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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

Response Essay by James A. Steintrager, University of California Irvine.

My argument in *The Autonomy of Pleasure: Libertines, License, and Sexual Revolution* is at heart simple: that radical libertinage in eighteenth-century France not only took up the notion that pleasure could be pursued as an end in itself, but laid out what might result if such a pursuit proceeded untrammelled by the usual social constraints. To an extent, the greater interest of these questions comes from the ramifications—the logical consequences and branching out into various arenas—of this literary experiment, associated with names such as Sade, Nerciat, and Mirabeau, all part of a welter of anonymous publications.

Jean-Marc Kehrès provides a nimble summation of the book, but I want to clarify some points that strike me as crucial to my overarching argument about why radical libertinage ought to be viewed in terms of the autonomy of pleasure and its implications. On the one hand, it is absolutely true that we cannot understand radical libertinage without tracing its genealogical tree and seeing how the early modern satirical vogue, the revival of Epicureanism, the dissemination of skeptical philosophy, and seemingly more specific influences such as the writings of Aretino—themselves by and large satirical—shaped a genre of writing that we retroactively and reductively class as pornographic. On the other hand, these inputs are systematically transformed according the autonomy thesis. Thus, if Aretino appeared to bequeath libertinage with a basic and, indeed, basal form of variation—those famous sixteen sexual “postures” that later libertine writers would expand to thirty, forty, and more—what radical libertinage grasped all too well was that such *Aretinism* would never provide the requisite variety for a truly autonomous system of pleasure to thrive or even survive. Further, the corrosive power of satire was used not so much to provide moral correction or political critique but to differentiate the claims of pleasure from morality and from political desiderata. And if classical Epicureanism emphasized *ataraxia* or the absence of disturbance as the key to happiness, radical libertines championed the pursuit of so-called kinetic pleasures as a source of systemic perturbation and dynamism. Finally, if even the most skeptical strands of philosophy cleaved to the core value of reason, libertinage would eventually shuffle off this alliance as an undue constraint on its domain. While Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) glimpsed in Sade the horrific apotheosis of instrumental reason unmoored from morality, libertinage at its most radical embraced not reason but its opposite: caprice, the paradoxical principle of a lack of any principles and a conceptual instrument to undo instrumentality itself.

Autonomy and differentiation likewise drove those eighteenth-century libertine investments in which we might like to glimpse progressive political agendas strikingly, if oddly, akin to those of our own era: an embrace of sodomy that eschews heteronormativity; an understanding of the physiology and function of the clitoris that borders on idolatry; the acceptance and even celebration

of interracial sexual encounters. We should approach these apparent pre-figurations with caution. These investments are functional: they serve to sunder pleasure from teleology and natural law, to sever *jouissance* from reproduction, and to insist that the diversity of possible enjoyments ought not be limited by biological hierarchies or aesthetic canons. They do not exclude misogyny, racism, or even homophobia—albeit radical libertinage does come awfully close to queerness at times. Indeed, in the later critical reception of Sade in particular, what have often seemed paradoxes and contradictions—feminist insights coupled with traumatizing depictions of violence against women or liberation played out in sickeningly carceral spaces—are, when viewed through the lens of autonomy and differentiation, logically, rhetorically, and rigorously coherent. Turning the tables on the Whig history of sexuality, the radical libertine judgment on *us* must be that even the most open-minded and free-thinking quite prudishly impose moral, ethical, political, and even practical restrictions on the pursuit of pleasure.

Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory* (published posthumously in 1970) posits a paradox: there are artworks that are truly autonomous, determined by an inherent formal logic and not by the exigencies of capital and the culture industry; nevertheless, the sphere of autonomous art in so far as it stands on its own is both a reminder and an aspect of a society that is intestinally fragmented. [1] Adorno addressed this paradox through the notion of negative dialectics, in which such tensions and contradictions are asserted and examined rather than resolved. Murielle M. Perrier in her reading of my book quite correctly points to similar paradoxes, contradictions, and tensions in the thesis that radical libertinage strives for the autonomy of pleasure. For certainly it is true that the writings that I examine are utterly intertwined with political and economic trends, scientific discourses, the aesthetic categories of the beautiful and the sublime, and above all with moral philosophy, broadly speaking. While I appreciate the Adornian approach when it comes to exploring autonomy, my primary inspiration has been Niklas Luhmann, who has argued—in keeping with a strand of sociological thought that reaches back to Émile Durkheim at least—that we understand modern society as differentiated into various spheres and that we understand such differentiation in terms of *operational closure*. If we take pleasure as a basal operation, then radical libertinage did not so much exclude aesthetics, for example. Rather it probed and queried: In what ways might sublimity or beauty increase pleasure? In what ways might they constrain pleasure and so need to be tempered or even rejected? The same goes for morality. Kant argued for moral autonomy, for adherence to moral law freely formulated and yet binding and categorical, and against any determination of the moral by either pleasure or pain as heteronomy and pathology (in the etymological sense of following the logic or order of passion or sentiment). Sade and his ilk, while they indulged in critical philosophizing and even went so far as to convert a Humean utilitarianism into a deontology where pleasure is not so much a subjective good as *the law*, follow pathology to its limit, where that passing whim known as “caprice” is all the determination that a libertine needs. On this rock the celebrated parallels between Kant and Sade founder.

I am certainly not suggesting that there aren't tensions and even contradictions between the moral and the pleasurable in libertine and related discourses. Only that what I have dubbed the radical libertinage of the 1770s into the French Revolution exhibits a strong tendency toward resolving these tensions via a thoroughgoing differentiation that can most readily be grasped through projects and fantasies of spatial isolation. Ledoux's planned *oikéma*, while ostensibly dedicated to pleasure, could never throw off the impositions of intimacy, virtue, health, and the need to fit neatly into an orderly and functional industrial planned city. Social reality gets in the way. Sade's Château Silling

in *Les 120 journées de Sodome* isolated and served pleasure more effectively, if horrifically and according to a strict hierarchy. Differentiation was conjoined to aristocracy and patriarchy. Moreover, that such radical differentiation was a literary achievement—set in print not in stone—is clear. Borrowing a term from Michel Foucault, Perrier suggests that we might see these projected libertine spaces as *hétérotopies*: “counter-spaces that are peripheral to our society,” that mirror that society and that, at the same time, present us with inverted or otherwise changed, distorted, yet recognizable images. Absolutely, and much libertine writing depicted convents, monasteries, and *petites maisons* not only as the real institutions that they were but also as fictional constructs for rethinking the possibilities of the social order and its organization, with pleasure—or rather, *somebody’s* pleasure—as the crux. At the same time, I want to resist an implication of *hétérotopie*, namely, that there must be a corresponding *homotopie* in which we usually live. The differentiation thesis means that those tensions and contradictions cut across all of us—and they did so already in the eighteenth century—and that unification is only possible if one type of operation is elevated over all the others. That pleasure might be this apex operation is what radical libertine texts explored; that we might not want to convert their counter-factuals into facts is something that even a cursory glance at Sade’s mature writings makes clear.

Autonomous pleasure for whom and at what cost? Thomas Wynn acutely surmises that these are key questions when approaching radical libertinage as I do. It is not just that this is an asymmetrically gendered discourse, in spite of those seemingly feminist moments or the enormity of Sade’s anti-heroine Juliette. The extremity of Sade’s representations of violence is, after all, a rather obvious target of legitimate criticism and an aspect of his oeuvre for which psychoanalytic hypothesizing—such violence is symptomatic and a function of repression—or similar explaining away strikes me as inadequate. Rather, it is the odd resilience of intimacy as a constraint on pleasure, including pleasure brutally extracted, that poses these questions in perhaps their most intriguing form. In my reading of *Les 120 journées de Sodome*, along with treating it as a case of libertine *autopoeisis* par excellence, I concentrate on the story of poor Constance, who is sacrificed on the altar of autonomy. Wynn, however, draws our attention to another character: Julie, who through the granting of “favors” somehow survives the sanguinary onslaught and apocalyptic finale. Château Silling presents an economy in which “favors,” redolent of *fin’amor*, are not supposed to function as tender. As Vivant Denon in *Point de lendemain* intimates—parodically, I believe—“favors” are tokens of recognition and interiority within the gendered world of courtly love that libertinage meant to expunge as unnecessary complications and to replace with the free trade of pleasures without commitment or passion. Julie’s survival depends on the residual value of this discounted currency. Try as he might, Sade could not fully eradicate intimacy from this most radical of libertine texts.

Close to two centuries on, sexual liberation discourse would, in parallel fashion, struggle with a similar issue: What are the limits of free love? Or, if we prefer a more theoretical point of reference, how far down the road of “bodies and pleasures” alone are we willing to follow Foucault? [2] Of course, we might also note that much has changed since the 1960s and 70s—over forty years have passed since the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* appeared and implicitly posed the previous question. In terms of media, the world of print in which radical libertinism existed and that, in fact, enabled that existence in the first place is closer to Foucault than to us. So where are we now with the autonomy of pleasure? At the end of his analysis, Kehrer wonders whether the “age of the selfie” exhibits certain aspects of the autonomy of pleasure: a late capitalist order,

enabled by the medium of the Internet, in which every nation becomes “a collection of isolated self-centered individuals, desperately looking for instant gratification, in an endless search for change and newness.” My response would certainly be in the affirmative, although with serious qualifications. First, this pursuit of pleasure while autonomous superficially is, as Kehrès suggests, heteronomous. Clicks follow the orders of (virtual) capital. The data hereby produced by millions of “individuals” is aggregated, parsed, and fed back into the system. But it is perhaps the nature of the pleasure that strikes me as so different from that of libertinage: orgasm traded in for a multitude of minuscule dopamine surges as we forever check our email. Even the remnant of passionate love and courtly social interaction that haunted radical libertinage—the favor—has been transmuted into the idiotically trivial and non-committal “like.” And yet, pursuing pleasure for its own sake and as if the only end worthy of pursuit, radical libertines already glimpsed the monotony of endless variation and the dulling of gratification through constant repetition. Maybe they are closer to us than we think.

## NOTES

[1] Perhaps most pithily put: “...are becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as ‘socially useful,’ it criticizes society by merely existing, for which puritans of all stripes condemn it. There is nothing pure, nothing structured strictly according to its own immanent law, that does not implicitly criticize the debasement of a situation evolving in the direction of a total exchange society in which everything is heteronomously defined” Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 225-26.

[2] “It is the agency of sex that we must break away from, if we aim—through a tactical reversal of the various mechanisms of sexuality—to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance. The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures,” Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 157.

James A. Steintrager  
University of California, Irvine  
[jsteintr@uci.edu](mailto:jsteintr@uci.edu)

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