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James A. Steintrager, *The Autonomy of Pleasure*, Columbia University Press, 2016. x + 394 pp. Bibliography and Index.

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In this study, James Steintrager explores a series of iconographic, literary, and philosophical works in order to demonstrate how libertinage construes pleasure as an *autopoiesis*, an autonomous system animated by a self-perpetuating drive. Pointing out the relation of libertinage to satire, Steintrager provides a genealogy that begins with Aristophanes, Juvenal, Ovid, Lucian, and culminates with Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Diderot. It is primarily Epicureanism, which he defines as “a materialist philosophical system and a related ethics of pleasure”, which exerts a substantial influence on libertine philosophy (p. 16).

For French libertine writers of the eighteenth century, and for Sade in particular, pleasure reigns supreme over happiness. Based upon a materialist vision of life, libertines undertake a critique of political, and religious authorities. In the libertines’ eyes, pleasure constitutes a radically autonomous sphere resting upon the divorce between reason and love, and the fulfillment of the senses. This autonomy of pleasure manifests itself in the libertines’ predilection for closed spaces independent from the rest of society.

There is an element of periodization in this study. Beginning with an analysis of the emergence of licentious libertine fiction in the 1740’s, which he associates deeply with philosophy, Steintrager later underscores a radicalization of libertinage itself in the 1770s. For Steintrager, the questioning of the power of reason over pleasure takes place at a privileged moment in French history, which allows “such a longstanding, profound, and radical version of the autonomy of pleasure” (p. 23). In Steintrager’s analysis, the rise of Louis XIV’s absolutism led to aristocratic disenfranchisement and a concurrent freedom of libertine pursuits that would culminate in the last quarter of the eighteenth century: “The radical libertinage of the 1770’s and following decades was an attempt to think the future of social organization and politics beyond the monarchy via the example of aristocratic license” (p. 23).

Since physical *jouissance* is the libertines’ primary motivation, the multiplicity of postures stems from their need for variety to perpetuate their pleasure. Steintrager examines the diversity of positions in sexual intercourse represented in writings from Antiquity to the eighteenth century. Ovid’s *Art of love* illustrates that there is no way to systemize the art of love because it is an art,” (p. 42). In contrast, Aretino’s famous *Ragionamenti* attempts to overcome the tediousness of repetition with a catalog of positions. Steintrager emphasizes the paradox underlying Aretino’s project, which strives to offer variety while imposing limits on the libertine imagination. Sade best illustrates the attempt to defeat repetition by increasing “the number of partners,” (p. 59) shifting “emphasis from manner to person,” (p. 59) investing “in racial diversity,” (p. 60) and bestiality. Steintrager observes that through the “combinatorial matrix” (p. 62) that

governs his libertines' sexual practice, Sade produces new perversions. Yet by pushing the boundaries of what bodies can perform, the Sadeian libertines are at risk of failure.

In the libertine system, space plays an essential role in the production of pleasure. Analyzing libertinage in its literary and painted manifestations, Steintrager pays particular attention to the *petites maisons*, where lovers can meet and experience voluptuousness in a refined setting. Other closed places such as convents and monasteries perform the same function by allowing clandestine pleasure. Harems, though outside the French context, play a similar role in enabling sexual pleasure in a closed environment. However, as Galland's *Mille et une nuits* and Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* demonstrate, oriental tales were mostly vehicles of social and political critique. This is most famously the case in Diderot's *La Religieuse* which, while painting numerous scenes of sapphic pleasure, nonetheless announces an (ambiguous) condemnation of the cloistered life and the perversions it engenders. In a revealing comment, Steintrager notes that "liberation in theory - even in its eventual celebration of polymorphous perversity - bears a deeply naturalizing, normative, and heteronormative kernel" (p. 95).

Sade's chateau de Silling, in the *120 days*, is the epitome of libertine space: exemplifying both a totalitarian order closed to the outside world, and society constructed solely around the production of pleasure for a few privileged aristocrats.

Steintrager also emphasizes how certain writers dealt with sexual license in the public space. Rétif de la Bretonne's 1769 *Pornographe*, for example, proposes that the state should take measures to curb sexual excess. Writers such as Montesquieu also condemn polygamy in the interest of fostering demographic growth. On these and other examples, Steintrager highlights a "shift from autocratic social organization, (monarchy, subjects, and territory), to a bureaucratic one, (state, population, and nation)" (p. 111) and an intensification of intimacy [...] to resolve social problems" (p. 114).

Libertines writers reacted to efforts to do away with libertinage via irony and satire. Underlining the conflict between individual pleasure and collective well-being in Enlightenment anthropological ideology, Sade's republican brothel in the *Philosophie dans le boudoir* offers a "defense of capricious tyrannical power and violence" (p.121). As Sade derides modesty, and conventional family structure, he rejects any form of restraint and praises absolute freedom. Steintrager remarks that in Sade all acts usually portrayed as outside nature and monstrous in society are presented as natural. In so doing, Sade contradicts attempts to reconcile pleasure and state utility, ideals that are essentially bourgeois.

Sade's praise of subversive sexual practice accounts for his libertines' preference for sodomy. Examining the historical evolution of the status of sodomy, Steintrager notes its association with alterity in authors from Antiquity and Asian conceptions. In Europe, sodomy is evoked to critique the Church and its institutions, monks exhibiting a supposed propensity to debauchery and hypocrisy, and to denounce celibacy. Similarly, buggery will be used as a means of political critique for the exploitation of the third estate in revolutionary pamphlets.

For the libertines, who praise ideological alterity, sodomy is a means of expanding pleasure and debunking so-called "natural" practices, along with the concomitant moral restraint imposed on

pleasure. By negating any reproductive practice, sodomy as sexual pleasure is an end to itself. This disconnect between reproduction and pleasure accounts for the privileged status of the clitoris in libertine sexual imaginary according to Steintrager. Examining representations of female genital organs, he notes that before the 16th century, the clitoris was conceived as a means of closure and protection of the womb, while subsequently, it was seen as a means to pleasure. Libertine writers, Steintrager remarks, “exploited the gap between pleasure and reproduction in their quest to grant pleasure an autonomous status” (p. 117). Thus, libertines read in the opposition between the hymen and the clitoris the opposition between an organ representing the social restriction placed upon women, and a sterile organ whose sole function is to provide pleasure. Libertinage, Steintrager observes, sees the clitoris as the organ *par excellence* of the autonomy of pleasure. In the libertine quest for maximum *jouissance* and their rejection of the imperative of reproduction, Sadeian creatures conceive of “anal intercourse [combined] with clitoral stimulation as the acme of pleasure’s autonomy” (p. 187).

Variety is a *sine qua non* condition for pleasure to function as a system. For example, Steintrager demonstrates that interracial relations are another factor enabling libertines to experience diversity and increase pleasure. Far from negating the racial hierarchy subordinating Black people to White, libertinage sees in interracial sexual practice a means to achieving greater variety in pleasure. Steintrager reads this positive view of interracial relations in terms of the neoclassical theory of colors, where uniformity is considered as a factor of boredom and “diversity of coloration [...] a criterion of beauty in the individual (p. 244), libertinage places essential value on contrast and variety. Indeed, exploring late eighteenth-century licentious novels such as Nerciat’s *Les Aphrodites* and Sade’s *La nouvelle Justine*, Steintrager comments that “the search for variety in radical libertinage does more than adopt neoclassical aesthetics. It pushes it to the breaking point” (p. 251). The libertine aesthetic of pleasure, for Steintrager, “foregrounds [...] the particular and the relational rather than the universal and the inherent” (p. 253).

In its rejection of judgment and taste, libertinage replaces reason and rules by their opposite: caprice. Steintrager comments that “caprice names a system-internal source of irritation that keeps the pleasure algorithm from lapsing into redundancy, thus into non-information. At the same time, caprice differentiates and draws a line around libertinage by thwarting any heteronomous determinations such as morality, nature, beauty, truth, or reason” (p. 256).

Steintrager spends a certain amount of time investigating Sade’s legacy. According to the author, posterity has depicted the most famous of libertines as an aesthetic saint, a “sexual fantaisist, and a political activist of the first order.” (p. 264) The surrealists saw the Sadeian libertines as consonant with their own fundamental rejection of reason. Bataille emphasized the political dimension of Sade, whose thinking remained “a consistent point of reference of the excessive, dark, and anticapitalist side of Eros” (p. 265). More particularly, in the 60’s, intellectuals recognized in Sade, who was imprisoned during the French monarchy, the Revolution and the First Empire, a “victim of social repression because of his sexual proclivities,” (p. 278) Steintrager writes that as “the ultimate victim of arbitrary power,” (p. 279) Sade was hailed as an icon of liberation. At certain moments, feminists even embraced the Sadeian derision of the imperative of reproduction. Throughout this reading, Steintrager points out the various and contradictory interpretations of Sade. While some see him as an agent of freedom, others denounce in his “evil

[...] a function of social forces, “and predict that “sadism itself will disappear when the latter are destroyed” (p. 280).

Perhaps in the end it is Foucault who best theorized the autonomy of pleasure by advocating the preeminence of bodies. Steintrager writes that “Foucault wants to render pleasure entirely free of any extraneous conditioning” (p. 291). What Foucault advocates for, according to Steintrager, is not free love but free sex in relationships where sexual pleasure and intimacy have definitively parted ways.

Would it be too wrong to see aspects of the “age of the selfie” in the libertines’ quest for the autonomy of pleasure? Could we say that Sade’s deviant characters in their frantic quest for sexual fulfillment at any cost were not so deviant after all, as the modern western economic *Weltanschauung* enjoins every nation to become a collection of isolated self-centered individuals, desperately looking for instant gratification, in an endless search of change and newness? In an age of exacerbated individualism – an era where liberal ideology has thrived on social fragmentation – it is ironical to see that libertinage, *libertinus* meaning “freed slave,” strove to pursue a pleasure grounded in transgression, but actually embraced submission to the emerging capitalist world order itself.

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