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Aude Volpilhac, *Le secret de bien lire: lecture et herméneutique de soi en France au XVIIe siècle* (Paris : Honoré Champion, 2015). Notes, bibliographie, indexe. 720 pp. €100 (broché). ISBN 9782745329394.

Review by James Helgeson, Barenboim-Said Akademie.

Poor Paolo Malatesta and Francesca da Rimini, condemned for their lust by Dante (*Inferno*, 5) to the buffeting winds of Hell's second circle, led astray by Lancelot and Guinevere! A generation later, Boccaccio played on the commonplace of reading and seduction in the preface to the *Decameron*, a *galeotto*, a Galahad for ladies. For reading is, of course, a dangerous activity, liable to snare all of us into sin and error, dragging us even to perdition.

It is the dangers of reading, and, ultimately, the relationship between interpretation and ethics, that form the core of Aude Volpilhac's extended account of the hermeneutics of interpretation and self-knowledge in seventeenth-century texts in the French tradition. The challenge Volpilhac sets for herself (and, for the most part, meets) is to show that seventeenth-century warnings about reading's perils were significantly different from those of previous centuries, and that these differences stemmed from the rise of the first-person perspective: the "self," the "soi," the "moi," that is, of the various avatars of the putative first-person entity. She wishes, as she writes in her conclusion, to show a "dark side" of the "Grand Siècle," its scripto- or graphophobia (p. 650), its deep mistrust of unruly reading, its attempts to reign in interpretive disorder through a model of reading that increasingly resembled the spiritual exercise of meditation. Volpilhac argues that, older—classical, patristic, medieval, or humanist—discussions of dangerous literature tended to place the ethical danger of books in the texts themselves. In the seventeenth century, however, to read became, increasingly, to reveal one's ethical cast as a reader. To put this idea another way, previously, to read correctly was to absorb arguments placed between the limits of a book by an author, revealing themselves to the attentive perceiver, a theory played upon for example, by Béroalde de Verville in *Le moyen de parvenir*, who suggested that his book arranged itself as a totality when seen aright from a particular perspective. Volpilhac argues that, in the seventeenth century, the responsibility for what was found in a text fell, increasingly, in the reader's ethical disposition. In short, discussions of the danger of reading called upon hermeneutic negotiations between a reader and what she read: "Le secret de bien lire reside donc dans la nécessaire articulation de la connaissance de soi-même et celle de l'œuvre" (p. 656). As such, Aude Volpilhac's study traces a path between a theory of reading and a (largely Augustinian) theory of the "self" (or "soi")—whatever such an entity might be—articulating that argument in an extensive corpus of

writing on the dangers of, particularly, what we now commonly call the “literature” and “philosophy” of the French “Grand Siècle.”

The book falls into two extensive sections of approximately equal length. The first, “Des mauvais livres aux mauvais lecteurs,” details the various early modern arguments about the dangers of reading: desire, curiosity, seduction. The section begins with the modern proliferation of books in which the reader loses her way. The reader is not just the ordinary one, seduced by the lascivious pleasures of fiction, but also the erudite one, seduced by a fetishized corpus of ancient texts. We move from the proliferation of often dangerous books—as numerous as the frogs of Egypt—to the dangers of the undisciplined explorations of curious readers, both lay and erudite. Such a desire for the accumulation of reading-as-knowledge becomes perverse. Readers are possessed by a *libido legendi* fraught with snares, even sexual ones (to read alone is to lay oneself open to an onanistic solitary seduction). This section provides a remarkable overview of the ways this idea of the danger of reading was inflected in major genres of seventeenth-century writing: novels, theatre, poetry, philosophy, where the pages on the differences between perceiving theatre in the context of spectacle and private reading are particularly well presented. The admirable section on Descartes and his readers which closes the first panel (pp. 259-308) is among the highlights of the volume, as it rearticulates the rhetorical performance that Descartes engages in to seduce his readers, in particular showing how, far from consistently employing the argument of a literary and philosophical *tabula rasa*, Descartes exploits the resources of humanist biblio- and logo-philia.

The second section treats the question of how one might remedy the problems of reading’s dangers, that is, how a reader might be trained, or train herself. Here, we move from a discussion of reading as poison and remedy, *pharmakon*, to largely theological and philosophical considerations on how to read the Bible and what kinds of texts might be put in front of readers in pedagogy, including the use of both ancient (e.g. Seneca) and modern texts (e.g. Descartes) as paths for readers (see the excellent, brief section on “le cheminement du lecteur” in Descartes’s *Méditations métaphysiques* (pp. 584-89)). If reading represents a danger to the reader’s soul, it will be necessary to guard against that peril, tracing methods that would protect readers against seduction. In particular, Descartes’s writings are central here since they negotiate a path between method and meditation. Reading thus becomes a propaedeutic to meditation as a spiritual exercise, but also itself a form of meditation. Philosophical and theological arguments come to the fore, at the expense of other kinds of writing (in particular novels and other “literary” forms) that largely fall, somewhat disconcertingly, by the wayside.

A pellucid conclusion (pp. 651-60) brings together the strands of Volpillac’s argument about the increasing responsibility of readers discerning and/or determining the meanings of texts, closing this remarkable, quasi-encyclopaedic treatment of the discourses of reading in seventeenth-century France. It seems churlish to complain about the rich variety of examples that Volpillac adduces, yet one might admire the large-scale construction of her thesis while at the same time wishing for a more pointed and focused statement of her argument. That such a study might become what Malebranche called a “garde-meuble” points to the utility of a remarkable compilation of information and its generosity as a source-book, but also to how the encyclopaedic coverage of the question of reading can hide, in plain sight, the guiding thread of its argument. Moreover, at least in English-language philosophy, one of the most difficult problems to address is what, exactly, people are talking about when they bring up questions of the “self,” “*le soi*,” and so forth, and the way these ways of speaking are rooted in philosophical

cultures quite specific to times, places, and traditions. The philosophical references of such a work naturally fall within the French domain, although the articulation of a notion of ethical subjectivity might well appear otherwise in other linguistico-philosophical corpuses.

A few hesitations: it is the *déformation professionnelle* of the early modernist, like the medievalist or the classicist, to deploy arguments of the form: “but, already in year x...” Yet, one is left wondering what this book might have examined if its corpus had been defined slightly more broadly, taking in more sixteenth-century treatments of analogous topics, in particular regarding biblical hermeneutics. One must, of course, start somewhere. There is quite a bit of material on Montaigne, but I would have liked more (perhaps this is simply a matter of taste and pleasure). And not just Montaigne: to take a famous example, Panurge, in Rabelais’s *Tiers Livre* (1546), wanting to know what would happen if he married, famously consulted a number of authorities, some written texts, others ostensibly living beings. The comic structure of the chronicle rests on how he misreads the answers he receives, and, vitally, the ethical underpinnings of that misreading: Panurge cannot understand what he is being told because his self-love skews his interpretation of the messages. Panurge shows who he is as a reader by virtue of the way he reads. It is his hermeneutic peculiarities that reveal his ethical make-up. Moving on to smaller details: using Desiderius Erasmus’s epistolary exchanges with Guillaume Budé (p. 246) to paint the former as a model of literary civility and “intellectual harmony” and not, say, as a purveyor of caustic polemic, seems rather odd. It is in any case difficult to discover the discussions of any particular authors because the *index nominum* of the book is so very brief. It is odd for a book in which the idea of “curiosity” is so central, that Neil Kenny’s work on the subject is absent from the bibliography, which is largely French in its focus with few forays into criticism in other languages.[1] Nevertheless, such hesitations hardly detract from the achievements of this remarkable study, which will be central to discussions of the issues it treats for a considerable time to come.

NOTE

[1] Neil Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity in Early Modern France and Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

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