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Anne Gédéon Lafitte, Marquis de Pelleport, *The Bohemians*, with an introduction by Robert Darnton, translated by Vivian Folkenflik. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. xlviii + 193 pp. Notes. ISBN 978-0-8122-4194-5.

Review by Marie-Hélène Huet, Princeton University.

The marquis de Pelleport's compelling novel follows a group of Bohemians through their wanderings, offering a rare glimpse into the lives of impoverished writer-philosophers who struggled to make a living on the eve of the French Revolution. Pelleport's witty and irreverent story invites the reader to join his libertine characters as they debate philosophical questions, battle with publishers, and vow to enjoy whatever pleasure will come their way. Their group includes three philosophical sects, the *Economico-Naturalistico-Monotonic* sect, the *Despotico-Contradictorio-Paradoxico-Slanderists* sect, and the *Communico-Luxurico-Knavistic* sect. Two lusty women follow the troupe, accompanied by the wise Colin, a donkey whose sexual prowess compares well with that of Joan of Arc's donkey in Voltaire's *La Pucelle*. There is no linear plot, and various characters take center stage as the action moves from France to England, with a number of digressions and cameo appearances by Frederic II of Prussia, William Pitt, and Jean-Paul Marat. Pelleport's wit spares no one: religion and sects, states and monarchs, Encyclopedists and politicians, all are subjected to his joyous impertinence.

As Robert Darnton writes in his introduction to the novel, *The Bohemians* spans several genres: it can be read as a picaresque novel, a libertine tract, and the partial autobiography of an author whose life itself was worthy of a novel. With its numerous digressions the novel calls to mind Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. The self-conscious narrator's engaging addresses to his readers—one of the most delightful elements of this gem of a novel—remind us also of *Jacques le Fataliste*. Diderot's novel was not published until 1796, as Darnton notes, though it is not impossible that Pelleport would have read it, or parts of it, when it appeared as feuilleton in *La Correspondance Littéraire*, between 1778 and 1780. At one moment, an unrepentant narrator challenges his reader: "Ha! You threw my book in the fire! No problem, I swear, no problem—I have ten thousand copies printed. Burning my book! O the horror of it! Going to the Bastille would make my reputation. Ah well, since you spoil me like a favorite child, I will pick up the thread of my narrative, and unwind it to the core" (p. 57) A few pages later, a triumphant narrator boasts: "How I hurried towards the denouement! How I avoided digressions! How laconic I was!" (p. 62), only to disclose everything that could have been added, in another of his marvelous digressions.

The novel can be enjoyed in several ways: as an exuberant romp through the intellectual landscape of eighteenth-century Europe, where no one is sacred, all rules of propriety are flouted, and religion and philosophy are mocked with equal audacity. It can also be savored for Pelleport's stylistic virtuosity: one rarely encounters an author so evidently elated with the sheer pleasure of linguistic exuberance. Pelleport displays a stunning literary range, parodying pompous philosophers, hypocritical church leaders, ineffective politicians, and amorous frolics with perfect pitch and literary nerve. He takes delight in pointing to his own devices ("After these Latin words to satisfy the rule established by great men from time immemorial in every

time and place—never begin an enterprise without some sentence worthy of its importance and quotable at the head of the narrative” (p. 9), and quotes with a mix of affection and respect the great authors that may have influenced him, from Horace to Cervantes. In a particularly droll passage, the author describes a pseudo-legal treatise on the ethics of seduction, moving effortlessly from the law of *primo occupanti* and the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases, to the philosophical debates on liberty of action and the problems of censorship.

The Bohemians is also a roman à clef, and Robert Darnton’s preface offers an invaluable guide to the many characters that are represented, slandered, caricatured in Pelleport’s work. *The Bohemians*’ main character, Bissot, is a thinly disguised portrait of Jean-Pierre Brissot de Warville, who was to become a prominent leader of the Girondists during the French Revolution. He shared with Pelleport the experience of struggling to survive through his literary works, trying his luck in London, and ending in the Bastille. Yet the two men could not have been more different. “Pelleport was dissolute, cynical and witty; Brissot serious, hard-working, and humorless,” writes Robert Darnton (p. xviii). Both had certainly cooperated in the spreading of dubious publications. Brissot was released from the Bastille after four months; Pelleport remained there for more than four years, from July 1784 to October 1788. The other characters in the book are mostly taken from the colony of French expatriates, the London Grub-Street authors who made a living through the production of lampoons and the dissemination of scandalous works. The novel is packed with literary allusions and references to contemporary events that are carefully explained in the introduction and notes. As such, *The Bohemians* offers invaluable insights onto the life and mentality of those marginal writers who played an obscure role in the political unrest that preceded the Revolution. They were minor characters to be sure, quickly forgotten by posterity, yet they were important enough to have been the object of relentless pursuit in the last years of the French Monarchy.

Robert Darnton’s preface also provides a wealth of details on Pelleport, the rogue and scoundrel whom Brissot himself described in his memoirs as someone with “plenty of wit, a bravura manner, an unbridled taste for pleasure, and a profound scorn for every kind of morality” (p. xix). Do we detect something like envy from the moralizing and humorless bourgeois? Another London libeler completed Pelleport’s portrait by calling him “a knave” and “a monster,” a man who “when you ask him about the primary cause that rules the universe, replies with an ironic smile and makes the sign of a zero, which he calls his profession of faith” (p. xxvi). Yet, this son of the aristocracy who had been dishonorably discharged from the army and disowned by his family is also curiously endearing. Darnton’s fascinating account of his troubled life, and what we can gather from the hardly disguised autobiographical pages of the novel, shows an unrepentant and well-read libertine, full of talent, energy and charm. “[I]n recommending *The Bohemians*, writes Darnton, I may be succumbing to a case of biographical enthusiasm. I stumbled upon the book while trying to reconstruct the life of its author, one of the most interesting characters that I have encountered during many years of digging in archives” (p. x). Pelleport’s undeniable appeal is also palpable in the novel’s unguarded moments of gravity, when the tone becomes wistful and tinged with melancholia. In these pages Pelleport discloses a more vulnerable side, unafraid to show in his own misfortunes the reflection of his own shortcomings.

By the time the novel was published, in 1790, it was already out of date, as Darnton points out, France being preoccupied with more urgent matters than life on the sidelines of the Republic of Letters. Yet it fully deserves to be rediscovered as a unique testimony on the life of the early Bohemians who tried to survive in the margins of eighteenth-century political and literary life, and as a remarkable display of stylistic virtuosity. Does the novel rank above Sade’s *Justine*, as Darnton suggests? Pelleport is not as preoccupied as Sade with conveying his own philosophical principles, making his novel more lighthearted. Sade left an immense corpus, Pelleport only this

brief text. Did the two men meet during the years they spent at the Bastille? We have no proof, notes Darnton, but it is difficult to imagine that their paths did not cross, and the reader cannot help dreaming of the exchange that might have taken place between them.

There is every reason to be grateful for this exemplary edition of a text that should have taken its place long ago on the shelves of any reader interested in eighteenth-century culture and philosophical tales. Vivian Folkenflik's elegant, literary translation respects the novel's playful energy and fully conveys what she describes as the "semi-complicit relationship Pelleport establishes with his readers" (p. xlv). The translation perfectly renders the multiple stylistic variations of a text that moves incessantly from comic interludes and erotic scenes to parodies of philosophical discourses and religious sermons. Moreover, Folkenflik's notes on the challenges presented by the original text make for some of the best pages I have read on the joys and perils of translation. Her particular attention to details (from the identification of characters to "the rapid shift in tenses, as part of a Sternean discourse" [p. xlviii]) perfectly allows the text to keep its eighteenth-century flavor while making it appealing to modern readers, even those who don't know the context in which it was written.

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