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James A. Steintrager. *The Autonomy of Pleasure: Libertines, License and Sexual Revolution*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. xi + 408 pp. \$65 (hb). ISBN: 9780231540872

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James A. Steintrager's new book, *The Autonomy of Pleasure*, takes an innovative and multi-disciplinary approach to retracing and rethinking the intricacies or nuances of the history of *libertinage*, sexuality, and sexology. His brilliant method, which he classifies as an "historical sociology approach," provides an exemplary example of what literary scholarship can accomplish (p. 27). Drawing from historical accounts, literary analysis, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and art and architectural history, *The Autonomy of Pleasure* takes its readers on a fascinating journey from Antiquity to modern times, from Lucretius to Sade, from Freud to Foucault.

Steintrager argues that for late-eighteenth-century radical libertine authors such as Rétif de la Bretonne and Sade, pleasure was autonomous and "totalizing," an end in itself. In other words, according to Steintrager, as *libertinage* became radicalized, exponentially expanding its limits through increasingly deviant or criminal sexual proclivities (e.g. bestiality, prostitution), libertine authors created fewer and fewer "marginalized moments" implicating philosophical, social, or political limits. According to Steintrager, these "radical breaks" unfold or evolve throughout the course of time and history. For him, these marginalized moments are socially mediated through pornography, self-guided books, and counter-normative discourses, and are intended to "express sexual relations as social relations and vice versa" (p. 28). Interesting enough, Steintrager shows that the more that *libertinage* discourse was radicalized – the more it focused on its own prerogatives and figurative rhetoric – the less impact it had on other social spheres. For Steintrager, radical libertine authors mostly advocated for pleasure in their works to assert pleasure's own autonomy.

Steintrager's well-documented and thought-provoking argument, which defines pleasure as purely autonomous, invites us to delve into the historical context of the eighteenth century's perception and, perhaps, reception of "radical libertine authors," such as the Marquis de Sade, who, as an essential figure of radical *libertinage*, pushed the limits of the possible in terms of sexual freedom. But how can late eighteenth-century libertine writers have viewed pleasure as exclusively autonomous when they all created an enclosed system defined by their own *praxis* that had an external framework, that of the novel? How can what Steintrager calls *autopoiesis* – the author defines this as an internal paradigm that maintains or reproduces itself without external connections to any other moral and political structures – sustain itself or be entirely self-governing? Can the concept of *allopoiesis*, a system producing extrinsic rules and structure, also be taken into consideration to describe radical *libertinage*? Can a communication between *autopoiesis* and *allopoiesis* also give meaning to the concept of *libertinage* and inscribe it within an historical or literary context? Whether we call the enclosed structure of the libertine *autopoiesis*, or what Foucault calls *hétérotopie* (counter-space), there is undeniably a framework that is self-

regulated by sexual laws and pleasure within the paradigm of libertinage. These libertine rules do not necessarily affect an individual's right or desire to seek and promote the autonomy of pleasure but instead they challenge its framework. Indeed, libertines need victims in order for the structure to exist. Declaring the autonomy of pleasure at the individual level seems to relate more to the notion of personal freedom and proclivities. However, once a self-governing system with rituals is established, then pleasure seems to be less individually autonomous, as exemplified by the *autopoiesis* framework of libertine novels, works within which sexual fantasy in all forms and shapes is enacted by several individuals. The inherent fact that libertinage is an enclosed-system that claims the autonomy of pleasure engenders, intentionally or not, a framework contingent on an outside paradigm, either moral, political, social, or even literary. In this sense, libertine novels inherently constitute a framework, for they were aimed at and consumed by a specific public who would have interpreted content in a given moral or historical context.

Let's imagine that "radical libertinage" is an *autopoiesis*, an enclosed space that stands alone and only proclaims the autonomy of pleasure for pleasure's sake without any other intention than to proclaim the right to sexual freedom. This enclosed space would never be able to maintain its boundaries for long, since it was written for a targeted public, the aristocracy. As the enclosed space opens up, it has no other choice than to communicate with the outside world, thereby losing its privacy and secrecy and hence its complete autonomy. The barriers are lifted, which causes that very system to be subject to study and analysis by its readers. At that point, the enclosed system or "radical libertinage" becomes peripheral to the "norms" of the targeted society, becoming what Foucault termed an *hétérotopie*. Indeed, in *Hétérotopie*, Foucault says that there are counter-spaces that are peripheral to our society, places such as gardens, parks, cemetery, asylums, brothels, etc. According to Foucault, these spaces exist in order to contest all the other places in two ways "en créant une illusion, ou bien, au contraire, en créant réellement un autre espace réel, aussi parfait, aussi méticuleux, aussi arrangé que le nôtre est désordonné, mal agencé et brouillon." [1] Daniel Defert adds to this argument, noting that in an *hétérotopie* "le miroir où je ne suis pas reflète le miroir où je suis." [2] Therefore, to summarize Defert's explanation of *hétérotopie*, libertine works, an archetype of an *hétérotopie*, automatically become a mirror of where we are not, but they nonetheless mirror where we are, namely, our traditional society.

As Steintrager mentions, eighteenth-century libertine authors used isolated spaces, such as brothels, remote *petites maisons*, far removed castles or convents, to stage libertine encounters. In Sade's *120 Journées*, the remote castle of Silling is the setting of libertine encounters where all sexual penchants are permitted. In *L'Histoire de Juliette*, the episode of the heroine's orgy in the Vatican, the heart of the Catholic Church, far surpasses what could possibly occur in reality, and only gives language itself the space to be completely autonomous and realizable. In these libertine territories, language in all its forms becomes autonomous. Indeed, these sacred libertine environments were intended to give free rein to the autonomy of pleasure within the constraints of their own walls, thus creating an enclosed structure for the liberation of "desire" but through the medium of language and within the structure of the book.

Returning to the vision of libertinage and its exclusive architecture, I would like to go back to Nicolas Ledoux's depiction of the utopian city of Chauv and most particularly of the *Oikema*, the "house of pleasure," which he included in his drawings of an ideal city. Ledoux believed the *Oikema* would enable the purification of *moeurs* in order to lead men to happiness: "L'hymen et

l'Amour vont conclure un traité qui doit épurer les mœurs publiques et rendre l'homme plus heureux.”[3] According to Ledoux, the house of pleasure should be part of the plan of the ideal city because it would enable the reconciliation of passion and virtue. Allowing its visitors to satisfy their natural ardent desires enables them to leave the place of lust with more virtue and ready for marriage (*hymen*), which is for Ledoux an act of virtue. In other words, for Ledoux, the *Oikema* is intended to “diriger les passions, de les régulariser.” [4] For him, love and marriage will come to an agreement that will purify men’s morals (*mœurs*), enabling happiness.

For Ledoux, there is indubitably a tension between passion (represented with the house of pleasure, the *Oikema*) and virtue (represented by the institution of marriage). The *Oikema*, “the house of pleasure,” has to be part of the ideal city because it allows its visitors to become “virtuous” after they have experienced various kinds of pleasurable acts. However, the *Oikema* still represents the other space or the counter-space that calls into question the notion of morality. Ledoux cannot reconcile the tension between passion and virtue in his book on architecture, but the very fact that there is a tension between both passion and virtue demonstrates that the concept of morality still prevails. In this case, libertinage can declare the autonomy of pleasure within its structure, but isn’t it simultaneously an *hétérotopie*, a counter-space, an inverted image of where we are not? Doesn’t it truly represent the “other space,” a “utopia,” a “dystopia,” a place that it is not completely what the current societal structure is but still reflects it?

Steintrager mentions that libertine novels had a pedagogical aim. Through libertine authors’ works, readers were able to learn about “anatomy, positions, contraception that could be very useful for the pursuit of pleasure” (p. 199). This argument cannot be contested because in the eighteenth century novels had a didactic purpose, as demonstrated in the *préfaces* and *avis de l’auteur* of novels such as *Manon Lescaut*, *Thérèse philosophe*, and Sade’s *Aline et Valcour*, to mention but a few. However, the use of debauchery in Sade’s work hints at a moral dimension as well. In *Les Idées sur le roman*, Sade explains that the reason why his writing is more virtuous than some of his predecessors is because unlike libertine authors such as Crébillon and Dorat, who, in their writing incite women to be fond of libertine characters who mislead them, he, on the other hand, makes women despise them. In order to achieve his goal, Sade explains that he paints his heroes heinously to avoid provoking emotions such as pity or love towards his libertine characters. As such, Sade underscores that he is more moral than previous libertine authors: “en cela, j’ose le dire, je deviens plus moral que ceux qui se croient permis de les embellir.”[5] Sade’s comments on what is moral or immoral in a libertine work can only raise awareness of the fact that there may be conceptual or philosophical elements other than the autonomy of pleasure that are at stake in his work.

Sade pushes the concept of morality beyond what is morally or culturally acceptable and beyond mere sexual pedagogy. In that sense, Sade is an artist who creates, analyzes, studies, and fights against prejudices “à mesure que les idées se corrompent, à mesure qu’une nation vieillit, en raison de ce que la nature est mieux étudiée, mieux analysée, que les préjugés sont mieux détruits, il faut les faire connaître davantage. Cette loi est la même pour tous les arts: ce n’est pas qu’en avançant qu’ils se perfectionnent, ils n’arrivent au but que par essai.” [6] Thus the mastery of Sade’s art and his fiery pen are intended to be perfected in order to become more “moral.” Yet, defining the word “moral” requires a clear understanding of the limits of morality and who sets its rules. In Sade’s works, *Idées sur les romans*, *Aline et Valcour*, *Juliette*, and *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*, the

author often calls into question the notion of morality. Therefore, although Sade may convey that pleasure is purely autonomous, is it not also a way for him to reflect upon moral values and what is moral or immoral? In short, who sets the rules of morality? How far can one push the limits of the autonomy of pleasure in a written work? Is a libertine work only a place to assert the autonomy of pleasure or also a place that allows one to shake the yoke of the authority and fight against prejudice?

Does Sade advocate for the “freedom to think” (or to write freely) without depending on any authority and to break free from all tutelage? Does his writing confirm in some ways Kant’s definition of what an enlightened man is, i.e., a person who “has the courage to use one’s intelligence without being guided by another.” [7] Would Sade be considered “an enlightened author” because he asserts the right to liberty of thought (and writes about the limits of libertinage) without any authority controlling him? In short, could we not argue that Sade subscribes to what the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment affirmed? Steintrager’s answer to this question is to assert (quite correctly) that Sade promotes the act of writing freely about the autonomy of pleasure. Yet his study also highlights the fact that Sade’s writing reveals a fundamental tension between sexual autonomy and morality.

NOTES

[1] Michel Foucault, *Le Corps Utopique suivi de Les Hétérotopies* (Paris: Nouvelles éditions Lignes, 2009), 34.

[2] Daniel Defert, Postface de *Le Corps Utopique suivi de Les Hétérotopies* (Paris: Nouvelles éditions Lignes, 2009), 42.

[3] Claude Nicolas Ledoux, *L’architecture considérée sous le rapport de l’art, des moeurs et de la législation* (Paris: Hermann, 2014), 340.

[4] Ibid, 340.

[5] D.A.F. de Sade, “Idée sur les romans,” in *Sade Polémiste: idée sur les romans et sur le mode de la sanctions des lois* (Paris: Editions Mille et Une Nuits, 1998), 35.

[6] Ibid, 31.

[7] Immanuel Kant, “Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?,” trans. Thomas K. Abbott, in *Basic Writings of Kant*, ed. Allen W. Wood, pp. 133-142 (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 135.

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