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Colas Duflo, *Philosophie des pornographes: Les ambitions philosophiques du roman libertin*. Paris: Édition du Seuil, 2019. 302 pp. Bibliography. 23.00€. (pb). ISBN 978-2-02-140417-3.

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I am very grateful to *H-France Review* for both presenting my work to its readership and for the opportunity to respond to the resulting review. This response seems particularly useful because my reviewer, Alistaire Tallent, does not seem to have really understood the subject of the book and to have missed its main methodological concepts. Obviously, if my reviewer would have expected to read a book on cunnilingus in the eighteenth century, I understand his disappointment: he has got the wrong book. The truth is that my book is not exactly a work on eighteenth-century pornographic literature either. There are already experts on the subject who have done an excellent job of mapping out the field, such as Jean-Marie Goulemot, Michel Delon, Patrick Wald Lasowski, Lynn Hunt and, more recently, Jean-Christophe Abramovici and Mathilde Cortey.[1] So it's not a question of redoing the research that they have already completed perfectly and to which I can only refer. My work, as its title indicates, deals more precisely with the philosophy of pornographers; that is, as the subtitle indicates, the philosophical ambitions of the libertine novel.

This work is part of my current research, the first results of which I have presented in an earlier book, *Les aventures de Sophie. La philosophie dans le roman au 18^e siècle*. [2] It focuses on the place of philosophy in the novel in the eighteenth century, the forms of this presence, and the effects it produces - the philosophical uses of fiction, fictional presentations of thought, and reciprocal borrowing between philosophy and the novel.

During the Enlightenment, philosophy was no longer produced only at the universities. It was written in French, purposefully not in a learned manner, and intended for a broad and cultivated public ranging from the selected circles of the *salons* to the more haphazard attendees of reading rooms. This extension of the reading public allowed the dissemination of scholarly debates outside the academic sphere. Magazines such as *Le Mercure galant*, *le Journal des savants*, *le Journal de Trévoux*, Marivaux's *Spectateur français* and Prevost's *Le Pour et Contre*, had been circulating in France since the seventeenth century and were modeled on *The Spectator* of Addison and Steele. Works of fiction, such as Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*, followed the same model and staged the same debates. Those readers who judged these texts successful also praised novels by Prevost, Marivaux, and Crébillon. This same readership also purchased, from among the growing list of prohibited books, La Mettrie's *Homme-machine* and the anonymous *Thérèse philosophe*. This narrative prose-fiction in its various forms grappled with the intellectual debates of the moment.

Novelists depicted philosophers, evoked metaphysical problems, described utopian societies, and engaged in elaborate thought experiments. Imaginary characters exchanged philosophical dialogues whose stake was the establishment of truth, sentimental characters wrote rational essays, incredible adventures were used to illustrate true ideas.

The history of philosophy itself provides many of the explanations for this revisiting of the question of its writing: the collapse of the major systems of the Classical Age, in the face of the pressure of various forms of empiricism; and the development of more or less heterodox currents based on new foundations required more appropriate forms to express these new ways of thinking. Most scholarly forms, like educational dialogue between master and disciple or systematic treatises starting from metaphysical principles to arrive deductively at the more remote consequences, were being challenged. It was considered necessary to reflect on the variety of legitimate views, the fragmentation of knowledge, the limits of reason, and to stage the foundation of truths in the multiplicity of experiences. The form of the novel allowed a narrative of experiences and particularly an anthropology of passions. It thus made it possible to invent new ways of presenting and elaborating the philosophical discourse. This "narrative philosophy" was more than just popularization or philosophical propaganda. The questions were no longer being asked abstractly, but staged narratively. The novel was also the site of an experimental analysis of human passions. Essays and dialogues were framed in life stories that contextualized them, and that they illuminated in return - when they did not make them more problematic.

My interest in the different forms of presence of philosophy in the novel in the eighteenth century has three dimensions. There is a historical dimension, first of all. It is a question of describing a specific time and particular interest in the history of the novel. The reader is in the presence of a genre in the process of inventing itself, without canonical standards, which borrowed its models and its matter from anywhere within a large sphere of formal invention. Moreover, it was a genre which was often despised, at least by the learned. But the same period is also a time quite specific to the history of philosophy, at least in France. To put it briefly, it was a moment when philosophy was pondering how to write itself and experimenting with new forms of writing in order to provide more opportunities for experiences. Many philosophers and writers with philosophical ambitions turned, each in a specific way, to the novel. This point alone deserves to be studied.

The presence of philosophy in the novel also raises, more generally, some narratological problems. What happens when one introduces non-narrative elements to a novel, such as philosophical dialogues, essays, argumentative developments, or statements of universal theses? What effect do these discursive elements produce on the novel? It is necessary, for each text, to study their place, their functions, their impact on the narrative. For example, the essays of Sade's characters have effects on the narrative rhythm that deserve to be studied. But the presence of philosophy in the novel of the eighteenth century is far from limited to the inclusion of argumentative passages in the narrative. The trajectory of a character, the experiences s/he lives can be designed by the novelist as ways to confront a singular individual and a universal question. What is the scope of these processes? What does it involve, for the novelist, to approach a philosophical problem through narration?

This brings us to the philosophical dimension of the investigation into the presence of philosophy in the novel in the eighteenth century. What is an idea when shaped in a narrative way? What is, in this sense, a philosophy of the novel? Libertine novels have been the subject of numerous

studies in recent years, but few from this philosophical angle: that is what this book is about. In the 1740s, a series of publications gave contemporaries the impression of witnessing a veritable philosophical offensive. Of very different natures, these works had in common the fact of making public, in print, various aspects of a heterodox philosophy that had previously circulated only in handwritten form. This alarmed the drafters of the *Journal of Trévoux* and the *Nouvelles ecclésiastiques* who dismissed the works as "materialistic," "deist," "fatalistic," and "spinozist." These books, being illegal, were only sold under the counter, but they still enjoyed a more widespread diffusion than did the clandestine manuscripts. Indeed, some published volumes brought together collections of these manuscripts, such as the collection entitled *Nouvelles libertés de penser* (1743), which includes Fontenelle's *Traité de la liberté* and Dumarsais's *Le Philosophe*. Other publications drew attention to a new generation of thinkers whose public engagement with subversive ideas contrasted with the traditional privacy practices of the erudite libertinism of previous generations, as seen in Maupertuis's *Venus physique* (1745), La Mettrie's *l'Histoire naturelle de l'âme* (1745), and Diderot's *Pensées philosophiques* (1746). However, we cannot study the diffusion of ideas and writing modes of philosophy in the eighteenth century without studying those books that, while they seem odd in light of our current categories, contributed to the diffusion of the most heterodox ideas. Indeed, some pornographic novels with philosophical ambitions, such as *Dom Bougre* or *Thérèse philosophe*, were among the best-selling of illegally published books.[3]

As discussed above, the development of philosophical ambition in fiction, including in a novel-like framework of reasoned arguments, was in itself not new, but could be traced to the late seventeenth century: see Fenelon's *Les Aventures de Télémaque* (1699), Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721), and Prevost's *Le Philosophe anglais ou Histoire de M. Cleveland* (1731), just to mention the most famous among them. *Thérèse philosophe* (1748) might be regarded as the most subversive side of this narrative philosophy. The story integrates censored ideological elements into the narration of forbidden sexual adventures, and combines in a single publication the various grounds for prohibition. Robert Darnton, in his work on the clandestine publishing industry, has shown that this combination of pornography and philosophy in one book was partly because all the banned books circulating during the Ancien Regime were distributed through the same channels and probably reached the same readership. Orders for prohibited books mixed together, in the same list of "philosophical" works, titles such as *Margot la ravaudeuse* and the *Traité des trois imposteurs*. Given this, we can understand how the two types of discourse came together in some texts. The *Histoire de Dom B***, portier des Chartreux* (1741), which was one of the most successful illegally published works in the eighteenth century, included all of the more transgressive elements. Obscene situations and deliberate vulgarity of language came with great anti-religious tirades, which took their material from clandestine manuscripts. *Thérèse philosophe*, in 1748, is probably the masterpiece of this hybrid genre.

While *Le Portier des chartreux* gives us the feeling that its aim is mainly to shock the reader through multiplying forms of transgressions, conceptual as well as in the descriptive, *Thérèse philosophe* presents a literary and philosophical unity that reflects a more systematic and concerted ideological project. The work embodies a specific ambition of narrative philosophy: a reflection on how to bind together, in a novel, a statement of philosophical ideas and a story of education, along with a more comprehensive and systematic philosophy reflective of a certain "spinozism" found in France in the first half of the eighteenth century. The presentation of the ideas, like the life of the narrator, leads to a new definition of the philosopher and of honest behaviour in society.

The dedication that opens Diderot's *Bijoux indiscrets* immediately and unambiguously makes clear that this work is part of a libertine genre, following in the footsteps of Crébillon. If this reference to Crébillon's erotic-oriental fiction is obvious, one may still wonder to what extent it acts as a screen and thus prevents us from seeing that *Bijoux indiscrets* also belongs to another, perhaps less innocuous lineage, which is fiction with philosophical ambitions, exemplified by Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*, with which Diderot's novel has many affinities. The most rhapsodic aspects of the text come precisely from the fact that nearly half of the chapters abandon the libertine pretext in order to evoke the philosophical debates of the time and to stir up intellectual controversies. And yet, even in this field, that which could give a sense of diffusion or diversity is unified by a deliberately light and sceptical tone, mocking the gravity of those who took these discussions seriously, and poses a series of philosophical questions that pierce through worldly matters. If *Les Bijoux indiscrets* is a novel with philosophical ambition, how is it so? How and why does the narrative articulate the essential erotic dimension and the philosophical dimension?

Sade, in the late eighteenth century, summarizes subversively the novelistic tradition that precedes him. The major forms of epistolary novel and *roman-mémoires* are employed; there is a multiplication of borrowing and re-use of utopian fiction, the sentimental novel and the picaresque novel. Sade also diverts from the philosophical tradition of his time, unscrupulously reusing all heterodox texts available. The last three chapters of my book reflect on these two modes of reuse/misuse in the novels of Sade.

This book studies the works and authors we have cited in a systematic way, but also shows that they are part of a series of libertine texts with philosophical ambition, of which it provides a general description. It attempts to sketch a history of the libertine novel with philosophical ambition, from the late seventeenth century (*Vénus dans le cloître*, Chavigny de la Bretonnière, 1683) to the late eighteenth century (*Juliette ou les prospérités du vice*, Sade, 1797). And finally, it makes clear their importance in disseminating the philosophical ideas of the heterodox Enlightenment and in questioning popular opinion on morality. Sade is both one who inherits from the Enlightenment and one who terminates it by deeply subverting its meaning (Rétif de la Bretonne's *Anti-Justine* [1798] is, in this regard, a significant manifestation, via the libertine novel, of a certain idea of the Enlightenment which considers itself misguided in Sade's immorality).

To conclude, there is one point on which Tallent was not mistaken: we do not have the same vision of the Enlightenment. His, based on critical analyses developed in the 1970s, seems to me to be outdated today. In defence of the thinkers of the 1970s, it must be said that they did not have access to the great texts of the Enlightenment and they inherited a discourse on the Enlightenment, pro and contra, constructed in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. These scholars were actually blaming the Enlightenment for its mobilization in the nineteenth century to justify colonization, which is about as relevant as accusing Plato, Sade or Nietzsche of being responsible for the great totalitarianisms of the twentieth century. We now have full access to the complete works of Diderot and Voltaire, to the *Encyclopaedia* in a reliable electronic version, as well as many other works, which has given us a more accurate vision of the thinking of the great authors of the Enlightenment. Many of us think (and these are banalities) that the great values of the Enlightenment are truth, experience, fact-checking, nature, moral and religious tolerance, and emancipation of the spirits. Unfortunately, these ideas, that were once thought banal, need to be defended today. We believe that the best way to defend them, in

our place as historians of literature and ideas, is to try to understand and study as accurately as possible the framework and texts in which they were produced, and to teach the history of literature and ideas of the Enlightenment with the new tools at our disposal.[4]

NOTES

[1] See, for example, Jean-Marie Goulemot, *Ces livres qu'on ne lit que d'une main. Lecture et lecteurs de livres pornographiques au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Minerve, 1994 [Paris: Alinea, 1991]); Michel Delon, *Le Savoir-vivre libertin* (Paris: Hachette, 2000); Patrick Wald Lasowski, *Dictionnaire libertin. La langue du plaisir au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011); Lynn Hunt, ed., *The Invention of Pornography. Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800* (New York: Zone Books, 1993); Jean-Christophe Abramovici, *Obscénité et classicisme* (Paris: PUF, 2003); and Mathilde Cortey, *L'Invention de la courtisane au XVIII^e siècle dans les romans-mémoires des « filles du monde » de madame Meheust à Sade (1732-1797)* (Paris: Arguments, 2001).

[2] Colas Duflo, *Les aventures de Sophie. La philosophie dans le roman au 18^e siècle* (Paris: CNRS-éditions, 2013).

[3] For a discussion of the issue and circulation of illegal literature, see Robert Darnton, *Édition et sédition. L'univers de la littérature clandestine au XVIII^e siècle*, Paris, Gallimard, 1991. He reported, according to a study of the archives of the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel and lists of books seized by the police, *Thérèse philosophe* is among the best-selling "philosophical books" in a diverse list including *l'Histoire de Dom B*** ou le Portier des Chartreux* and the *Système de la nature* of Holbach. Jonathan Israel, in his study of the diffusion of spinozist ideas in Europe, quote briefly *Thérèse philosophe* (*Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750*, Princeton, 2001). Roland Mortier, the first, proposed a study of the novel from the perspective that we follow here (« Les voies obliques de la propagande philosophique » in *Le Cœur et la raison : recueil d'études sur le XVIII^e siècle*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, Bruxelles, Universitas, 1990).

[4] <https://www.fun-mooc.fr/courses/course-v1:upl+142002+session02/about>

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