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## When Pleasure Isn't Enough: *Volupté* in the Libertine Text

LIBERTINE WRITING OCCUPIES a curious and privileged place in the history of eighteenth-century French literature. Indeed, according to the recent work of cultural historian Robert Darnton (revisiting Daniel Mornet's question of what the French read in the eighteenth century), libertine texts that were largely forgotten until very recently, such as the anonymous *Thérèse Philosophe*, or Gervaise de Latouche's *Histoire de Dom Bougre, portier des chartreux* may have enjoyed a wider readership in eighteenth-century France than seminal Enlightenment texts, such as Rousseau's *Du contrat social*.<sup>1</sup> These "forbidden best-sellers," as Darnton refers to them, were part of an important genre in eighteenth-century French literature, that of the libertine text. Pleasure constitutes the *raison d'être* of libertine literature, a literature which, according to Jean-Marie Goulemot, benefits from an interplay "between the sexual and the cerebral, between ... the body and the mind, between philosophical discourse and the verbal representation of sensual pleasure."<sup>2</sup> In the present article, I would like to examine closely the role that pleasure plays in one libertine text, *Histoire de Dom Bougre, portier des chartreux*. Although the libertine text purports to recount tales of pleasure, and indeed, to move its readers to pleasure, in *Dom Bougre* the reader encounters something disturb-

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<sup>1</sup> See Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1995) xvii–xxi, and *Édition et Sédition* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> "Toward a Definition of Libertine Fiction and Pornographic Novels," *Yale French Studies* 94 (1998): 135.

ing: a tale burdened by impotence, disease, castration, and death. What sense must the reader make of this tale, ostensibly devoted to the representations of the pursuit of pleasure and its refinement, but haunted by the faults and failings of the body? I would like to argue that, in this novel, pleasure is dependent upon more than just the body; in fact, the text seems to propose that true pleasure is found only in the text.

The history of libertine literature can be summed up by Paul Valéry's definition of '*libertin*,' his *Regards sur le monde actuel*. Valéry writes: "In Rome, free men, if they were born of free parents, were called '*ingénus*'; if they had been freed, they were referred to as '*libertins*.' Much later, men who claimed to have freed their thoughts were called *libertins*; soon, this title was reserved for those whose conduct no longer knew the chains of order."<sup>3</sup> Libertine literature as a genre will undergo a transformation from the *libertinage érudit*, characterized by the 'free thought' typical of the utopian writings of authors such as Gabriel de Foigny and Cyrano de Bergerac, in the mid and later seventeenth century, to the sexually explicit writings found in works such as Nicolas Chorier's *L'académie des Dames* (1655, first published in French in 1680). By the eighteenth century, 'libertine' literature has left behind the thought exercises of the previous century. Although it is a genre that has proven difficult to define, most agree that libertine literature constitutes a body of texts which run the gamut from the tasteful suggestiveness that characterizes novels such as Crébillon fils' *Les Égarements du coeur et de l'esprit*, to the all-out pornographic nature of works such as Sade's *Juliette*. The libertine text is a text dominated by seduction, the pursuit of pleasure, and the depiction (in various degrees of explicitness) of love's consummation. But the philosophical inquiries of the seventeenth century are not entirely discarded in eighteenth-century French libertine literature. In fact, many libertine texts engage in a *va-et-vient* (that seems puzzling outside of the context of the Enlightenment) between long philosophical discourses, explications of materialist philosophy, inquiries into the nature of good, evil, and even the role of government, and scenes of masturbation, heterosexual and homo-

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<sup>3</sup> Cited from definition '*libertin*' in Paul Robert, *Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française* (Paris: Société du Nouveau Littré, 1966) 4:92. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

sexual sex, incest, *ménages-à-plusieurs*, and other titillating descriptions.

Eighteenth-century France will experience two great waves of libertine writings, the first in the 1740s, the second arriving in the 1780s. The second wave will increasingly include pornographic writings criticizing the royalty, especially after the scandal of the “affaire du collier” (1785–86). The first wave is ostensibly launched by the release of *Dom Bougre*, in 1740. In the decade following this publication, a series of explicit writings is published on the heels of this novel, including more than one “sequel” to the story of Saturnin, the narrator of *Dom Bougre*. These writings include some of the century’s most emblematic pornographic, erotic, or libertine texts, including Monbron’s *Canapé couleur de feu* (1741), Querlon’s *La tourière des carmélites* (1743), Aucour’s *Thémidor* (1745), and the hugely-popular *Thérèse Philosophe* (1748), which was published anonymously, and has since been attributed to the marquis d’Argens. Of the aforementioned works, only *Thérèse Philosophe*’s popularity could rival that of *Dom Bougre*.

The publication of *Dom Bougre* did not pass unnoticed. Gervaise de Lataouche’s small, anonymously-printed volume would become a widely-read best seller during the *Ancien Régime*. It would also become a favourite item of contraband, for if it was widely read, it was not legally sold, and potential owners and sellers of the work could be faced with police harassment, or time in the Bastille. Its fate scarcely improved in the centuries that followed. If it became a classic, it was a classic of a certain genre, a classic of the ‘*Enfer*’ of the Bibliothèque Nationale, that holding place of all books banned, scandalous, or frankly, pornographic.

The book’s contemporaries were quick to launch an attack against this novel. Indeed, in a 1741 critique of the work, an anonymous author publishes a letter denouncing the work as “a book that surpasses all the horrors that the licentiousness of the press has spread for the last few years,” and describing its author as “a monster in society and a poisoner of the public.”<sup>4</sup> As early as December 1740 a colporteur named Auchereau was arrested for “trafficking in obscene books, including *Dom B...*, *Portier des*

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<sup>4</sup> Cited in “Notice,” Alain Clerval, *Romanciers libertins du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2000) 1105.

*chartreux*.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, as Alain Clerval remarks in his notice to the Pléiade edition to this novel: “between February and March of 1741 twelve persons are imprisoned in the Bastille, then transferred to Bicêtre,” accused of selling, printing or otherwise being involved in the distribution of *Dom B... , Portier des chartreux*.<sup>6</sup>

The reception of this work did not change greatly in the centuries following its first printing. *Dom Bougre* is discussed in the 1993 volume *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity*. In her introduction, Lynn Hunt cites an 1806 dictionary by Etienne Peignot, in which Peignot establishes a list of “the most repugnant, immoral books,” identifying them only by abbreviations.<sup>7</sup> *Dom Bougre* ranks at the top of this list, and Hunt remarks: “it is clear that a kind of galaxy of the most explicit pornographic writings was already in place in the minds of connoisseurs at the beginning of the nineteenth century.”<sup>8</sup> It is also clear that the *Portier des chartreux* is a star in this aforementioned “galaxy.”

It is not surprising, then, that *Dom Bougre* speaks of pleasure. In fact, it would be easy to describe this text simply by sticking to the titillating parts (and one might argue that the text offers little else): *Dom Bougre*, then, is the story of the sexual awakening of Saturnin, brought about by a primal scene of voyeurism, in which he sees his mother in a compromising position with the local priest, le père Polycarpe. This first scene of voyeurism propels the narration forward, sending Saturnin on a quest to unlock the mysteries of the pleasure he has just witnessed. Eager for experience, the young narrator will try to seduce his sister, only to be interrupted by his mother, with whom he will almost have intercourse, only to be interrupted by the cries of sister, who is fighting off the advances of le père Polycarpe. Eventually, Saturnin will be shipped off to the seminary, but not before losing his virginity to his sister’s godmother.

The seminary, rather than curbing Saturnin’s desires, provides him with his first homosexual experiences, and introduces him to the wonders of the “piscine” (the “pool”), the seminary’s on-site harem, where Saturnin writes that he hopes to “taste with-

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<sup>5</sup> “Notice” 1105.

<sup>6</sup> “Notice” 1105.

<sup>7</sup> Lynn Hunt, *The Invention of Pornography* (New York: Zone Books, 1993) 15.

<sup>8</sup> *The Invention of Pornography* 15.

out constraint all the pleasures of love in the arms of a number of beautiful women devoted to my desires,"<sup>9</sup> a wish that will be fulfilled, beyond his wildest hopes.

However, it would be possible to provide another résumé of the novel, one which is much more disturbing. Indeed, I would like to propose that within this text, the purported goal of which is to excite its readers, one thing is consistently devalued, debased, and cast in a troubling light. It leads to disgust, remorse, disease, violence, unwanted pregnancy, castration and eventually death, all in the space of a couple of hundred pages. The disturbing element in this erotic novel is, of course, the very thing that drives its narrative—sex. In fact, even the "piscine," the locus of Saturnin's greatest sexual satisfaction, a site which provided him with a seemingly endless possibility for pleasure, will eventually become the site which bears witness to his increasing weariness, desperation, and ennui, which will develop into a complete impotence, immune to even the most varied erotic stimulation. Attentive readers might find themselves questioning the role of pleasure in this text, in which a castrated narrator writes: "such is pleasure. It shows its face, and then it flees. Did you see it? No, the sensations that it aroused in your soul were so vivid, so quick, that worn out by the force of its impulse, your soul found itself unable to know them" (419–20).

Before examining Saturnin's remarks about pleasure more closely, I would like to turn to another text from the same time period, which also, perhaps surprisingly, given its title, casts pleasure in a disparaging light. This text is La Mettrie's *L'École de la volupté* (1746), which he will rework and retitl *L'Art de jouir* (1752).

La Mettrie's text offers an in-depth analysis of "volupté," a state which Diderot would define a few years later, in the *Encyclopédie*, by writing: "pure volupté is found neither in the satisfaction of the senses, nor in the excitement of appetites. Reason must be its mistress and its rule; the senses are but its ministers."<sup>10</sup> A more recent definition of volupté echoes some of the contrasts inherent in Diderot's definition, offering that volupté may be "a vivid sensual pleasure, fully felt, a sexual pleasure, or a strong

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<sup>9</sup> Gervaise de Latouche, *Histoire de dom B\*\*\*, Portier des chartreux*, in Alain Clerval, *Romanciers libertins du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2000) 449.

<sup>10</sup> "Volupté," in *Encyclopédie* (Neufchâtel: Chez Faulche et Co., 1765) 17:458.

moral pleasure.”<sup>11</sup> La Mettrie’s text, like Diderot’s, insists upon the role of the intellect and reflection in volupté, which he contrasts with both *le plaisir* (pleasure) and *la débauche* (debauchery). In *L’École de la volupté*, La Mettrie notes that pleasure is born of the senses, and hence, is also circumscribed by them. La Mettrie’s idea of the limitations of the senses, and indeed, of the body, become evident as he describes a moment of sexual ecstasy between two lovers who, in the instant of their mutual euphoria, achieve what La Mettrie calls “the sovereign pleasure ... in which the soul seems to leave us, to pass into the object of our affections, where two lovers now form one heart.”<sup>12</sup> La Mettrie describes this ultimate pleasure, however, with slight disdain, specifying: “But no matter how intense these pleasures are..., they are only ever but pleasures; only the state that follows them is true volupté” (132–33).

Volupté, which entails contemplation, offers a richer experience than pleasure, which clearly resides in the body. It is in the moments after pleasure, La Mettrie explains, that the mind is able to attain this state: “The mind (*l’âme*), now less intoxicated, belongs to itself, exactly as much as it needs to in order to contemplate the full pleasure of its state, and take advantage of its situation” (133). For La Mettrie, physical pleasure, no matter how satisfying, never suffices to bring about volupté, and is only ever a stepping stone from which the subject may attain the state of volupté. La Mettrie’s account privileges the mental faculties of *imagining*, *contemplating*, and even *remembering*, over sensual pleasures. He questions the body’s ability to produce volupté, and points to its physical insufficiency: “could the body’s organs suffice for so much pleasure? No, good things of this amplitude could only belong to the mind (*l’âme*)” (133). He will reiterate this claim in a passage mocking libertine pleasures, where he writes: “it is not bodily pleasure (*jouissance*) that I require, rather, the pleasures of the mind (*l’âme*)” (135).

As La Mettrie clarifies his definition of volupté, the role of the mind becomes even more complex. While proposing that the senses are the domain of pleasure (“Our senses are the seat of pleasure,” and “therefore, it is only in the senses that pleasure must be sought” [136]), he argues that “volupté must be sought else-

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<sup>11</sup> Robert, *Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique* 6:859.

<sup>12</sup> *De la volupté* (Paris: Éditions Desjonquères, 1996) 132.

where (*plus loin*)” (136). If the senses are necessary for pleasure, they are not sufficient for volupté. In a sentence which brings to mind Derrida’s arguments in *De la Grammatologie*, La Mettrie notes that the imagination must serve as a “supplement” to the senses for the subject to attain volupté: “imagination must supplement what they [the senses] are missing. It is volupté that makes everything worthwhile” [“il faut que l’imagination supplée à ce qui leur manque. C’est elle qui met le prix à tout”] (136). For La Mettrie, the imagination can produce volupté even when the body is decrepit. Indeed, even when the body fails, or is well past its prime, he affirms, “Everything is volupté for a thinking man” [un homme d’esprit] (137). A tension exists throughout La Mettrie’s definition, wherein the body, cast as insufficient, capable only of *plaisir*, and not of the more rarefied pleasure, *volupté*, must have recourse to the mind to attain this state. Oddly, these reflections on the body’s insufficiency, and the tenuous quality of sexual pleasure, are remarkably evident in Latouche’s tale of Saturnin’s libertine coming of age.

Indeed, to return to Saturnin, it would appear that the more our narrator learns about sex, the less there is to like about it. The text’s final line, in which Saturnin imagines his own epitaph, “*Hic situs est Dom Bougre/Fututus, futuit*” (496), offers a conclusion bemoaning the perils of the narrator’s sexual thrills. Yet well before Saturnin offers this joyless epitaph, he has learned that pleasure’s bed of roses is strewn with thorns. Even in his first forays into seduction, with his sister, Suzon, he will be cut short. Suzon will evoke her fear of pregnancy, telling Saturnin that she would like men better “if what one did with them was not so dangerous” (381).

This spectre of danger, evoked early in the text, haunts Saturnin throughout, as sex is often equated with risk, or bodily harm. Saturnin’s sister, Suzon, will be raped by another religious figure (l’abbé Fillot), only to have to bear “the bitter fruits” (490) of the ensuing pregnancy. The man who had taken advantage of her promises to ease her situation, and Suzon soon understands the horrible equivocation of his promise, when the bumpy carriage ride he forces her to endure will induce a miscarriage outside of Paris, leaving her sick, destitute, and abandoned. Her story continues with her descent into libertinage, and indeed, Saturnin will only find her at the end of the story by accident, having followed a prostitute into the seedy Parisian brothel where Suzon ends her days.

A miscarriage and prostitution are not the only misfortunes she will suffer because of sex. When Saturnin comes across his sister near the end of his narrative, overcome at having found the one person whom he has always loved, he explains to her that she is not in fact his biological sister, but that she is still “the idol of his heart” (491). Moved by his passion, he pushes her to make love with him but she stops him, asking: “Would you want to share ... the sad price of my libertinage? And if you would, could I have the cruelty of consenting to your desire?” (492). Saturnin’s consent will infect him (with syphilis), prompting the “petite opération” (castration) which he will suffer before beginning his narrative. He writes: “Little by little my pain became so violent that recourse to violent remedies was needed to rid me of it. I was told that I must resign myself to undergoing a little operation. I must spare you the painful spectacle .... I put my hand where the pain was the sharpest. Oh! I am no longer a man!” (493–94). It is in this state, reduced to becoming the title’s doorman for the Chartreux brothers, that Saturnin will write the memoirs that comprise this novel.

The novel’s exposition of the body’s most dramatic problems, pitfalls and failings (impotence, unwanted pregnancies, venereal disease, castration) are, to state the obvious, not very arousing, and seem ill-placed in an ‘erotic’ masterpiece. Yet beyond all of these explicit ways in which the body (and, obviously, sex) are being problematized within this text, the novel seems to linger over subtler depreciations of the body’s experiences.

For almost all of the narrator’s sexual conquests, or moments of sexual satisfaction, are written under the sign of ‘insufficiency.’ In fact, Saturnin often laments the evanescent, ephemeral quality of pleasure, sometimes mourning its end before that end has come about. Saturnin realizes early on in his sexual awakening that sexual pleasure cannot last, that the sexual act is brief and its pleasure fleeting. Sexual satisfaction only serves to underscore this, its arrival often provoking moments of regret. This realization will stir the narrator to bemoan the fate of humanity, in a quote that prefigures Rousseau’s reflections in his *Cinquième Promenade*: “Man is not born for lasting happiness” (460).

Saturnin will articulate this world-weariness and despair during his glory days in the seminary’s “piscine.” Yet this pessimism is prefigured early in his narrative, during first sexual encounter with Mme d’Inville, Suzon’s godmother, the results of which include



sexual satisfaction, certainly, but also indifference, disgust and remorse.

Whereas Saturnin will describe his first orgasm in glowing terms ("I fell motionless ... our mutual kisses expressed our pleasure" [407]), and portrays his second with no less warmth ("our sighs ... caused us a sweet languorous sensation that was soon crowned by an ecstasy that swept us away, and exhausted us" [408]), he provides a puzzling intermission to these two acts.

Saturnin turns wistful describing the pleasure he is about to experience, and the narration sharply swerves away from a description of the sexual organs of his partner ("I spread her legs, looking willingly at that charming spot"), to a sense of impending disappointment: "Those foretastes of pleasure are more titillating than pleasure itself" (407). He ruminates that this dissatisfaction is man's permanent state, noting: "Man, insatiable in his desire, forms new desires even in the throes of pleasure.... He is like a victim of dropsy, for whom drinking increases his thirst" (407).

His third orgasm of the afternoon finds him indifferent: "I felt neither desire, nor disgust. However, I felt that if it were up to me, I would have preferred rest to action" (409). Mme d'Inville's attempts to arouse him are given a less than enthusiastic reception ("I placed my hand on what she was showing me, but I placed it there with indifference, and tickled it even more indifferently" [410]), and the description of her touch is bereft of sensuality. He narrates that it is "like a doctor taking a criminal's pulse" (410). His fifth and final orgasm of the day, preceded by a bout of impotence, only underscores pleasure's evanescence, and Saturnin's regrets. Mme d'Inville will rely upon artificial means in order to bring Saturnin up to snuff, through the use of a special lotion she will apply to his genitals.

Once it is over, Saturnin will reflect: "The charm dissipated, and all that I was left of the pleasure I had just known was a slight idea, which, fading away like a shadow, left me in despair of ever finding it again. Such is pleasure" (413). He will describe his post-coital state by depicting himself in a weakened and disgusted state. When Saturnin asks his lover to reapply the lotion she had used before, she replies by invoking the spectre of danger which has often troubled the pursuit of pleasure in this text, and which here appears to be mortal, saying: "I love you too much to want to cause your death" (413). In this text purportedly devoted to pleas-

ure, Saturnin's first day of sexual pleasure has left him wistful, unsatisfied, feeling cheated, weakened, disgusted, and finally, on the brink of death.

Ultimately, in this libertine tale, the narrator casts the sexual act in a bizarre light, offering a peculiarly mixed message to his readers. What is the moral of these memoirs, in which a castrated narrator consistently calls into question the body's experience of pleasure? Has pleasure, the mainstay of the libertine text, been expelled from Saturnin's narrative?

I would argue that there is a volupté in this text, and that its narrator is suggesting that it is not to be found within his sexual successes. It is not through the narrator's sexual conquests, but rather through his recollections, the reflection that writing about his sexual past has afforded him, that Saturnin will experience volupté. La Mettrie, addressing the possibility of volupté in the elderly body, wrote that it would never abandon men with imagination. He writes that even if the body has become blasé, as long as the imagination is not jaded: "lascivious movements might leave behind certain parts of the body, but if these moments remain in the imagination, this precious stock will raise the mind above the debris of the body" (136). "This precious stock" ("*ce dépôt précieux*") of memories is all that is left to the formerly able narrator of *Le Portier des chartreux*. By accessing this treasure through the act of describing, of remembering and writing, this physically incapacitated narrator experiences *volupté*, for the first time. Through writing, he now relives the "*approches du plaisir*" (foretaste of pleasure) which he had glorified during his tryst with Mme d'Inville. These same "*approches du plaisir*" are lauded by La Mettrie when he writes: "Even happier are those whose vivid and sensual imagination can maintain the senses in a foretaste of pleasure," which allows these actors to "experience bliss (*jouir*) long after *la jouissance*" (132).

I would argue that there is a volupté in this text, and a seduction much more powerful than all of the numerous seductions Saturnin experiences throughout his sexual career. While those seductions failed to bring him satisfaction, always falling short of the tantalizing volupté they appeared to promise, writing has afforded him this pleasure. This volupté points beyond the body's limited capacity for pleasure, locating an ultimate, enduring pleasure in the acts of reading and writing. The libertine text, I would

argue, is not seductive because it will lead its readers astray, as the frightened critics of *Dom Bougre* had suggested, or as one generation of luckless censors after another certainly believed. Reading is seductive because it affords the opportunity for experiencing the pleasure of the text. It provokes readers to read more, and in doing so, allows them to experience the volupté of the imagination. Libertine literature may arouse its readers, but as literature it also, as Saturnin's memoirs demonstrate, incites its readers to imagine, to dream, and to remember. As literature, it always points to a pleasure which can only be found in the mind, and which is consistently more satisfying than any sexual pleasure. Indeed, I would argue Saturnin's memoirs posit themselves, and the pleasures of recollection, as much more enticing than even sex, which they often seem to debase.

Derrida argues, in a discussion of the "supplement": "It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in the place of; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void."<sup>13</sup> In *Histoire de dom B\*\*\*, Portier des chartreux*, writing, and in turn reading, offer a greater and more long-lasting satisfaction than any physical pleasures could. Not only does the pleasure of these texts supplement sexual pleasure, it also threatens to supplant it. This, I would argue, is the greatest seduction of the libertine text. In the last analysis, *Dom Bougre* is a story in which sex is fraught with danger, mishaps, disease and death (perhaps as it always is, in every century, and certainly has proven to be so in our own), but in which *writing* is cast as a pure pleasure—the pleasure of remembering, of living in a permanent foretaste of satisfaction, of creating—that higher pleasure which its time called 'volupté.'

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<sup>13</sup> *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976) 145.

