

## LIBERTINE CLAIRS-OBSCURS

### THE ENTICEMENT OF THE SHADOWS

Marine Ganofsky

*You, whose first duty, when sensations are concerned, is to seduce, flatter and deceive  
the eyes, ... know the most auspicious dispositions for clair-obscur*

[*Vous, dont le premier devoir dans l'ordre des sensations est de séduire, de flatter et de  
tromper la vue, ... connaissez les dispositions les plus favorables au clair-obscur*]

*Claude-Henri Watelet, “Clair-obscur”, in Encyclopédie méthodique: beaux-arts (1788-  
1791)<sup>1</sup>*

This paper draws an analogy between the early modern definitions of *clair-obscur* and eighteenth-century libertine literature and libertinism. It is now relatively well acknowledged that libertine authors would rely on veils and linguistic shadows to make their texts more intriguing and all the more erotic. However, their direct references to the *clair-obscur* technique remain to be investigated. Libertine authors would often draw an analogy between their art, that of their fictional seducers or seductresses, and finally that of painters, through their respective skills in the art of *clair-obscur*. These authors’ references to painterly techniques and to contemporaneous artistic debates can serve as further proof of the libertine desire to bridge the gap between the aesthetic and the erotic spheres. When they discuss the merits of shadows and lights, the libertine authors examined here reveal the union of erotic bliss and aesthetic delectation as the greatest source of *jouissance*. Clairs-obscurs are thus conceptualised, not only by artists but by libertines too, as crucial factors in one’s quest for a superior form of enjoyment. Yet, departing from the painterly tradition and standing out from a century that praised both literal and metaphorical enlightenment, these libertines would make darkness the core and the source of their at once artistic and erotic pleasures.

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<sup>1</sup> Claude-Henri Watelet, “Clair-obscur”, in *L'encyclopédie méthodique: beaux-arts*, 3 vols (Paris: Panckoucke ;

The notion of “clair-obscur” seems to have lent itself naturally to the analogy which libertine authors would draw between them, seducers and artists. Just as a painter strives to create harmony between the light and the dark on his canvas, a libertine aims to reach a balance between polarities in his/her pleasures: liaisons unfold between vice and virtue, control and abandonment, society and the self; seductions rely on a compromise between revelation and concealment, clarity and obscurity, a dynamic of the tease that pervades even the style of libertine narratives. Both the (fictional) libertine seducer or seductress and the libertine author use clairs-obscurs (literal or literary) to please and pleasure an audience: one uses candles, lampshades, veils, clothes or darkness, whilst the other uses narrative highlights and textual obscurity: litotes, metaphors, irony or ellipses. Imitating their fictional *coquettes* and seducers who play with advantageous lights and shadows to entice their prey, libertine writers also seem to apply the lessons of the clair-obscur science developed by theorists like Roger de Piles, in order to appeal to their readers. What is the libertine take on the traditional technique of the clair-obscur? Where have libertine authors departed from the theoretical model offered by art treatises? Why have they done so? In this paper, I will argue that libertine authors from Crébillon to Laclos have re-evaluated the charms of shadows and thus departed from the tradition of praising the beauty of light. Besides, from the libertine perspective which their works offer, obscurity has more than a simple aesthetic function: it has also been endowed with erotic powers.

Libertine pleasures, in the eighteenth-century novels that portray them, appear as nocturnal pursuits. So often are seductions and their victories set at night that French libertine fiction can itself be deemed to be a nocturnal literature. Indeed, the erotic indulgences of its protagonists generally unfold after sunset, with their descriptions clad in a decent yet teasing narrative obscurity. Independently from any authorial decision, such stories *had* to unfold in the dark. In reality, eighteenth-century lovers needed the mask and protection which dark nights could grant. Guilty couples and licentious parties waited until nightfall to convene secretly, whilst others slept. Yet, despite the crucial need for the concealment bestowed by darkness, the nights of libertine literature are not characterised by their opacity. Rather, they can be singled out, in the history of literature, by their vespertine atmosphere: “I mean, one of these nights that are neither too light nor too dark, and which seem to be made for tender adventures” [J’entends, de ces nuits qui ne sont ni trop claires ni trop sombres et qui semblent

faites pour les tendres aventures].<sup>2</sup> In these fantasies created by libertine authors, midnight shares the aesthetic virtues of dusk and dawn, the erotic frisson of penumbra, the tease of in-betweens. Whether because the crudity of light is softened by a lampshade or a cloud, or because the depths of darkness are alleviated by some candle- or moonlight,<sup>3</sup> the atmosphere of libertine rendezvous is unfailingly that of a harmony. It offers heroes and readers the pleasing image of balance that is reached between the extremity of light and that of darkness. Thus, even in its darkest hours, the libertine night is experienced and described as a clair-obscur, as a “penumbra that seemed to have been invented to light love’s undertakings” [ce demi-jour qui paraissait avoir été inventé pour éclairer les entreprises de l’amour].<sup>4</sup>

This libertine conceptualisation of clairs-obscurs as being devised on—and for—harmony rather than on violent contrasts belongs to the wider context of its century. The men and women of the Age of Enlightenment started to appreciate the charms and even the potential brilliancy of night (a shift in sensibilities inaugurated by Fontenelle’s gallant and nocturnal stroll with a marquise in *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* [1686-1688])). Philosophically, enlightened thinkers also sought to reach a balance between the two poles of an antithesis. Beyond the sphere of libertine fiction and its clairs-obscurs, such a stance is also exemplified by Voltaire’s *Le Blanc et le noir* (1764) and by Prévost’s *Le Pour et le contre* (1733-1740). Two extremities are indeed in conflict but what triumphs eventually is the compromise between the two. Likewise in painting, for eighteenth-century minds, the most admired clairs-obscurs are to be found in the early works of Boucher, as Diderot remarked: “Nobody understands the art of light and shadows as well as Boucher does” [Personne n’entend comme Boucher l’art de la lumière et des ombres].<sup>5</sup> These clairs-obscurs are made of pastel hues and exalt a rococo gracefulness exempt from the overall effect of a violent confrontation between shadows and light. This is therefore the reverse of the likes of

<sup>2</sup> Anne-Gabriel Meusnier de Querlon, *Les Soupers de Daphné*, in *Psaphion ou la courtisane de Smyrne; Les Soupers de Daphné; Les Hommes de Prométhée; Les Dortoirs de Lacédémone* (1747; Paris: Flammarion, 1894), 113-114.

<sup>3</sup> Véronique Costa makes this remark in “Les figures de la nuit chez Crébillon ou la fascination du clair-obscur,” *Dix-huitième siècle* 30 (1998): 457-471.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Rochette de La Morlière, *Angola, Histoire indienne* (1746), in *Romanciers libertins du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, dir. by Patrick Wald-Lasowski, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, La Pléiade, 2005), 1:409.

<sup>5</sup> Denis Diderot, *Salons* (1759-1767), ed. by Jean Seznec and Jean Adhémar, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), I: 112.

Caravaggio's or Georges de La Tour's masterpieces, which the expression “clair-obscur” often brings to mind nowadays.<sup>6</sup> This common but incomplete definition of a “clair-obscur” as referring to a painting composed around “the great shadows and the great lights” [les grandes ombres et les grandes lumières]<sup>7</sup> is indebted to the baroque dramatisation—on canvases as on metaphysical levels—of a conflict between the evil forces of darkness and the divine power of light. Yet, libertine authors refuse to see only ominous implications in the contrast between lights and shadows. They prefer to find in clairs-obscurs a trigger for pleasure, as suggested by the following theoretical definitions of the concept:

Clair-obscur is not a *genre* that would be best exemplified by Caravaggio's paintings, but a *technique*. It is concerned with the reproduction of the effects of light and shadow upon a scene and its objects. From Cennino Cennini in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, to Diderot in his *Salons* (1759-1764) through Leonardo da Vinci, Roger De Piles, Claude-Henri Watelet, and Charles Batteux,<sup>8</sup> art theorists have been adamant to emphasise the importance of mastering the clair-obscur technique, firstly to produce a physically faithful image of reality (recreating how a source of light affects the look of a scene for instance), secondly to create relief and perspective on canvas (thus allowing painting to rival with sculpture), and finally to selectively highlight certain elements. The purpose of this was to achieve an overall effect that would please and content the viewer's mind, by first charming their eyes.

Using early modern theoretical definitions of the clair-obscur as a reference, in the first instance, I will explore the extent to which libertine authors and characters can be compared to master artists creating clairs-obscurs. Indeed, like the most skilful painters, their handling of lights and darkness creates a better, more pleasing version of reality. They obscure all that could be unattractive to a viewer or reader, and highlight all that has the power to charm.

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<sup>6</sup> On the transformations in the meaning of this word, see René Verbraeken, *Clair-Obscur. Histoire d'un mot* (Laget: Nogent-le-Roy: 1979).

<sup>7</sup> Roger de Piles, *Cours de peinture par principes* (Paris: Estienne, 1708), 365.

<sup>8</sup> Giuseppe Tambroni Cennino Cennini, *Trattato della pittura* (14th century; Roma: Salviucci, 1821), Leonardo da Vinci, *Trattato della pittura* (Milano: Società Tipografica de' Classici Italiani, 1804), Charles Batteux, *Les beaux-arts réduits à un même principe* (Paris: Durand, 1746), Denis Diderot, ‘Essais sur la peinture’, ed. by Gita May, in *Essais sur la peinture, Salons de 1759, 1761, 1763*, ed. by Jacques Chouillet (Paris: Hermann, 1984), 3-79. Subsequent references to these works will be indicated in the text. We can also add to this list André Félibien, *Des Principes de l'architecture, de la sculpture, de la peinture* (1676).

In the second instance however, I show how these libertines departed from the traditional clair-obscur, when its aesthetic purpose (pleasing) blends into an erotic function (pleasuring, through teasing). The goal of “pleasing” the spectator is taken to the extreme—or indeed very literally interpreted—when the clair-obscur becomes an actual sexual gratification. We will see how libertines radically re-conceptualised the role of shadows in clairs-obscur.

Indeed in traditional clairs-obscur what matters most is bathed in full light. Shadows are the boundaries of what to represent: what is left in the dark zones of the painting is just the background, what is unnecessary to the scene. Clairs-obscur are thus devised to make something visible. In libertine clairs-obscur, on the contrary, what looms in the shadows is the most important part of the scene: it is the untold reality of sex, it is the viewer’s or reader’s unavowed fantasies which have been summoned up to fill in the blanks of indeterminacy. Based on the assumption that “what is hidden fascinates” [le caché fascine],<sup>9</sup> libertine clairs-obscur are thus devised not to make something *visible* but to make it *invisible*. Darkness, no longer peripheral, becomes central in libertine clairs-obscur.

## I. Penumbra as beauty

With his short story *Point de lendemain*,<sup>10</sup> published in *Le Journal des dames* in 1777, Vivant Denon created the literary epitome of carefree libertinage, before Laclos and Sade tainted such pleasures with a sulphurous scent. His text is also perfectly representative of the libertine conceptualisation of night and, through night, of clairs-obscur. Its narrator recalls the story of one “wonderful night” (or “nuit merveilleuse” in French, *La Nuit merveilleuse, ou Le Nec plus ultra du plaisir* [ca. 1790] being the title of the pornographic version of *Point de lendemain*) spent with the daring “madame de T...”: “What a delicious night!” [Quelle nuit délicieuse !] (*Point de lendemain*, 41). The narrator often pauses in his tale to describe the

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<sup>9</sup> Jean Starobinski, *L’œil vivant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), 9.

<sup>10</sup> Dominique de Vivant Denon, *Point de lendemain* (1812), in “*Point de lendemain* ” suivi de “*La Nuit merveilleuse* ”, ed. by Paul Emmanuel, Auguste Poulet-Malassis and Jean-Jacques Pauvert (Paris: Le Promeneur, 1993).

night itself and the atmosphere it lends to the moment: “The mysterious torch of night was lighting a pure sky and diffusing a most voluptuous penumbra” [Le flambeau mystérieux de la nuit éclairait un ciel pur et répandait un demi-jour très voluptueux] (*Point de lendemain*, 26); “The night was superb ; it barely enabled us to catch a sight of the objects around us, and seemed to veil these only to further enthuse our imagination” [La nuit était superbe; elle laissait entrevoir les objets, et semblait ne les voiler que pour donner plus d’essor à l’imagination] (*Point de lendemain*, 29). Although the scene takes place late at night and outdoors, most of this night is not characterised by its absolute darkness but rather by its soft luminosity, its “demi-jour” or clair-obscur. More than a mere background, the penumbra seems to be an agent in the libertine quality of this moment, seducing the two lovers by impressing its voluptuousness onto their senses. This representation of night as softly luminous and sensuous appears as the exact opposite of the nights one can encounter in Prévost’s “romans noirs,” where night is gloomy and full of perils for their heroes, or in Racine’s ominous clairs-obscur such as the evocation of Troy set ablaze (“embrasée” [act 1, scene 1]) in *Iphigénie* (1667), or of Junie’s apparition to Nero in *Britannicus* (1669), amidst “shadows and torches” [[l]es ombres, les flambeaux] (act 1, scene 1). These are baroque clairs-obscur in the vein of Caravaggio’s or Artemisia Gentileschi’s (1593-1656) who exploited the sharp contrast between light and darkness to create an overall dramatic effect. However, Vivant Denon’s conceptualisation of the clair-obscur in *Point de lendemain* belongs to typically libertine aesthetics: its first and foremost function is to please. Still, this “pleasing” effect was not an addition libertines made to the definition of the clair-obscur, as indeed from Cennino Cennini onwards, art theorists have been adamant to attribute to clairs-obscur the ability of attracting and gratifying the viewer’s eyes.

Roger de Piles (1635-1709), who became the reference of virtually all subsequent art theorists of the early modern period, defines clair-obscur as a technique, a “science” (De Piles, 361) consisting in the harmonious recreation of the effects of light on a represented scene. He underlines the importance of producing an agreeable result: “With the term ‘clair-obscur’, we mean the art of advantageously distributing the lights and shadows which must feature in a painting, as much for the peace and satisfaction of one’s eyes as for the Overall effect” [par le mot de clair-obscur, l’on entend l’art de distribuer avantageusement les lumières et les ombres qui doivent se trouver dans un tableau, tant pour le repos et pour la satisfaction des yeux que pour l’effet du Tout-ensemble] (de Piles, 362). To produce “a

magical harmony of clair-obscur” [une magique harmonie du clair-obscur] (Watelet, 107), the painter must learn how to use light advantageously: “[He] must know and choose the advantageous effects of light” [[Il] doit connaître et choisir les effets avantageux de la Lumière] (de Piles, 361), inventing on canvas, if need be, sources of light as well as obstacles to this light, these “more or less complete privations, and consequently more or less auspicious to the harmonious effects he has to produce” [privations plus ou moins complètes, et par là, plus ou moins favorables aux effets harmonieux qu'il est tenu de produire] (Watelet, 106). The painter, by devising the lighting of the scene which his painting will display, and by selecting what to show and hide from this scene, offers versions of reality superior in beauty to their model, and consequently more likely to please and charm<sup>11</sup> spectators: “All efforts had to be necessarily reduced to a choice between the most beautiful parts of Nature in order to make up a most exquisite whole that would be even more perfect than Nature itself, without, however, ceasing to be natural” [Tous les efforts durent nécessairement se réduire à faire un choix des plus belles parties de la Nature pour en former un tout exquis qui fût plus parfait que la Nature elle-même, sans cependant cesser d'être naturel] (Batteux, 8). A clair-obscur is thus not only art but also an artifice (de Piles, 371) akin to seduction in so far as it relies on presenting a vision of reality at once more advantageous yet also somehow treacherous in its incompleteness.<sup>12</sup> Whilst the clair-obscur of *Point de lendemain* was naturally bestowed by a moonlit summer night, many other clairs-obscurs from libertine fiction appear to have been carefully, artificially devised by seducers and seductresses in order to charm. *Point de lendemain* can be read as an allegory of the *effects* of a successful clair-obscur, but many libertine stories also offer themselves to be read as illustrations of the *technique* through which such clairs-obscurs can be realised.

A remarkable and early instance of such intentionally seductive *clairs-obscurs* can be found in Crébillon’s *Tanzaï et Néadarné* (1734), as the genie Jonquille leads the Princess to a nocturnal grove where her reticence will be dangerously challenged: “Néadarné was surprised to find this grove extremely dark, whereas the rest of the garden was illuminated in such a

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<sup>11</sup> “Destinés [...] à nous charmer” (Batteux, 5).

<sup>12</sup> Christian Biet remarks that the term “chiaroscuro” appeared in Castiglione’s *Il Corteggiano* (1528) to refer to the courtier’s art in showing off qualities and virtues whilst dissimulating his flaws and vices. See “Les impasses de la lumière: le clair-obscur”, in *Le Siècle de la lumière 1600-1715*, ed. by Christian Biet and Vincent Jullien (Fontenay: ENS ; Paris: Ophrys, 1997), 227-229.

way that one could barely believe that the sun was no longer lighting it” [Néadarné fut surprise de trouver ce bosquet extrêmement sombre, pendant que le reste des jardins était illuminé de façon qu’à peine l’on pouvait croire que le soleil n’éclairait plus]<sup>13</sup>. Yet it is in the lesser known Bastide’s *La Petite maison* (1753) that one can find the most vivid vindication in favour of the arguments that clairs-obscurs in real-life situations as in paintings require the agency of artistic sensibility, and that the overall effect they create is meant to provide a sensual gratification. Watelet, in his “Clair-obscur” entry for the *Encyclopédie méthodique*, describes how the sense of sight, once indulged by a harmonious vision, will now share its pleasure with the entire sensual and intellectual being of the beholder: “The art of clair-obscur, which essentially pleases the sense of sight, contributes through this to the pleasure of the spectator’s mind” [l’art du clair-obscur, qui satisfait essentiellement le sens de la vue, contribue par-là à la satisfaction de l’esprit du spectateur] (Watelet, 106). This is why every space in Trémicour’s (Bastide’s protagonist) *petite maison* recreates a clair-obscur: indeed, Trémicour has wagered with the gallant Mélite that she will surrender to his advances if she only visits his house. As the reader is bound to notice, architectural beauty, but also artificial clairs-obscurs are exhibited in each room. In the first room, “the day was drawing to a close” [[l]e jour finissait],<sup>14</sup> but a servant is quick to supply light: “a servant came to light thirty candles” [un nègre vint allumer trente bougies] (*La Petite maison*, 32). In a subsequent bedroom, artificial trees are “loaded with girandoles from which candles were diffusing a gradual light” [chargés de girandoles dont les bougies procurent une lumière graduée] (*La Petite maison*, 38). The garden, once night has fallen, is “lit by two thousands Chinese lanterns” [éclairé par deux mille lampions] (*La Petite maison*, 51) but still, Trémicour’s expert architect has been wise enough to soften these lights: “Tremblin … had contrived a gradation in these lights by putting moulds on the nearest ones, and only fairylights of various sizes in the more remote parts” [Tremblin … avait gradué ces lumières en plaçant des terrines sur les devants, et seulement des lampions de différentes grosseurs dans les parties éloignées] (*La Petite maison*, 51). Finally, the last room that Mélite visits displays a clair-obscur orchestrated according to the same principle as the one described by Batteux in his essay on art, namely that of selecting which sign of taste and wealth to highlight, luxury being regarded as

<sup>13</sup> Claude Porsper Jolyot de Crébillon, *Tanzaï et Néadarné, histoire japonaise* (1734), *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Jean Sgard, 4 vols (Paris: Garnier, 1999-2002) 1:399.

<sup>14</sup> Jean-François de Bastide, *La Petite maison* (1753), ed. by Benedetta Craveri (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2008), 32.

seductive in itself for voluptuaries such as Voltaire's "mondain" or "man of the world"<sup>15</sup>: "It was lit only just enough to allow one to catch a glimpse of the masterpieces of these expert artists" [Elle n'était éclairée qu'autant qu'il le fallait pour faire apercevoir les chefs-d'œuvre de ces habiles maîtres] (*La Petite maison*, 71). In that last and most technically perfect clair-obscur, "Mélite shivered, became uneasy, sighed, and lost the bet" [Mélite frémit, se troubla, soupira, et perdit la gageure] (*La Petite maison*, 74 [last sentence]). Trémicour's artful clairs-obscur, further heightening the charms of his house, triumphed over the heroine's last reluctance.

Such libertine clairs-obscur take the reader far from the atmosphere conveyed by Georges de La Tour's use of light and darkness. The loneliness, contemplation and meditation of the scenes he represents have indeed given way to tête-à-tête and action. Melancholy has become pleasure, whilst the sacred subject of his canvases has become the profane topic of erotic fiction. Nevertheless, the clairs-obscur of De La Tour and those from libertine literature create a similar effect: they both highlight the presence of the human body in a scene, and they also endow this prominence of the flesh with a philosophical meaning. Christian Biet explains, about clairs-obscur artists such as Bassano, Rembrandt or Caravaggio: "The artist endeavours to privilege the body-as-light against darkness, to make a light of the human body itself" [l'artiste se mêle de privilégier le corps-lumière contre l'obscur, de faire du corps humain une lumière].<sup>16</sup> Likewise, in the universe of libertine fiction, scenes set in a clair-obscur seem made to suggest the glory of the flesh over the intellect from which hesitations and resistances arise. The body placed in the context of an advantageous clair-obscur is meant to suggest the imperative need to succumb to bodily desires and give in to the here and now. Shadows indeed seem to isolate the highlighted body from all spatial, social and temporal contexts, as in a clair-obscur reminiscent of Caravaggio's:

The clair-obscur (in the style of Caravaggio) introduces an obvious dialectic between zones of light and zones of shadows ... The world is absent, no faraway, no landscape, no skies. We are, with Caravaggio and his followers, in a point in space; we are not within narration nor within duration anymore, but in the instant, the privileged moment:

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<sup>15</sup> See Michel Delon, "L'éclat du luxe," in *Le Savoir-vivre libertin* (Paris: Hachette, 2000), 97-112.

<sup>16</sup> Biet, "Les impasses de la lumière," 235.

a point in time. We witness the staging of a presence made all the more powerful as—all spaces beyond the bodies being shut—these bodies are frontally imposed.

[Le clair-obscur (caravagesque) introduit une dialectique évidente entre zones éclairées et zones d'ombre. . . . Absence de monde, pas de lointains, pas de paysages, pas de ciels. Nous sommes avec les caravagesques, dans un point de l'espace, nous ne sommes plus dans la narration, ni dans la durée, mais dans l'instant, le moment privilégié: un point du temps. Nous assistons à la mise en scène d'une présence d'autant plus forte que tout espace au-delà des corps étant clos, ces corps sont imposés frontalement.]<sup>17</sup>

A wise seductress puts that theory into action in Duclos's *Les Confessions du comte de \*\*\** (1741). The narrator recalls how, as an inexperienced and naïve young man, he had been invited one night to an intimate meeting with one of his mother's friends, a marquise determined to make him become aware of his own lust. She endeavours to do so by displaying her charms under a most flattering light, literally so:

I found her on a chair . . . twenty candles were diffusing an infinite brightness; yet all my attention was drawn to a somewhat exposed bosom. The marquise was wearing a tasteful negligee, her attitude was disposed by the desire to please and embolden me.

[Je la trouvai sur une chaise longue . . . vingt bougies répandaient une clarté infinie; mais toute mon attention se porta sur une gorge tant soit peu découverte. La marquise était dans un déshabillé plein de goût, son attitude était disposée par le désir de plaire et de me rendre plus hardi.]<sup>18</sup>

The marquise has devised the lighting and her state of undress as a painter would have devised a clair-obscur: she knows it is necessary to place certain parts of a scene “in a beautiful light, thus making them more capable of agreeably attracting and deceiving the eyes through the strength and peace which the intelligent composition of general lights introduces” [dans un beau jour en les rendant plus capables d'attirer les yeux et de les tromper agréablement par la force et par le repos que l'intelligence des lumières générales introduit]

<sup>17</sup> Olivier Jullien, “La main, le regard, la lumière”, in Biet, *Le Siècle de la lumière*, 327-349 (332).

<sup>18</sup> Charles Pinot Duclos, *Les Confessions du Comte de \*\*\** (1741), in *Romans libertins du dix-huitième siècle*, ed. by Raymond Trousson (Paris: Laffont, 1993), 181-264 (184).

(de Piles, 373). Thus, Duclos suggests that there can be a form of artistic genius in a coquette's play. Indeed, this seductress appears to have an astute mind comparable to that of an artist, an interpretation which seems in keeping with Duclos's overall feminist stance.<sup>19</sup> Yet, mastering the clair-obscur technique is just as much about highlighting certain parts as about keeping others in the dark. Eighteenth-century authors are not in general as forgiving as Duclos<sup>20</sup> with these women who seek the advantageous clair-obscur of the Opéra or the treacherous darkness of night to show their faces, as La Morlière remarks in passing in *Angola* (1746): “Most of them were there to exhibit their charms in that penumbra of shows, in that remote candlelight so favourable to outdated beauties” [Le plus grand nombre était là pour étaler leurs charmes dans ce demi-jour de spectacle, dans cette réflexion éloignée des bougies si favorables aux attractions surannées] (*Angola*, 749). Imperfections vanish in the dark, making a moment all the more delectable although the delight might be artificial if not illusory.

Clitandre, one of Crébillon's *petits-maîtres*, presents himself as a one time victim of this artifice: Araminte gave herself to him one night in a garden. But when she later agreed to show herself in crude light (“the candles remained lit, and the curtains, opened” [les bougies restèrent allumées et les rideaux ouverts]),<sup>21</sup> Clitandre was outraged by the extent of her deceit: “Ah! What a monster!” [Ah, quel monstre!] (*La Nuit et le moment*, 549). Still, one can infer that Clitandre—whose elegant seduction of Cidalise in *La Nuit et le moment* epitomises the gracefulness of certain libertine endeavours—is not only appalled by the physical ugliness he can now see. He is also disgusted by Araminte's unrefined behaviour. As a “monster,” in his own words, she is still halfway only between beast and human. She fails to display a form of restraint (keeping certain animal instincts literally and metaphorically in the dark) which allegedly distinguishes civilised man from savage in the early modern period.<sup>22</sup> Were her

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<sup>19</sup> Duclos had labelled himself the “avocat des femmes”. See Jacques Brengues, *Charles Duclos ou l'obsession de la vertu, avec son annexe la ‘Correspondance’* (Saint-Brieuc: Presses Universitaires de Bretagne, 1971), 382.

<sup>20</sup> Or as Ovid, who famously commented upon the advantages of *clairs-obscurs* in his *Art of Love*: “By night are blemishes hid, and every fault is forgiven; that hour makes all women fair,” in *The Art of Love* (c. 2 AD), in *The Art of Love and Other Poems*, trans by J. H. Mozley (London: Heinemann, 1947), 249-250.

<sup>21</sup> Crébillon, *La nuit et le moment, ou Les matines de Cythère, dialogue* (1755), in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Jean Sgard, 4 vols (Paris: Garnier, 1999-2002), 2:549.

<sup>22</sup> The early modern gesture towards the annihilation of the signs of Man's raw nature (sex and the body being at the core of the issue) has been notoriously discussed by Norbert Elias in *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*

mind superior, were she concerned with the aesthetic nature of love-making, Araminte would have wrapped this moment (along with her body) in a decency and elegance which, from an eighteenth-century perspective, require both actual penumbra and semantic obscurity. Only then—it was argued—can the crudity of the sexual act be transfigured into eroticism.

This praise of the decency which a skilful *clair-obscur* can preserve even around the most libertine fornications, suggests an interesting analogy between the seducer or seductress from libertine fiction and the writer of such fiction. Indeed, all these seductive, scenic clairs-obscur find a parallel in the *clair-obscur* style in which these stories are told, as Michel Delon has remarked: “In most of the texts mentioned, light and music only reach the characters as attenuated, filtered, just like a language that wants to be veiled to express the reality of sexuality” [Dans la plupart des textes évoqués, la lumière et la musique parviennent aux personnages atténus, tamisés, à l'image d'une langue qui se veut gazée pour exprimer les réalités de la sexualité].<sup>23</sup> This reflection underlines the art at work in the simple action of obscuring the raw reality behind libertine pleasures. This linguistic “gauze” transmutes reality into an art. Painters get involved in precisely the same alchemical enterprise when, through their skilled handling of lights and shadows, they manage to offer spectators the image of a superior reality. One could rightfully argue that this concerns every artist, and that “the science to place lights and shadows” [la science de placer les jours et les ombres]<sup>24</sup> is at the crux of any representation of reality. However, libertine literature stands out as the epitome of how skilled the artist has to be to offer a harmonious overall effect.

Indeed, libertine writers have to face the additional challenge of dealing with a crude (a term used to refer to vivid lights and colours) subject: it is easy to fall into pornography, but it requires talent to address the question of fornication beautifully. Different readers (or the same readers at different moments or in different places) would have different expectations and wishes which the author of the erotic book would have to fulfill. The desires of eighteenth-century consumers of erotic stories were not homogenous, but rather ranged from wanting only delicate and elegant allusions to sexuality, all the way to desiring stimulating

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(1939).

<sup>23</sup> Michel Delon, “L'espace de la séduction dans le roman français du dix-huitième siècle,” in *Littérature et séduction: mélanges en l'honneur de Laurent Versini*, ed. by Roger Marchal (Paris: Klincksiek, 1997), 383. He is quoting La Harpe’s *Correspondance littéraire*.

<sup>24</sup> Anne-Gabriel Meusnier de Querlon, *L'école d'Uranie, ou L'art de la peinture* (Paris: Mercier, 1753), 228.

material for masturbation. As Rousseau put it, such books were meant to be read “with one hand”.<sup>25</sup> The abundance of books and pamphlets written by starving “Grub street writers” as Robert Darnton called them,<sup>26</sup> bears witness to the facility of a genre towards which one could turn to for commercial profitability instead of artistic recognition, as indeed these would prove highly popular. But certain authors aimed to address another readership deemed more refined: these writers would then have to exhibit their talent in the art of the clair-obscur which lifted their prose beyond everyday pornography, libertine authors often indulged in self-reflexive comments that proclaim the exceptional arduousness of reaching a balance between being too clear and being too obscure. Imbedded narrators thus serve as mouthpieces and reveal how much libertine writing was conceived by its authors as an art in clairs-obscurs.

Emblematic of this authorial trick, the narrative situation of *Le Sopha* (1742) represents a perfect opportunity for Crébillon to discuss the demanding nature of his task as story-teller: Amanzéi, *Le Sopha*'s hero and intradiegetic narrator, tells Schah-Baham and his wife (and Crébillon's readers) the story of his transformation into a sofa: “My soul could only start a new career when two persons would offer each other, and on top of me, their respective commencements” [mon âme ne commencerait une nouvelle carrière que quand deux personnes se donneraient mutuellement, et sur moi, leurs prémisses]. Schah-Baham interrupts the storyteller: “Here ... is ... a lot of gibberish to say that... ... I tend to like clear things. However, if you do not agree with me, I accept that Amanzéi be as obscure as he pleases” [Voilà . . . bien du galimatias, pour dire que. . . . J'aime assez les choses claires. Cependant si vous n'êtes pas de mon avis, je consens qu'Amanzéi soit aussi obscur qu'il le voudra] (*Le Sopha*, 293). “Clear” and “obscure” are thus clearly shown to co-exist in the libertine style of story-telling, as Crébillon's fictional translator of a Chinese legend also notes in a foreword to *Tanzaï*, advocating the desire to please a French eighteenth-century audience: “The translator of this book sincerely admits that, not understanding its author fully, he became obscure ... in places where the author was clear” [le traducteur de ce livre avoue franchement, que n'entendant pas parfaitement son auteur, il est devenu obscur . . . où il était clair] (*Tanzaï*,

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<sup>25</sup> “These dangerous books which a beautiful lady of the world finds inconvenient because they can only be read with one hand” [ces dangereux livres qu'une belle dame de par le monde trouve incommodes, en ce qu'on ne peut les lire que d'une main], Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Les Confessions* (1782), Book I.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Darnton addresses the question of the lack of talent of many pornographic books written just to ensure easy money to the author in *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). See also *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Prerevolutionary France* (New York: Norton, 1996).

394). A skilful story-teller must know how to balance narrative lights and shadows, so that his tale is neither an offence to decency nor incomprehensible, whilst focusing principally on what relates to sexual pleasures: “I claimed to tell him not so much all the things I had seen, as those that could amuse him” [J’ai moins prétendu lui rendre toutes les choses que j’ai vues, que celles qui pouvaient l’amuser].<sup>27</sup> The erotic content of the text is highlighted: it is the central focus of the narration. Yet at the same time, it is also strategically obscured. Schah-Baham’s impossibility to finish his sentence, resulting in his using a point of ellipsis (“to say that...” [pour dire que...]) confirms that Amanzéi’s “gibberish” [galimatias], far from being senseless, actually requires a certain intellectual talent which a clumsy character like Schah-Baham does not possess. The story-teller’s ability to highlight what fascinates the readers’ attention and yet to obscure what could upset their sensibility or innocence is indeed not available to all.<sup>28</sup>

Like the most skilful painters, only a few authors will achieve the harmonious balance between lust and elegance: In *L’école de la volupté* (1747),<sup>29</sup> La Mettrie distinguishes voluptuous and obscene authors on the ground of their respective use and mastering of the clair-obscur technique, of revealing and concealing:

I divide these authors into two categories. Some are obscene and dissolute, and the others are masters of the purest voluptuousness. The former, prostituted to debauchery, indulge in the most odious excesses; almost all of these write according to the freedom of their thoughts, or to the depravation of their morals.

[Je partage ces auteurs en deux classes. Les uns sont obscènes et dissolus, & les autres sont des maîtres de volupté plus épurée. Les premiers prostitués à la débauche donnent dans les excès les plus odieux; ils écrivent presque tous conformément à leur liberté de penser, ou à la dépravation de leurs mœurs.] (*L’école de la volupté*, 8)

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<sup>27</sup> Crébillon, *Le Sopha, conte moral* (1742), in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Jean Sgard, 2:718.

<sup>28</sup> In a chapter of *Angola*, La Morlière remarks that Marivaux, unlike Crébillon, lacks in this talent: “He had devised a singular way to be stilted and obscure with the clearest and most common terms, whilst alleging, in order to be original, to represent low and trivial images that could only be but poorly interesting.” [[Il] avait trouvé le moyen singulier de se rendre guindé et obscur avec les termes les plus clairs et les plus communs, d’ailleurs affectant de représenter pour être neuf des images basses et triviales qui ne pouvaient intéresser que médiocrement] (*Angola*, 754).

But, he continues, there exists another category of writers in the vein of Petronius, who are “like these virtuous women who know how to fall with decency, and attract in their fall many compliments from respect itself” [[s]embrables à ces femmes vertueuses qui savent tomber avec décence, et s'attirer dans leur chute autant d'hommage du respect même] (*L'école de la volupté*, 12). The craft of the first type of writers is, according to La Mettrie, minor and base, whilst the other deserves praise.

However, although La Mettrie distinguishes crude pornographers from voluptuous writers on the ground of their respective morality, the distinction between the two types of writers can also be regarded as stemming from different conceptions of what artistic representation should be. Whereas Crébillon, La Morlière, Choderlos de Laclos and La Mettrie to name but a few, valued the linguistic shadows through which they preserve the elegance and mystery of their texts, other writers, like Sade, praised the ability to portray sexuality in full light, without omitting any detail. The latter have indeed adopted a “strategy of writing ... [which is] monosemous and hostile to any form of interference” [stratégie d'écriture . . . monosémique et hostile à tout effet de brouillage].<sup>30</sup> For them, the shadows of a clair-obscur are detrimental to one's pleasure: “One has to paint. Any gauze, any dissimulation, any veil would become a wound inflicted on our readers” [Il faut peindre. Toute gaze, toute dissimulation, tout voile deviendrait une lésion faite à nos lecteurs].<sup>31</sup> The frustration even becomes a wound (“une lesion”) with Sade. Yet, La Mettrie's text celebrates the existence of a different form of pleasure which regards shadows and veils (actual or literary) not as enemies of erotic gratification but as necessary conditions in which a superior form of jouissance can be reached: voluptuousness. La Mettrie defines it as a sensuous bliss completed by the delights of imagination. It combines sensual with spiritual enjoyment: “It is not the jouissance of bodies, it is the jouissance of souls that I need” [Ce n'est point la jouissance des corps, c'est celle des âmes qu'il me faut] (*L'école de la volupté*, 39). La Mettrie thus praises the clair-obscur situations which leave something for the mind to imagine and enjoy:

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<sup>29</sup> Julien Offroy de La Mettrie, *L'école de la volupté* (1747; Geneva: [n. pub.], 1783).

<sup>30</sup> 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), 78.

<sup>31</sup> Donatien Alphonse François de Sade, *La nouvelle Justine ou les malheurs de la vertu* (1797), in *Œuvres*, ed. by Michel Delon, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, La Pléiade, 1990), 2:495.

Voluptuousness must be sought further. We would always miss it if we only expected it from the senses. Whilst these are necessary to it, they are not sufficient. Imagination must provide for what they lack.

[La volupté veut être recherchée plus loin. Elle nous manquerait souvent, si nous ne l'attendions que des sens. S'ils lui sont nécessaires, ils ne lui suffisent pas, il faut que l'imagination supplée à ce qui leur manque.] (*L'école de la volupté*, 40)

This conception of a clair-obscur echoes the theoretical definitions of the term. Indeed, as we remarked above, according to de Piles and his followers, the technique of the clair-obscur must indeed aim to trigger a dual emotion, both physical and intellectual, through the eyes to the mind, in the beholder of the painting.

For La Mettrie as for the libertine authors who regard shadows not as frustrating but as potentially charming, darkness, and with it any form of visual, intellectual or narrative indeterminacy, represents emancipation for one's imagination. This is why the night of *Point de lendemain* epitomises libertine aesthetics: because it is described as one of these voluptuous clairs-obscurs: "The night was superb; it only enabled us to catch but a glimpse of the objects around us, and seemed to veil them only to further enthuse our imagination" [La nuit était superbe; elle laissait entrevoir les objets, et semblait ne les voiler que pour donner plus d'essor à l'imagination] (*Point de lendemain*, 29). Because it can free imagination, darkness becomes the centre of focus of libertine clairs-obscurs. Consequently, the libertine take on the clair-obscur technique becomes less a matter of representation than of suggestion; it revolves less around a dynamic of revelation and display, than on a dynamic of concealment and mystery.

## II. Shadows as promises of liberty

In the early modern tradition, shadows are very seldom the subject of representation in art, if only because the very nature of darkness evades depiction. In most nocturnes, shadows exist to further emphasise the brilliancy of light, through contrast, as can be seen in all paintings imbued with religious or philosophical significance in the baroque and the Enlightenment

periods respectively.<sup>32</sup> Whether in nativity scenes such as Matthias Stormer's *Adoration of the Shepherds* (ca. 1640-1650) or in Joseph Wright of Derby's *Experiment with an Air Pump* (1768), the source of light or what receives full light (the arm of the executioner in Caravaggio's *The Beheading of John the Baptist* [1607-1608]) occupies a central position in the painting.<sup>33</sup> It is expected to catch and hold the viewer's attention. Darkness here is only peripheral. Its function is to second the eye-catching effect of light by limiting what the viewer can behold: since "bodily organs can only find pleasure fully and at once from one single object" [les organes du corps ne peuvent bien jouir dans un même temps que d'un seul objet] (De Piles, 375).<sup>34</sup> From this traditional definition of clair-obscur, obscurity and shadows appear as limits beyond which opacity swallows everything that is not worthy of being pictured.

However, when one further considers the clairs-obscurs featured in libertine prose, it appears that these are built on a diametrically opposed conception of the function of obscurity in a scene. Indeed, literal and narrative shadows are central to libertine seduction not only because they can highlight the visible charms of a moment, but also because it is in shadows that the full reality of sex—the crux of libertinism and libertine fiction—is looming. Thus, what obscurity conceals is not what is accessory or unnecessary but rather the most important component of this erotic literature. By being kept in a narrative obscurity or actual darkness, the reality of sexuality is preserved. Yet, we can argue that this reality is concealed less because libertines deem it shameful than because it is regarded as sacred, and sacred entities are better left behind a veil of mystery.

In reality, artists also have no other choice but to leave certain details in the dark, since giving an exhaustive representation of reality is an impossible task: This is a frustration with which painters are also confronted, as Christian Biet remarked, but which they overcome by resorting to the clair-obscur technique and to the limitation offered by shadows:

To represent means indeed to choose to *darken*, to put in the dark this or that part of

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<sup>32</sup> On the Enlightenment's exploitation of the Johannic Manicheism to dramatise the goodness of knowledge, see Michael Baxandall, *Shadows and Enlightenment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>33</sup> Gerrit van Honthorst, *Mocking of Christ* (ca. 1617) is particularly representative of this tradition of putting the "light" of the painting in its very centre.

<sup>34</sup> Darkness prevents the much-despised "papillotage" or unnatural dispersal of lights and shadows.

one's thought, and to illuminate, to put in the light, this or that other ... It is then the duty of the painter or writer to produce the illusion of achievement by using clair-obscur. Darkness thus becomes the enclosure of representation.

[Représenter, c'est en effet choisir d'*ombrager*, de mettre dans l'ombre telle ou telle partie de la pensée, et d'*éclairer*, de mettre en lumière telle ou telle autre . . . C'est alors au peintre ou à l'écrivain de produire l'illusion de l'achèvement par l'utilisation du clair-obscur. L'ombre devient la clôture de la représentation].<sup>35</sup>

Andréa de Nerciat's libertine narrator Félicia faces this problem as she attempts to write the story of her voluptuous life, and she comes to the conclusion that “to write is to put black on white” [écrire, c'est mettre du noir sur du blanc].<sup>36</sup> She is not only referring to darkening paper with ink, but is instead pondering the unavoidable need to obscure certain memories. Yet, Félicia's other meditations on the art of writing reveal that obscurity serves not only to hide tedious details or to chastise too erotic a souvenir, it also permits her to keep the vividness of certain memories intact: “I would have too much to say if I endeavored to describe all the charms of these happy nights” [J'aurais trop à dire si j'entreprendais de décrire tous les charmes de nos heureuses nuits] (*Félicia*, 838). Her silence is the most efficient manner to evoke and revere the ineffable nature of sexual bliss, what “the nib, the pencil cannot express” [la plume, le pinceau ne peuvent exprimer] (*Félicia*, 630). Thus, Félicia prefers to use narrative shadows to tell the most delectable moments of her life, hence her use of an ellipsis: “He took advantage of the delirium of illusion and temper . . . we were happy” [Il profita du délire de l'illusion et du tempérament... nous fûmes heureux] (*Félicia*, 820). The ellipsis, a key instrument in the narrative technique of clair-obscur, holds in its epistemological hollow the potential of endless bliss. Libertine texts can therefore be compared to pictorial nocturnes that also have the prerogative of opening onto infinity: “Nocturne paintings have been particularly favoured by this lyrical mode in which ‘depth’ and the ‘Unfathomable’ proliferate” [Les tableaux nocturnes ont eu la faveur particulière de ce mode lyrique où prolifèrent l’“indicible” et la “profondeur”].<sup>37</sup> No clarity in expression, no

<sup>35</sup> Biet, “L’impasse de la lumière,” 236.

<sup>36</sup> Andréa de Nerciat, *Félicia, ou mes fredaines* (1775), in *Romanciers libertins*, ed. by Patrick Wald Lasowski, 2:661.

<sup>37</sup> Paulette Choné, *L’âge d’or du nocturne* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 14. See also, by the same, *L’atelier des nuits. Histoire et signification du nocturne dans l’art d’Occident* (Nancy: Presses Universitaires de Nancy,

attempt at unveiling this limitlessness, would suggest it more powerfully than linguistic obscurity does here.

Thus, whilst traditional clairs-obscurs are built on a dynamic of revelation and visibility whereby light occupies centre-stage, libertine clairs-obscurs are structured around a dynamic of concealment and opacity. They illustrate the theory that “what is hidden, fascinates” [le caché fascine].<sup>38</sup> This is the reason why libertine clairs-obscurs give prominence to darkness whilst traditional clairs-obscurs favour light. Indeed, the traditional artist seeks to elicit in his/her audience an aesthetic emotion, that is an actual sensation (*aesthesia* = ‘sensation’ in Greek). The libertine author or character however hopes to prompt erotic emotions which are, by definition, based on the perception of an absence or a lack.<sup>39</sup> Desire remains high as long as it is unquenched. Eroticism demands an art of the tease and the postponement of complete fulfillment through the perpetuation of obstacles such as veils, clothes, masks, but also darkness or linguistic obscurity. This longing for screens compose the essence of seduction, as Jean Baudrillard perceived: “Attraction through void is the essence of seduction, hence the seduction operated by systems that are closed upon themselves, impenetrable, opaque” [L’attraction par le vide est au fond de la séduction, d’où la séduction opérée par les systèmes fermés sur eux-mêmes, impénétrables, opaques].<sup>40</sup> Against the stance of art theorists who claim that eyes are attracted by light, libertines contend that obscurity has the power to catch one’s attention more obsessively.

The shrewd heroines of libertine fiction know very well that they are more likely to enthrall their preys if they play with all manner of veils: darkness, clothes (“a single handkerchief covers her bosom, and my furtive but penetrating glances have already figured out its enchanting shape” [Une seule mousseline couvre sa gorge, et mes regards furtifs, mais pénétrants, en ont déjà saisi les formes enchanteresses], writes Valmont about the devout Mme de Tourvel who uses, perhaps without knowing it, the tricks of the most artful coquette).<sup>41</sup> Untied hair too, because they can veil, can be an enticing ornament: “her hair that

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1992).

<sup>38</sup> Starobinski, *L’œil vivant*, 9.

<sup>39</sup> Plato discussed the lack inherent to erotic love in *The Symposium*, Eros being begotten by Penia (“Indigence” or “lack”).

<sup>40</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *De la séduction* (Paris: Galilée, 1979), 108.

<sup>41</sup> Pierre Ambroise François Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782), ed. by Laurent Versini

had been let down ... was less hiding than beautifying her” [ses cheveux épars . . . la cachaient moins qu’ils ne l’ornaient].<sup>42</sup> Likewise, libertine narrators know how to build up their reader’s interest by refusing to display at once the full meaning of their texts, or their full sexual content. Roland Barthes would later acknowledge the entralling power of indeterminacy in narration, arguing that it is through its ambiguity that a text provides pleasures to the reader (the pleasure of the reader will be to try and clarify what the author actually meant) whom it must attract “This reader, I must seek him [I must attract him]” [Ce lecteur, il faut que je le cherche [que je le ‘drague’]].<sup>43</sup> This accounts for the enduring popularity of Choderlos de Laclos’s masterpiece *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782) for instance. Indeed, if it is now regarded as the greatest of all libertine works, “at once the masterpiece and the swan song” [à la fois le chef d’oeuvre et le chant du cygne]<sup>44</sup> this is partly due to its defying all definite exegesis, calling forth again and again the attention of critics and readers. What is the nature of the emotion which the protagonists feel for each other? Is it about love? Lust? Power? What was the author’s purpose in writing this story? Was it actually meant to be edifying as his foreword claims? The reader is invited to plunge in the depths of the text to find clues to answer these questions: the author has successfully grabbed their attention by playing with clarity and obscurity. As an ultimate tease through obscurity, Choderlos de Laclos carefully removed Valmont’s dying letter to the Présidente from the collection given to the public, leaving the reader to feel the lack of certainties, and therefore to crave for what truth is hidden:

There is, in dissimulation and absence, a strange power which forces the mind to turn itself towards the inaccessible, and to sacrifice all it possesses for its conquest ... Yes, darkness has the power to make us forsake every prey, solely because it is darkness and irritates in us an unfathomable expectation.

[Il y a, dans la dissimulation et dans l’absence, une force étrange qui constraint l’esprit à se tourner vers l’inaccessible et à sacrifier pour sa conquête tout ce qu’il possède . . . Oui, l’ombre a le pouvoir de nous faire lâcher toutes les proies, du seul fait qu’elle est

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(Paris: Gallimard ‘La Pléiade’, 1979), Letter VI, Valmont to Merteuil, 21.

<sup>42</sup> *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, Letter LXIII, Merteuil to Valmont, 125.

<sup>43</sup> Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), 10.

<sup>44</sup> Valérie Van Crugten-André, *Le roman du libertinage: 1782-1815* (Paris: Champion, 1997), 16.

ombre et qu'elle irrite en nous une attente sans nom.]<sup>45</sup>

Starobinski resumes his reflection and analyses the direct consequence of this initial frustration by quoting Goethe: “The hands want to see, the eyes want to caress” [les mains veulent voir, les yeux veulent caresser].<sup>46</sup> The blinded lover will grasp his way to his mistress’s body despite the dark, a cliché unwearingly repeated in libertine literature, from *Angola*: “He laid avid hands on beauties which he had not been allowed to contemplate yet” [Il porta des mains avides sur des beautés dont la vue ne lui étaient pas encore permises] (*Angola*, 726) to *Thémidore*: “My hands, which had gradually become more audacious, dared to lift the veil that was concealing treasures from my eyes” [Mes mains, devenues entreprenantes par degrés, osèrent lever le voile qui cachait à mes yeux des trésors].<sup>47</sup> Likewise, when confronted with obscurity, the reader will throw him-/herself actively—if not passionately—into the laying bare of the text’s meaning which Barthes compares to the undressing of a body: textual interpretations become so many “scratches I inflict on its beautiful envelope” [éraflures que j’impose à sa belle enveloppe].<sup>48</sup> The reader, like an eager lover, will strive to grasp at the text, and give in to the temptation of exegesis and literary analysis in an effort to see what the shadows hide.

In this respect, the analogy between traditional pictorial clairs-obscur and libertine ones can be resumed. Indeed, both view shadows as having the power to prompt a closer and more tactile relation between the spectator and the object displayed. About de La Tour’s *tenebrae*,<sup>49</sup> Pascal Quignard wrote that they invited the audience to silence in a “direct communication”<sup>50</sup> with the canvas. For shadows indeed are meant to give relief and perspective to objects: “di dare il relieve alle tue figure” (Cennini Cennino, 9). This is a basic principle in the science of clair-obscur already underlined by Cennini Cennino in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and afterwards

<sup>45</sup> Starobinski, *L’œil vivant*, 9. From Goethe’s *Römische Elegien* (1795): “Sehe mit fühlendem Aug’, fühle mit sehender Hand” (Elegie V).

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>47</sup> Claude Godard d’Aucour, *Thémidore* (1744), in *Romanciers libertins*, ed. by Patrick Wald Lasowski, 1:501-583 (549).

<sup>48</sup> Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*, 20.

<sup>49</sup> Pascal Quignard prefers this expression referring to a religious service unfolding the dark to the usual *tenebrosi*, in *George de la Tour et Pascal Quignard* (Paris: Flohic, 1991), 10.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

religiously repeated by all art theorists: “To give roundness, projection, and relief to objects ... to bring them closer to, or further from, the spectator: this is clair-obscur” [donner de la rondeur, de la saillie, du relief aux objets, ... les approcher, ou les éloigner du spectateur: c'est le clair-obscur] (Batteux, 248). As in a painting, the shadows of a text help reduce the distance between the work of art and its spectator. However, in a painting, this proximity is achieved through the relief which objects and bodies seem to acquire against a dark background: it is a movement from the canvas to the spectator. In contrast, in the libertine universe, this proximity is achieved by drawing the “spectator” into the void of obscurity. It relies indeed on the “attraction through the void” [attraction par le vide] that Baudrillard described as the essence of all seduction.

Yet, this attraction into a void of indeterminacy, anguishing as it might sound, is positively conceptualised in libertine literature. Blank spaces are indeed conceptualised as an opportunity: the indeterminate reality hidden in the shadows can be replaced by the fantasies of the viewer, lover or reader. Godard d'Aucour's *Thémidore* (1744) perfectly illustrates the libertines' erotic conceptualisation of clairs-obscurs. The scenes where the courtesan Rozette plays with shadows to tease the narrator can be read as self-reflexive comments on the “pleasure of the text”. *Thémidore* recalls the tricks she played upon him to entice him:

Bring these two chairs closer ... I obeyed. She put her two legs on them; one on a side, the other on the other, and without forsaking modesty, except by the situation, she teased me with a thousand figures ... In the distance, she would uncover her bosom, then cover it again and, singing the praises of what was hidden, she would promise me that I would never enjoy it.

[“Approchez ces deux chaises” . . . J’obéis. Elle mit ses deux jambes dessus; l’une d’un côté, l’autre de l’autre, et sans sortir de la modestie, sinon par la situation, elle m’agaça par mille figures . . . Elle découvrait de loin sa gorge, puis la recouvrait et, faisant l’éloge de ce qui était caché, elle me promettait que je n’en profiterais jamais].  
(*Thémidore*, 524)

When Rozette recovers herself, it is not out of modesty but in order to turn her body into the blank space where her lover's desires are welcome to linger and get lost: “Her crossed legs concealed all I would have loved to behold, but they offered my imagination a beautiful

meadow where to get lost” [Ses jambes croisées dérobaient ce que j’aurais voulu envisager, mais fournissaient à l’imagination une belle prairie à s’égarer] (*Thémidore*, 528). Thus, Rozette’s body is itself a clair-obscur where shadows and lights co-exist and clash. So is her room: “The canopies of the bed were drawn, and the candles were placed on the dressing table, so that the light was not casting its reflection on the entire room. We moved to the dark side” [Les rideaux du lit étaient fermés, et les bougies placées sur la toilette, de sorte que la lumière ne réfléchissait pas sur toute la chambre. Nous passâmes vers le côté obscur] (*Thémidore*, 523). For the reader too, pleasures unfold in obscurity. Hyperboles—“the tenderest discourses” [les discours les plus tendres], vagueness—“so you want me … to give you pleasure?” [tu veux donc . . . que je te donne du plaisir ?], clichés—“Venus’s doves are painted thus” [ainsi peint-on les colombes de Vénus] (*Thémidore*, 523), and metaphors simultaneously lighten and shade Godard d’Aucour’s erotic scene. These devices are transparent enough for any reader to understand that Rozette and Thémidore are not involved in a chaste frolicking, yet nothing filters through the screen of narrative obscurity to offend decency. Like Rozette, the narrator seduces “without forsaking modesty” [sans sortir de la modestie]. Toying with linguistic clairs-obscurs, Thémidore recalls how his first advances resembled his fencing classes (*Thémidore*, 519), how they talked about his penis as being a “bunch of flowers” [bouquet] he wanted to offer her. Then, having complained about her refusal to accept his “fleuri” (both flowery and florid) present, Thémidore is punished and “put in jail”. The bunch of flowers metamorphoses, or “metaphorises,” itself into a prisoner:

Then, she took hold of the bunch of flowers I had for her. “Since I am insulted”, she continued, “in jail at once!” and indeed she led it there, but I cannot tell whether it was out of sorrow or because of any other reason, that the prisoner, as soon as it entered, started to cry between the two gratings of the gate.

[Alors, elle se saisit du bouquet que je lui destinais. “Puisque l’on m’insulte, continuait-elle, en prison tout à l’heure.” Effectivement, elle l’y conduisit, mais je ne sais si ce fût de chagrin ou par quelque autre motif, le prisonnier, à peine entré, se mit à pleurer entre les deux guichets.] (*Thémidore*, 524)

In the early modern period, metaphors were considered to have the power of “rapidly go[ing]

to the heart” through an immediate combination of “truth and beauty”.<sup>51</sup> However, besides touching the reader, these metaphors also prompt him or her to share the protagonists’ amusements by deciphering what each metaphor conceals. This implies that all aspiration to an innocent relationship with the text be forsaken. In this deciphering game, the reader and the lustful character appear united by a same knowledge of what sexual pleasure entails.

Yet, in a typically libertine fashion, *Thémidore* goes further than merely asking the reader to fill in the blanks with a definitive answer. Through the analogy with Rozette’s teasing poses which offer the hero’s imagination “a beautiful meadow where to get lost” [une belle prairie où s’égarer], Godard d’Aucour’s narrative obscurity is an invitation to saturate indeterminacy with any personal memory and/or fantasy. The shadows of a libertine clair-obscur are thus exponentially widening the meaning of a scene rather than limiting it to one single represented object as traditional clairs-obscurs do. In the libertine sensibility therefore, shadows are conceptualised as enticing because they have the power to liberate one’s imagination from reality and its limits, thus supporting one of the most positive effects of erotic love: “Amorous—or erotic—experience often seems to implement everything that can create the conditions of a non-knowledge, thus opening, at the same time, a space of liberty” [l’expérience amoureuse –ou érotique-, semble souvent tout mettre en œuvre pour créer les conditions d’un non savoir, et ouvrir du même coup, un espace de liberté].<sup>52</sup>

The notion of liberty that is at the (etymological) roots of libertinism can be relished without limits in the carefully devised shadows of a clair-obcsur.

After examining all the similarities between the skilful painter and the talented libertine seducer (whether author or character), on the grounds of their respective conceptualisations of the clair-obscur, this paper has analysed how libertines took possession of the model set by artistic tradition. It has argued that with libertines and through their conception of the

<sup>51</sup> Giambattista Vico, *Institutiones Oratoriae*, quoted by Myriam Tavernier, *Metaphor and Metaphorology: A Selective Genealogy; or, Philosophical and Linguistic Conceptions of Metaphor from Aristotle to the 1990s* (Ghent: Academia Press, 2002), 13.

<sup>52</sup> Claire Jaquier, *L’Erreur des désirs: romans sensibles au dix-huitième siècle* (Lausanne: Payot, 1998), 189.

enticement of shadows, the notion of pleasure would link together the aesthetic sphere and the erotic realm. The bliss reached thus is manifold and maximal.

Both painters and libertine seducers based their art on the principle that Nature or reality could be transformed, for the better, by resorting to artifice and control. Such a reflection echoes the civilising ambitions and pride of the early modern Man. Savage Nature can be refined through the agency of the civilised man's superior intellect. The clair-obscur technique flaunts the artist's or the civilised man's ability to transform reality, dissolving in shadows what is undesirable, whether it be an unnecessary background (as in a painting) or a crude detail (as in court etiquette or *galanterie*). Likewise, in the erotic aesthetics displayed in the plots and style of libertine literature, raw lust is metamorphosed into elegant love-making by resorting to actual darkness and linguistic shadows.

Still, libertines and libertine authors went one step further than traditional painters in the function they gave to clairs-obscurs. Shadows are not conceived as limiting representation by concealing any undesired aspect of reality; rather, if artistically placed in a scene or in a discourse, they permit imagination to replace reality with fantasies. Obscurity and darkness, which one could regard as an obstacle to enjoyment are in fact, from a libertine perspective, a condition of "voluptuousness," this superior form of jouissance according to eighteenth-century definitions. This theory that the skilful devising of lights and shadows can provide jouissance, pleasure and rest ("jouissance", "plaisir" and "repos") is the crux of the analogy between the libertine art of love and the theoretical art of the clair-obscur.