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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

Review Essay by Thomas Wynn, Durham University

“We even dared to jest about the pleasures of love, analyzing it, separating morality from it, reducing it to a simple form, and proving that favors were nothing more than pleasure.” This statement from the narrator of Vivant Denon’s novella *Point de lendemain* (first edition 1777) might provide an entry point into thinking about, and dialoguing with James Steintrager’s stimulating examination of libertinage in eighteenth-century France. Denon evacuates love of sentiment and morality, and presents physical pleasures as the object of enquiry. Importantly such analysis is itself a source of social pleasure (“We even dared to jest”); libertines seem to spend as much time talking with each other about sex as practicing it, and it is a testament to Steintrager that his own prose is as pleasing as it is erudite.

Steintrager rightly observes that Denon’s account of pleasure remains dubiously gender free, [1] and in this response to *The Autonomy of Pleasure*, I should like to engage with his understanding of libertinage as “a social system given over to pleasure as an end in itself or, more grandiosely, an attempt to make the totality of the social system subordinate to the pleasure principle” (p. 198), by touching on the problem of the favor within this system. Denon breezily equates favors with pleasure, but following Steintrager’s suspicion of libertinage’s claim to sexual liberation for all genders, it is worth asking who gets to give and receive favors? Whose pleasure is served and satisfied by this favor? And, riffing on the title of Denon’s text, are there consequences of giving or withholding those favors, and if so, for whom? To answer these questions, I shall turn to the figure with whom Steintrager opens and closes his study, Donatien Alfonse François de Sade.

In his far-reaching analysis of canonical and less familiar texts, whether fictional, polemical and philosophical, Steintrager identifies a new wave of libertinage emerging in the 1770s. [2] He argues that, amongst its other achievements, libertinage follows – only then to surpass – natural philosophy in rejecting teleology so as to assert the moral neutrality of the body and its pleasures. Moreover, while this radical strain of libertine discourse uses natural philosophy to make its positive case, it also subverts that philosophy’s tendency to moralize. As Steintrager asks, “What do morality, politics, utility, or even beauty itself as an absolute quality matter as long as my pleasure is served?” (p. 254). We are dealing with pure sex, or at least the semblance of it.

One of the key insights of this richly detailed study is that this amoral form of libertinage is an *autopoietic* system. [3] Once pleasure has been unhooked from matters of reproduction, political demands, moral authority and the protocols of courtly culture, libertine discourse takes on the task of guiding, protecting, and developing that same pleasure. Disregarding the biological imperative to reproduce – by turning to masturbation or sodomy, for instance – the

libertine extracts as much enjoyment as possible from the limited pleasure Nature has allotted for her ends to be met. *Autopoiesis* thus entails not just autonomy, but also the “burden of self-reproduction” (p. 57); as soon as pleasure is dissociated from external demands, “it can only reproduce itself as a system out of its own elements and justify itself on its own grounds” (p. 57). This sexual system is thus inherently inadequate, and seems to contain within itself the seeds of its own dissolution. If there are no new actors, no new kinds of stimulation, and no new realm of action, then the system is bound to stall and shut down.

Written in that period of radical libertinage of the last decades of the eighteenth century, Sade’s unfinished novel *Les 120 journées de Sodome* is largely set in the castle of Silling, a place which, according to Steintrager, concretises “the totalizing tendency of the autonomy of pleasure: not simply the differentiation of pleasure from other spheres but rather its place at the top of a hierarchy of nested functions” (p. 100). This fortress is beyond the reach of civil society, as the Duc de Blangis tells his victims:

Consider your situation, what you are, what we are, and let these reflections make you tremble: here you are far from France in the depths of an uninhabitable forest, beyond steep mountains, the passes through which were cut off as soon as you had traversed them; you are trapped within an impenetrable citadel; no one knows you are here – you have been taken from your friends, your families, you are already dead to the world and it is only for our pleasures that you are breathing now. [4]

Simultaneously – and thus oppressively – an enclosed space and a closed system, Silling is an ideal site in which to assess the nature, limits, and dangers of autopoiesis. Steintrager argues that if *Les 120 journées de Sodome* has some semblance of a conventional plot, then it is in the story of Constance, the Duc’s wife and Durcet’s daughter. She falls pregnant, and suffers increasingly brutal torture until she is murdered as the child is ripped from her body. This disturbing act abides by the logic of *autopoietic* logic (the foetus is generated from within the system), and pleasure appears autonomous, undiminished by the foundational violence and cruelty. Constance’s death and other Sadean violence, counsels Steintrager, should make us question the radical libertine commitment to the autonomy of pleasure, and I particularly welcome his thoughtful and convincingly critical account of how Sade the man as much as the writer was canonized in the twentieth century; a “cautionary and homoeopathic version of the marquis” (reading Sade brings to light the evil common to us all) stands frequently though inconsistently beside Sade the “avatar of dogged resistance and a source of revolutionary inspiration” (p. 280). [5]

Inspired by Steintrager’s reading of *Les 120 journées de Sodome*, one might take up his focus on autopoiesis and, turning to another of the novel’s characters, sketch out a way to live with the demands made within this deeply gendered system. Julie is the only one of the four wives to live through the bloodletting at Silling, [6] and from the start of the novel she is framed by her favors, for as the Duc tells Curval: “I give her to you without hesitation and set only one condition: that you will not be jealous if she continues, even as your wife, to offer me the same favors she always has in the past.” Whereas Denon claims that favors are “nothing more than pleasure,” Julie appears to owe her survival at least partly to the strategic granting of her favors. It is difficult to speak of “granting favors” amidst such totalitarian violence, and what a victim

offers within that closed system has little to do with her own pleasure. But even when the other wives are repudiated, Julie manages to hold her own through the strategic deployment of fake affection:

There was also another creature among their company who was beginning to make herself most delightful and to become most alluring: this was Julie. She was already showing signs of imagination, debauchery and libertinage; politic enough to sense she needed protection, false enough to cosy up even to those for whom deep down she perhaps cared little, she made friends with Madame Duclos in an attempt to remain on good terms [“en faveur”] with her father, whose influence among the company she recognized. [7]

In his nuanced chapter “The fury of her kindness,” Steintrager shows that when the pleasures of one’s sexual partner are taken into account, intimacy acts as a restraint on one’s own pleasure. Given the essentially patriarchal nature of radical libertinage, the favor of the faked female orgasm unsettles the security of the autonomous realm by introducing complexity into a situation theoretically characterized by transparency. Rebellion against, and escape from the regime at Silas are not an option, and it seems the only means of survival is to meet the demands of the four libertines. Julie might not fake her orgasms, but she does produce fake emotions in order to carve out a position of safety in the morbidly autopoietic system of Silling. She is able to resist the libertines and thereby to survive the slaughter by continuing to perform a kind of deceitful complicity with the system and agents that set out to destroy her. The moral to her story is a dispiriting one, and one that mitigates claims that Sade speaks truth to power. If Sade continues to be a touchstone for debates about sexuality, freedom and modernity, then readers would do well to turn to Steintrager’s fascinating and necessary reassessment of the marquis.

## NOTES

[1] As Nancy Miller has noted, postwar work on the libertine novel remained “completely untroubled by the asymmetry of power between men and women. The assumption is that this is a game in which women play as well as men. And that’s one of the great fantasies, or delusions, that the dominant discourse has about eighteenth-century social life and artistic practices [...]” See “Libertinage and feminism” in *Libertinage and Modernity, Yale French Studies*, 94 (1998): 17-28 (pp. 17-18). For a new approach to gender and libertinage, see *Sade et les femmes, ailleurs et autrement*, ed. Anne Coudreuse and Stéphanie Genand (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2013).

[2] Dominique Hölzle similarly argues for a shift in libertine fiction at around this time, prompted in part by the influence of Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa*; see *Le Roman libertin au XVIIIe siècle: une esthétique de la séduction* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2012).

[3] On circulatory mechanisms in Sade, see Natania Meeker, “Sade at the end of world” in *Sade’s Sensibilities*, ed. Kate Parker and Norbert Sclippa (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2015), 119-40.

[4] D.-A.-F. de Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, trans. and ed. Will McMorran and Thomas Wynn (London: Penguin Classics, 2016), 56.

[5] On Sade's reception, see Michel Delon, *Les Vies de Sade* (Paris: Textuel, 2007); and Éric Marty, *Pourquoi le XXe siècle a-t-il pris Sade au sérieux* (Paris: Seuil, 2011).

[6] Peter Cryle argues that Julie survives through a combination of seduction, resignation and chance; see "How not to be murdered in Sadian stories" in *Geometry in the Boudoir: Configurations of French Erotic Narrative* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 147-66.

[7] Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, 207.

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