‘TOUCHSTONES OF TRUTH’: THE ENLIGHTENMENT OF JEAN-BAPTISTE-LOUIS GRESSET, LÉGER-MARIE DESCHAMPS, AND SIMON-NICOLAS-HENRI LINGUET

DISSERTATION

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My dissertation, “‘Touchstones of Truth’: The Enlightenment of J.-B.-L. Gresset, L.-M. Deschamps, and S.-N.-H. Linguet,” focuses on three key but little studied opponents of the philosophes. I argue that the writer Jean-Baptiste-Louis Gresset (1709-1777), the philosopher Léger-Marie Deschamps (1716-1774), and the lawyer and political theorist Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linguet (1736-1794) opposed the philosophes in the name of a set of universally valid principles against what they took to be the philosophes’ superficial, self-serving, and haphazard politicization of language, philosophy and the social sciences. These three intellectuals warned that such politicization fostered economic, political, and intellectual inequality as well as cultural alienation, thereby undermining the Enlightenment’s own vision of a world of self-emancipated human beings and pushing France in the direction of a violent revolution.

Gresset supported a “civic republican” political economy of virtue, and warned about the dangers of the consumer culture fostered by the philosophes. The roots of his cultural criticism lay in moral and political concerns that found expression in a patriotic discourse stressing the importance of social “harmony” and the common good while rejecting any temptation to belong to a “party.” In this spirit, Gresset defended the “ancient constitution” against idle monks, royal or ministerial despotism, parlementarian rebellion, and the philosophes.

Radically egalitarian and idiosyncratically constructed from elements of scholastic theology and neoplatonic philosophy, Dom Deschamps’ critique of the philosophes’ dependence on the privileged serves as a useful guide for exploring the
consistency and the limits of the second or theological phase of the French Enlightenment. Dom Deschamps stood at the center of a circle consisting of active soldiers and army veterans, most of them nobles, who combined cosmopolitanism, a serious knowledge of the natural sciences and of philosophy, political concerns, and a libertine life. Rural, castle-bound, and exclusively male, this Enlightenment was concerned not with reforming society, but with preserving a tradition of liberty and of free inquiry that escaped the ‘philosophes’ consensus. While ultimately aimed at opening up a space for “true” Enlightenment within the Enlightenment, Deschamps’ own social connections shed light on the clandestine patronage networks that challenged both the Old-Regime establishment and the “philosophic” opposition to it.

With Linguet, finally, my dissertation explores the political battles that led to the French Revolution. As a lawyer, economist and political journalist of European stature, Linguet argued that the systematic laissez-faire theories of “enlightened” political economists would dissolve the traditional ties of society and that only a politics of subsistence, welfare, and nurture would prevent the coming revolution. Linguet was embraced as a hero by the early French Revolutionary press, only to be executed as a defender of despotism in 1794.

The choice of Gresset, Deschamps and Linguet permits my “coverage” to be comprehensive in both a chronological and a thematic sense, given that the French Enlightenment evolved from mainly literary quarrels in the 1730s-1750s, to theological battles in the late 1750s and 1760s, and on to political battles in the 1770s and 1780s. Each of my three characters “belongs” to one of these pivotal moments; collectively they delineate an even more radical Enlightenment than that prevalent in current scholarship.
To the memory of Nicolae Pintilie
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INTRODUCTION

The French Enlightenment has long been characterized as the triumph of secular reason over faith, led by such well-known philosophes as Voltaire, Diderot and d'Alembert. Recent scholarship, however, has challenged this interpretation. A new generation is arguing that the Enlightenment is best understood not merely as a linear drive to replace a religious with a purely secular view of reality, but as a plurality of different answers to the problems raised by a nascent modernity characterized by popular politics, urbanization, industrialization and the development of the public sphere. ¹ This revisionist “Age of Reason” looks increasingly like an “age of conflicting reasons” or arguments, in which heated public debate rather than the steady light of wisdom dispelled ignorance and darkness. One virtue of this historiographical turn is that it has taken the concept of “the Enlightenment” out of the realm of the history of ideas alone; historians now speak of “enlightenments,” understood as attempts to construct progressive, reformist discourses that need to be analyzed at the level of cross-

cutting political factions, social realities, religious polemics and even domestic affairs. Another virtue of this same revisionism is that it has opened the way for the study of the enemies of the philosophes as well.

Inspired by these trends, my dissertation sets out to do two things. First, it applies to the “Counter-Enlightenment” the methodology so successfully deployed in enlightenment studies by treating it as a set of factions and discourses representing specific responses to specific contexts that competed for visibility in the public sphere and at Court. Second, it argues that the so-called “Counter-Enlightenment,” far from the conceptually monolithic and obscurantist opposition to “reason” depicted by the philosophes and contemporary historians, itself consisted of several diverse and quite “enlightened” movements held together only by a common opposition to the better known “radical” or “encyclopedic” Enlightenment of the French philosophes. To this end, my dissertation studies three representative anti-philosophes who, read intensively, reveal themselves as positively enlightened figures in their own right rather than as the embodiment of some kind of a-historical “Counter Enlightenment.” These three figures are the writer Jean-Baptiste-Louis Gresset (1709-1777), the philosopher Prosper-Marie-Leger Deschamps (1716-1774), and the lawyer and political theorist Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linguet (1736-1794). Far from being embittered relics of an obscurantist past, these “enemies of the philosophes” proved to be more radical in their quest for “liberty, equality and fraternity” than the philosophes themselves.

In methodological and conceptual terms, my dissertation most directly builds on the recent insights of Daniel Edlestein. Taking his cue from Levent Yilmaz’s argument that the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns pitted in fact two modern factions,²

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Edelstein has argued that the Enlightenment itself grew out of this Quarrel. For him, a tension between a Whiggish, evolutionary historicism among the Moderns, and a dialectical historicism on the part of the Ancients, was part of the very genetic make-up of eighteenth-century thought. According to his view, the Moderns distinguished themselves by their “unabashed celebration of present greatness,” that is of Louis XIV’s splendor, while the Ancients were the real progenitors of the “esprit philosophique.”

Indeed, the Ancients’ dialectical synthesis led them on the one hand to admit, like Dubos, that the eighteenth-century “is already more enlightened than the centuries of Plato, Augustus, and Leo X,” while on the other hand to practice a historicism that allowed them to maintain that certain values, specifically the aesthetic values, of the past could not be discarded or replaced with modern ones. The Ancients’ historicism was not a triumphant one, ready to discard history for the sake of its goal. Their epistemological superiority over the Moderns consisted in their readiness to admit the existence of certain qualities, virtues or shades of light in the past that could not be pushed into obsolescence by progress. Progress was understood by the Ancients mainly in a quantitative way, as a form of material and cultural betterment resulting from the accumulation of data, knowledge, or goods. By positing certain “absolute” values, that is certain plastic, philosophical or literary accomplishments impossible to surpass, the Ancients were less predisposed than the Moderns to negotiate with, or flatter, power. The triumphalist presentism of the Moderns, their eagerness to celebrate the absolute superiority of the present made them less able than the Ancients to recognize the meanings of the past, and thus hindered the development of that “esprit philosophique,” of that wisdom that lets us look at things with an eye ready to discern the nuances.

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In what follows, I like Edelstein define the Enlightenment as a rationalist movement of political, cultural, and social emancipation,\(^5\) which was nevertheless preoccupied above all with “defining the present moment” as “new”\(^6\) or exceptionally enlightened. As such, the Enlightenment raises new questions regarding the standards of its rationalism, and the models of its emancipationalism. Gresset’s, Deschamps’, and Linguet’s opposition to the philosophes stemmed from their conviction that the philosophes had become satisfied with advancing the cause of their own party by way of piecemeal reforms, of \textit{sui generis}, opportunistic and self-serving axiological criteria, and of cynical culture wars. The philosophes had thus abandoned any desire to engage in the pursuit of what Immanuel Kant called a "touchstone" of truth: that is to say, a valid, objective axiological set of principles that could be used as a foundation for a truly democratic politics linking political liberty to economic justice. As a result, Gresset, Deschamps and Linguet opposed the philosophes in the name of their own eminently enlightened ideal of a universal set of valid criteria against what they thought to be the philosophes' superficial, self-serving and haphazard politicization of language, philosophy and the social sciences.

As this accusation of “politicization” implies, the Enlightenment at its most fundamental level was concerned with politics -- with the affairs of the "city of man" -- and thus politics take center place in my analysis. In pre-Enlightenment political theology, politics were largely a by-product of theology, the result of a real or merely rhetorical concern for the transcendent. The Enlightenment prompted both a translation


of religion in political terms, and a redefinition of politics. The Enlightenment translated religion into a new politics defined not by concern for tradition, aristocratic honor, or salvation but by an absorbing interest in happiness and progress in this life. At its best, Enlightenment thought posited that human beings had not so much to fulfill their duties as to fulfill their humanity, that is to live not as specialized, partial human beings dedicated to preserving their place and accomplishing their telos in the great chain of being, but as fully emancipated individuals in the Kantian sense. In other words, divine economy was read as, or even replaced with political economy. Rulers started to practice, with a desire to master, the most appropriate way of displaying human potentialities in the visible world rather than the invisible one.

In this transition, politics lost their second-string status. Enlightenment thinkers encouraged kings to move from traditional stewardship over their subjects, whose virtue depended upon the king's steady Christian hand and personal example, to concern for the administration and multiplication of population and goods. The main object of politics became economic and demographic growth. Less of a judge, the sovereign became more of a legislator, invested not so much in what was "right," as in what was "good," that is to say useful to his country. Negotiating its presence in the confines of a well-ordered police state, religion had to highlight its utility rather than its claims to truth. Christian apologetics written during the Age of Enlightenment argued from the perspective of the social, economic, and political utility of "religion." Streamlined, Christianity lost the weight of its adiaphora, of its "value added tax" on dogma and rituals, in order to become socially accepted as a rejuvenated religion of public service and moral policing, on the same level as the "natural religions" of Islam and
Confucianism. "Religion" was translated into political terms that ultimately, with the French Revolution, gave rise to the political religion of civic nationalism.

But until that moment, when elements of pre-modern national consciousness would be catalyzed by political, economic and cultural shifts and revolutions to solidify into the modern dogma of nationalism that served as the operational truth of modern European history, the eighteenth century was largely an age open to negotiations. The scientific revolution had to be translated into political and cultural terms that would allow society to flourish. The rise of absolutist monarchies and baroque states pushed government in the direction of technocracy. Newtonian science offered new mechanistic images of the social and natural world. Political economy and early modern globalization helped replace protectionist standards of quality and gold with the “market price” as the main referent of economic value. Even the thorough socialization of religion meant losing a traditional, “revealed” standard of truth – already in tatters due to the sixteenth and seventeenth religious conflicts. The eighteenth-century scramble for certitudes required "mass" mobilizations, empirical solutions, and on-the-spot adaptability and ruthlessness.

The rise of the public sphere made politics more vivacious at the margins and more abstract at the center, where appeals to ideologies of "public" progress complicated the traditional factional politics. Religion lost its dogmas on the road to tolerance and social relevance. Still, communal order, that is society, remained hard to imagine in the early modern age unless founded on truth. For as Giambatista Vico wrote in his De uno

"universi iuris principia et fine uno liber unus" (1720): "The basic demand that all action must be *bona fide*, that is in good faith, and based on mutual trust, can be expressed as living in and by the truth." In fact, thinking of both Voltaire's take on hypocrisy, and Kant's ponderous disquisitions upon what is and what is not possible to know and reasonable to make public, it could be argued that the Enlightenment was nothing if not an attempt to recover the possibility to think and the right to speak in good faith, that is without merely instrumentalizing valid concerns for self-interested reasons, in an age of multiplying mediations, and of multiple epistemological and identitarian shifts: religious, scientific, economic, political, social, and cultural.

Since a majority of those articulating the public discourse tended to agree and even to enthuse about living in a “new” age, most of the old certitudes, orthodoxies, and traditions were challenged, discarded, rewritten, considered obsolete, or merely and simply harmful in the new circumstances. In the case of eighteenth-century France, a kingdom left by the disastrous last decades of Louis XIV's reign shivering in fear of demographic decline, financial crises, and religious conflicts between Jesuits and Jansenists, or Church and Parlements, the necessity of reforms served to complicate the larger epistemological issue regarding the new sources of “truth” and therefore of usefulness, happiness, and authority. How to speak about and enact a reform in good faith, or how to make sure that a crisis would not lead to merely another crisis, that is to another collapse, revolutionary or despotic, of good faith? How, Linguet for example asked, was the French economy to be reformed: by giving in to free market economy, or by reforming the guild system in order to strengthen its productivity as well as its capacity to function as a social safety net? What was the "truth" that had to preside over this reform in order to ensure that the interregnum would not merely lead to a social

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reshuffling benefiting only a group of people, or certain new aristocracies? Was that “truth” the ideal “natural law” of the physiocrats, asked Linguet, or the historical facts that pointed to the overwhelming importance of power relations in social life?

Both the philosophes and their enemies studied in this dissertation agreed that reform was necessary for bringing the political order in tune with the social order, for making the political signs agree with the social referent, and thus for making the res publica whole again - that is putting a stop to the various divisions that were tearing France apart. But how should one proceed in order to prevent the perpetuation of factional interests feeding upon social inequalities, cultural discord, economic disharmony, and political strife? How could the popularization of knowledge postulated by the Enlightenment be reconciled with preserving the private virtues, and the economic independence that made political liberty possible by making citizens immune to propaganda or bribes?

The writer Jean-Baptiste-Louis Gresset (1709-1777), the philosopher Léger-Marie Deschamps (1716-1774), and the lawyer and political thinker Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linguet (1736-1794), the three figures analyzed in this dissertation, came up with answers that, while different in certain respects, converged on rejecting France’s dominant philosophe Enlightenment. An ex-Jesuit and a friend of the philosophes in the 1730s and 1740s, Gresset famously returned to the Church in the 1750s, thus becoming one of the main polemical targets of Voltaire who accused him of treason against the cause of philosophical “reason.” Gresset attacked rich clerics and financiers and argued for a Catholic reform that would prompt the regular clergy to become more sensitive to the needs of society, but he also opposed the academic ascension of philosophes. Far from being merely a personal or aesthetic conflict, Gresset’s opposition to the philosophes stemmed from deeper moral and political concerns that found expression in
a patriotic discourse stressing the importance of social "harmony" and rejecting any temptation to belong to a “party.” Gresset’s career makes it easier to understand the intrigues and confrontations that led to the conquering of the French Academy by the party of the philosophes and their attendant appropriation of the right to police the French language.

Dom Deschamps constructed a radically egalitarian and idiosyncratic ontological system from elements of scholastic theology and neo-Platonic philosophy. Deschamps argued for the need to ground proposals for social reform in a metaphysical system or theory of ultimate being. While superficially akin to Spinoza, Deschamps rejected Spinoza’s materialistic monism in favor of a dualist ontology consisting in the totality of the apprehensible world, or “All” ("le Tout"), and the infinity and therefore unicity of “Nothing” ("Tout"), of pure existence, or being-in-itself. In anonymous pamphlets as well as in sustained correspondence with Voltaire, d’Alembert, Rousseau, and d’Holbach, Deschamps challenged the metaphysics, the theory of knowledge, and the philosophy of history of the philosophes on account of their potential for revolutionary violence and the crumbling of civic virtue that he saw as flowing from their teachings. If Deschamps’ arguments against the methodological empiricism and both deistic and atheistic worldviews of the philosophes would prompt Diderot to denounce him to the police, he also stood at the center of a circle consisting of active soldiers and army veterans, most of them nobles, who discussed radical literature while rejecting the philosophes' ideas. Neglected by scholars until now, this circle of aristocratic friends combined cosmopolitanism, a serious knowledge of the natural sciences and of philosophy, political concerns, and a libertine life. Together, they fostered a sort of "Epicurean Enlightenment" that revolved around a radical ontology and conservative politics. Rural, castle-bound, libertine, and exclusively male, this Enlightenment was concerned not with
refarming society, but with preserving a tradition of liberty and of free inquiry that escaped the philosophes’ consensus. One of the young members of this circle, Donatien Alphonse François, marquis de Sade, would later go on to oppose the French Revolution in the name of these same radical ideas. While ultimately aiming at opening up a space for “true” Enlightenment within the Enlightenment, Deschamps’ own social connections shed light on the clandestine patronage networks that challenged both the Old-Regime establishment and the “philosophic” opposition to it.

Finally, with Linguet, this dissertation explores the political battles that led to the French Revolution. As a lawyer, economist and journalist of European stature, Linguet argued, as did Deschamps, that the political and economic ideas advocated by the philosophes were bound to lead to a dangerous revolution undertaken without a clear idea of the true principles of a new and better society. Linguet’s opposition to the philosophes stemmed from a radical populism that caused him to accuse the philosophes of talking about humanity while neglecting the sufferings of real human beings. Closer than the philosophes to the people and their needs and resentments, Linguet nevertheless feared the potentially destructive power of their unchained emotions. Linguet therefore warned during the 1770s and 1780s that the systematic laissez-faire theories of “enlightened” political economists would dissolve the traditional ties of society while arguing that only a politics of subsistence, welfare, and preventative nurture would prevent the coming revolution. Linguet’s clashes with the physiocrats would have a deep influence upon his career.

Gresset appealed to the integrity of the French language and of French cultural tradition. Dom Deschamps believed that meaningful political reform would spring only

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from ontological realism. Linguet argued that in order to build a well ordered society the sovereign had to start with a healthy dose of political and legal realism. Linguet’s realism meant not English-style "liberal" politics, but liberal policies: not an abstract affirmation of legal equality and of individual rights, but a concrete defense of the people’s right to subsistence and to property. The cultural, ontological, and political realism of these three figures clashed with the philosophes' cultural, philosophical, and political nominalism, that is with the idea that everything in nature, and therefore in society, is individual, and therefore that concepts and categories are arbitrary since sign and substance - paper and gold, words and meaning, worth and value, status and merit, "natural law" rights and social reality "rights" - are disassociated.10 Or, as Louis Dupré has argued talking about the Enlightenment in general - but which is more true of some philosophes in particular - its “concept of the universal [...] was a rational a priori void of any particular content, a category of thought imposed upon the real, rather than expressive of it. Its formalist character shows a surprising similarity with the universal names that, in nominalist philosophy, the mind imposes upon reality in order to gain purchase on a chaotic multiplicity.”11 Gresset’s, Deschamps’, and Linguet’s anti-philosophes Enlightenment, even if punctuated by moralistic condemnations of “corruption,” was underpinned by epistemological, and ultimately ontological concerns having to do with this imposition of arbitrary concepts upon reality.

The various difficulties – fiscal, demographic, political, religious, and military – experienced by eighteenth-century France made clear that the nation needed reforms in order to recast its theologico-political structure according to both the new domestic French reality, and the new international balance of powers. But the need for reforms

was echoed by the public sphere in a multitude of discourses on reforms. The crisis of financial and symbolic credit of the French monarchy, or what historians saw as its “desacralization,” the difficulty of the French monarchy to assert its authority in domestic (from the Jansenist crisis of the 1730s, to the perpetual quarrels between the parlements and the king’s ministers, leading to the Maupeou coup in 1771, and then to the rescinding of the Maupeou reforms in 1774) or foreign-military contexts (the Seven Years War), gave way to discursive inflation. The risk of semantic emptiness at the heart of a “proliferation of mediations” was made possible by what Keith Baker has described as a haphazard appropriation by various parties or factions of isolated components of the three-pronged royal discourse of “will, justice, and reason.”

The crisis of credit raised the question of representation, political or cultural, of the accuracy with which current legal or political concepts and institutions expressed and defended the interests of the French citizens. The 1787-1789 pre-revolutionary polemics on the nature and scope of the Estates General were in fact the last Old Regime expression of the debate on political rights sparked at the outset of the eighteenth century by the French absolutist monarchy’s taxation policies. To be sure, this crisis of

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15 For the politics of taxation and their political consequences consisting mainly in a nationalization of the public discourse and in the transformation of subjects into citizens by way of taxpayers, see Michael Kwass’ essential *Privilege and the Politics of Taxation in Eighteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For the financial origins of the French Revolution, see Gail Bossenga, "Financial
credit required not merely a restoration of statu quo ante, but the development of a new symbolic economy, of a new set and circulation system of values that would account for the new reality of France. If parlements were increasingly harder to discipline by royal lits de justice, the finances of eighteenth-century France were increasingly impossible to manage on the old basis of tortuous tax exemptions in exchange of corporate “free gifts.” “Feudalism” had to give way to more rational and sophisticated forms of social and economic credit. And, as Christian Thorne has rightly pointed out, eighteenth-century economy thrived on new instruments of economic credit, that is on “promises of valuable things” whose proliferation “lure[d] the economy out of the realm of concrete, away from land and tangible, tradable goods [...] and into a realm of fluid and disembodied values.” If credit is “that set of practices and institutions that give authority to paper,” then in its new guises risked to epistemologically “unmoor” societies incapable to set up a sophisticated set of institutions and standards that would objectify, and regulate this credit.16

What Gresset, Deschamps, and Linguet reproached the philosophes for was precisely what they perceived to be the philosophes’ refusal to engage in constructing such as set of cultural, economic, and political standards and institutions that could offer semantic stability to a truly enlightened France. The main strength of the philosophes as a party was their self-referentiality, which assured their cohesiveness. Even the Encyclopédie was steeped in it, with its massive appeal to authorities undermined by a subtle game of cross-references with radical results.17 The self-referentiality of the

philosophes allowed their enemies to brand them as “sophists” (Gresset, Rousseau, Deschamps), or as a “sect” (Linguet) dedicated to advancing their own cause or fortune by instrumentalizing otherwise legitimate concerns or institutions. Gresset saw the philosophes as academic free riders neglecting the French Academy’s mission to distill and defend certain literary and linguistic standards. For Gresset, the philosophes distinguished themselves as counterfeiters of reputations and abusers of words, whose activity would ruin sociability, or social commerce - dependent upon the existence and exchange of words with a certain substance - and would thus lead to despotism. Deschamps ridiculed with Rabelaisian verve the salon moorings of the philosophes’ “metaphysics” and ethics. And Linguet pointed out that, after falsifying the cultural standards, the philosophes had started as physiocrats to subvert the economic foundations of France by promoting economic policies aiming to drastically reduce the number of small farmers, and to dismantle the guild system for the benefit of large agribusinesses. The result of these policies, warned Linguet, would be a bureaucratic despotism served by philosophes propagandists.

Quoting Claude-Levi Strauss’s expression used to describe Marcel Mauss’ understanding of *mana*, Dan Edelstein described the *esprit philosophique* as a “floating signifier,” “capable of being affixed to a wide variety of different works, initiatives, and practices,” while “providing the *je ne sais quoi* that made some books and ideas philosophical and others not.” Gresset, Deschamps, and Linguet argued that, as long as they remained “floating signifiers,” as long as they did not acquire an objective nature,

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the “esprit philosophique,” “reason,” the “Lights,” or “philanthropy” would be just hypocritical, debased conceptual currencies whose circulation would lead to cultural bankruptcy and societal crash.\textsuperscript{20} As the philosopher Stanley Rosen has argued, “if reasons have no external, objective reference and are altogether self-certifying, then they are arbitrary utterances, lacking in rational justification or human value.” As such, they foster not “enlightenment,” but its opposite: nihilism.\textsuperscript{21} Gresset, Deschamps, and Linguet left no doubt that by attacking the philosophes they opposed precisely the self-referential refusal of objective reference that gives rise to nihilism, or to what Deschamps called the “half-lights” propitious to despotism. To paraphrase Thorne, the set of practices (for example, excluding from public institutions such as the French Academy those with real literary merits in order to promote obedient literary mediocrities such as La Harpe), and institutions (such as the salons) that gave authority to the philosophes’ literary “paper” were, Gresset, Linguet, and Deschamps claimed, bogus. The philosophes’ “possession” of a large share of the symbolic economy was not legitimized by a “code,” or by a system of rules and public obligations that would make the philosophes not just holders of certain values, but beholden to them.\textsuperscript{22}

As long as they would not abandon self-referentiality, the philosophes were suspect of not acting in good faith, of operating like a “party,” a “faction,” and a “sect.” Similarly to Rousseau, Gresset, Deschamps, and Linguet described the philosophes as “sophists,” that is as professional rhetors arguing themselves and others into living in a


\textsuperscript{22} On the relationship between possession and legitimate ownership, see Jacques Attali, \textit{Au propre et au figuré. Une histoire de la propriété} (Paris: Fayard, 1988), 13.
world of their own creation, in a sectarian microcosm. Gresset held that, because they refused to share the cultural and political tradition and standards upon which he based his defense of liberty, the philosophes engaged in a multiplication and distortion of linguistic signs, conferring artificial, or coded meanings to these signs. Gresset warned that linguistic and cultural anomie would lead to societal anomie and thus to tyranny. The metaphysical expediency of the philosophes, their refusal to seek an ontological basis for their ethics would lead to a relativist ethics, argued Deschamps. The Benedictine metaphysician also feared that naturalizing ethics according to a monist system such as Spinoza's, would relativize and thus make irrelevant concepts such as "good," "bad," "just," "unjust." The result would be either the moral collapse of society, or a revolutionary explosion of the state in the absence of a really solid, well thought out alternative. But, Deschamps argued, it would also mean abandoning any hope for political equality since it would leave people without any common ground with the rich on which to base their claims for social justice.

Deschamps' ontological ruminations led him to reject an autonomous political realm founded upon the principle of individualism,23 and on the optimist Leibnizian ethics of "more" and "less," of the natural, and therefore necessary and beneficial imbalances of social, economic, and in the end ontological status. Linguet, in his turn, bitterly contested the Liberal political economy of the "metaphysical" and economic philosophes, their devotion to political and economic individualism and to the "free market," both underpinned merely by a proclamation of an abstract freedom and leading to complete economic deregulation. Linguet deemed that the philosophes refused to take social reality into account, that is, the whole of society and of its needs. As Linguet

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argued, the real relationships of economic and political power favoring the rich could not
be turned in the favor of the poor by merely destroying guild privileges, liberalizing the
market, and importing the English political model. If eighteenth-century Europe was not
a Leibnizian world, the global free market was also not the best of all possible worlds.

In the end, Gresset, Deschamps, and Linguet argued that it was impossible to
restore the connection between French political and economic institutions and the social
substance they were supposed to represent or address without first taking into
consideration that whole reality. The three authors agreed that France needed the
institutional and conceptual overhaul provided by the Enlightenment, as long as this
Enlightenment was a real one. And in order to be a real one, the Enlightenment had to
exclude the self-referentiality practiced by the philosophes for tactical reasons having to
do with their desire to win the cultural wars, but contributing little to the enlightenment
of the public. If the philosophes defended their tactics on the ground of being under
attack, Gresset, Deschamps, and Linguet retorted, like Rousseau, by pointing out that the
philosophes were in fact part of the Old Regime establishment: they enjoyed the
protection of powerful ministers such as the marquis d’Argenson, Malesherbes, Turgot,
Necker, cardinal Loménie de Brienne, the duc de Choiseul, they counted on the
complicity of Sartine, the chief of the Parisian police, and even of the favorite, Mme de
Pompadour, who lobbied for their election in the French Academy, they occupied official
posts (from royal historiographer like Voltaire, to censors, to diplomats, to perpetual
secretary of the French Academy like d’Alembert). The philosophes, in other words,
could count on the support of the state, because the monarchy had actually enlisted them
in its fight against “feudalism,” 24 that is against those legal fictions and institutions that
hindered or resisted the control of the monarchy. According to Gresset, Deschamps, and

24 Edelstein, The Enlightenment, 82, 89-91.
Linguet, the philosophes had used this support to advance the cause of their own party, seeking to monopolize French cultural life. Linguet, one of the most persecuted writers of his century, Deschamps, and Gresset held that, instead of fighting for the sake of the common good, the philosophes fawned to the people in power while helping to ruin France politically, economically, and culturally.

In order to be genuine, the reform of the system needed an Archimedean point of inflexion, a signified “thing” capable of resisting manipulation by the signifying intellect. For Gresset, this ontological referent was the nation, understood as a people sharing a common set of cultural and political values over the longue durée, values which thus could not be easily distorted by adroit warlords or wordlords. Gresset’s “nation” was opposed to both the "people," or the crowd which a tyrannical ruler could easily work into a frenzied mob, and to "society," that is to the salons, or the elite sophists capable of lulling the people into becoming a dejected, cynical mob, unable and unwilling to defend its liberty, and thus an easy pray for despots. For Deschamps, reaching this point of inflexion had to do with a Cartesian reason rejecting socialized reason, with the logic of conviction rejecting the rhetoric of persuasion. Salon conversation and debate, and the conclusions arrived at in this way, did not convince but swayed people into a certain direction. Mere rhetoric could not offer unwavering support to a system of ethics, and thus to any standards of justice, virtue, and fairness. Purely subjective preferences could not have universal applicability, and thus could not be construed as legitimate ways of legitimizing an enlightened alternative to Old Regime “feudal” abuses. Deschamps’ discursive “reason” instead had, he argued, the capacity to attain and to preserve certain universal truths (such as the existence of "le Tout," and of "Tout") able to support a

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communitarian political philosophy, and ethical system. Linguet had in mind the poor and those making a very modest living, that is those almost eighty percent of the French population living slightly above poverty levels in a precarious balance between survival, misery, and death.\textsuperscript{26} Attacking natural law systems, Linguet argued that political and legal imbalances could not be resolved, and that freedom and justice could not exist in a system plagued by huge economic gaps. Against the physiocrats, Linguet defended the idea that small farmers secured a much larger degree of liberty on account of their modest but real economic power, than the propertyless managed to do by appealing to the "natural laws" of the market, or to bills of rights. Any reformer, who took as his point of reference only what the "public" or the salon "society" clamored for at a certain moment, risked hijacking the need for reform in France for the benefit of certain special interests, such as those of the big landowners championed by the physiocrats.

Gresset, Deschamps, and Linguet mounted their cases using different rhetorical strategies - Gresset used a familiar style, Linguet was the prototypical rabble rousing journalist - or rejecting, like Deschamps, any rhetoric in favor of forbidding, closely argued ontological ratiocinations. Gresset wrote dramas and poetry, Deschamps wrote letters and treatises, and Linguet harassed his enemies in treatises and in journal articles. They voiced their concerns, all three of them, at different moments (more on that in a moment), and in different contexts: as a result of French Academy backroom confrontations (Gresset), in sword nobility circles (Deschamps), and in the journalistic circumstances of pan-European diplomatic intrigue (Linguet). But they all maintained that disregarding the "whole" of society, the constants of history, or the known facts of nature risked leading to a synecdochical reform, in which a part would be taken for the

whole. Such a skewed reform was bound to lead to a nominalist rewriting of reality - be it social, political or cultural -, and to the perpetuation of injustice. A minority would acquire the means and gain the opportunity to justify slavery as freedom. The Enlightenment of the three authors that I study here stemmed from their refusal to accept a part as the whole, or to reduce people to their function, be it a fashionable or "Liberal" (that is, economic) one. Like Rousseau, Gresset, Deschamps, and Linguet worked their way toward some form of general will. And if Gresset and Linguet both took the historical turn – Gresset in the sense of tradition, and Linguet in the historicist sense of the relation of power and “justice” to private property - while Deschamps took the ontological way toward the "generality" of things in themselves, Rousseau differed from them mainly because he combined historicism with Platonism in an “Ancient historicist” way that allowed him to read national specificity as a manifestation of a Platonic idea.

The selection of Gresset, Deschamps and Linguet in this dissertation makes sense not only from a political and epistemological perspective but also from a chronological and thematic point of view. Even revisionist historians agree that the French Enlightenment evolved from literary quarrels in the 1730s-1750s, to theological battles in the late 1750s and 1760s, to political battles in the 1770s and 1780s, all of which factored in turn into making of the French Revolution. Each of my figures corresponds to one of these pivotal moments. The French society of orders, with its intricate, and not always unfair or absurd systems of representation, was, however, in a crisis for financial and theologico-political reasons that had to do with the Jansenist-Jesuit conflicts fueling the stand-offs between Parlement and the Crown Ministers in the five central decades of the eighteenth century. The crisis of representation could be solved neither by the Maupeou coup (1771-74) deconstructing and reconstructing the parlements, nor by the suppression of the Jesuits in 1763, although the last did more to pacify French society
than the first. As long as no minister of finance had a clear and long-lasting mandate to
do anything the financial crisis would persist as well,\(^27\) and no cabinet could hope to have
such a mandate as long as the crisis of representation resulted in governmental in-
fighting.

France needed a new system of representation: but the signifying will of the
government and of a part of the intellectual elites had to be refrained in the name of
justice and reason from distorting the signified social substance. For Gresset, it was
impossible to develop this new system without being firmly rooted in the French “ancient
constitution,” that is in that political, legal, and institutional pattern bequeathed by a
French past seen as “a history of representative institutions” defending the liberty of the
nation against the tyranny of the kings.\(^28\) For Deschamps, monist metaphysics and
instrumental reason were bound to give birth to an ethics vitiated by relativism and were
therefore incapable of fostering a fair society. According to Deschamps, a system of
representation that would foster a just society had to be built upon an ethics of
ontological equality arrived at with the help of a Cartesian, discursive reason capable of
establishing a set of metaphysical truths functioning as major premises of any political,
moral, and economic developments. For Linguet, a system of representation that
disregarded the interests of the people - that is of those eighty percent of the French

\(^27\) The last finance ministers to last at least a decade on the job were Philibert Orry (1730-1745), and his
successor Jean-Baptiste de Machault d’Arnouville (1745-1754). Between 1754 and 16 July 1789, France had
19 finance ministers (15 without the interim ministers). The most enterprising ones, such as Gresset’s
protector Henri Léonard Jean Baptiste Bertin (1759-1763), Linguet’s hero Joseph Marie Terray (1769-1774),
or Jacques Necker (1777-1781), kept the job for four or five years.

*Language, Law and History in the French Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970);
Robin Briggs, “From the German Forests to Civil Society: The Frankish myth and the Ancient Constitution in
University Press, 2000), 231-249.
population living under (thirty percent) or only vaguely and insecurely above (fifty percent) the level of subsistence - while proposing legal concepts that would have maintained the existing power relationships, was harmful. Linguet did not argue that laws were an expression of power relationships in order to legitimize the existing power structures, but in order to challenge them. In order to change the law, the sovereign had first to change the power relationships. The way of life was, for Linguet, more important than a set of proclaimed natural rights or civic values proclaimed from the salons but unable to affect the real world. Gresset, Deschamps, and Linguet considered the Enlightenment of the philosophes dangerous not only because it was superficial, or an exercise in genuflecting to the rich, but also because it exhibited another nominalist trait: it was self-propelling, it self-reproduced. It created its own reality.

Indeed, by charting these polemics from the 1730s with Gresset, and into the 1790s with Linguet, we can see the institutionalization of philosophe culture. In the 1730s and 1740s, Gresset attacked a cultural climate, a perceived erosion of cultural standards and of sociability, a moral erosion attributed by Gresset to the philosophes. By the 1770s, after the philosophes had become entrenched in the French Academy, both Gresset and Linguet entered in conflict not merely with a culture, but with the institutional expression of that culture, by now "official." Besides the academy, Linguet could also attack Turgot's cabinet and policies, which he saw as another instance of philosophe political and institutional triumph. Between 1740 and 1770, Gresset's "méchant" plotted his way from the salons into the ministerial cabinet, from wielding empty words in a salon to wielding the power of the state.

Gresset, Linguet, and Deschamps cautioned that the most important element in the philosophes' success story was not necessarily their conquest of political power, harmful as it was, as Linguet warned, but fleeting by the very nature of things political.
More worrisome was the way in which the philosophes managed to disrupt the rules of the cultural life and of sociability, the way in which they managed to foster a new French culture, and to incubate it in the salons. The philosophes' sectarian approach to both the politics of culture and the culture of politics made impossible any rational debate. For Gresset, Deschamps, and Linguet, the birth of the philosophe-moulded "public opinion" meant the death of the national consensus: the salon operators managed to carry the day against national interests that remained unheard. Indeed, if Gresset, Deschamps and Linguet seemed to believe that the philosophes invaded the Academy, they were also convinced that the philosophes were hatched in the salons. According to Gresset, Deschamps, and Linguet, if the philosophes did not belong in the French Academy, they certainly belonged in the salons, where they honed their skills at staging and manipulating discourse, shutting out their opponents, and specializing in spurious arguments. Gresset believed salons perverted the symbolic economy of French literature and sociability by putting in circulation inflated reputations and by injecting social interaction with cruelty and egocentrism disguised as wit. Deschamps argued that salon conversation destroyed the capacity to sustain a serious philosophical discussion by parsing the attention and discursive span. Deschamps pointed out that, replacing the appeals to logic with recourses to rhetoric, salon conversationalists managed to convince themselves of anything while being unable to establish that what they believed was true outside their own circle. The same perspective on the salon-philosophes circles as societies of mutual reassurance, gathering sectorially around their own certitudes was shared by Linguet, who maintained that salons falsified the public debate by monopolizing the public voice and distorting it in favor of certain factions. But Linguet also deplored the political and economic consequences of such power-brokering hubs.
This concentration on cultural criticism brought all three anti-philosophes figures discussed in this dissertation in Rousseau's vicinity. Gresset, Deschamps, and Linguet admired Rousseau's attacks on the philosophes as exponents and begetters of a corrupt culture, unable to satisfy the need for emancipation and justice that the Enlightenment was supposed to embody, as a triumph of “light” against the darkness of oppression, superstition, and misery. Gresset offered protection to Rousseau in the difficult period of the Genevan’s less than triumphal return from England in 1767, when Rousseau felt hunted by the philosophes, largely because he was. Deschamps wrote to Rousseau and their correspondence indicates that, although disappointed when Rousseau did not embrace his “system,” Deschamps considered Rousseau the most profound thinker among the French intellectual elite. Linguet also saw in the civic republican Rousseau an important ally in his fight against the philosophes and the physiocrats. If Rousseau was admired by all three anti-philosophes discussed here, d’Alembert was unanimously detested by all three. Gresset resented d’Alembert’s academic maneuvers, especially those in favor of philosophe protégées such as the young Jean-Baptiste de la Harpe. Deschamps resented d’Alembert’s “inability” to grasp ontological problems, his mathematical “pettiness,” and lack of metaphysical intuition, which he deplored together with Diderot. If Gresset looked upon d’Alembert as an academic upstart, twenty years later Linguet reviled d’Alembert as the face of a corrupt cultural establishment, and as a high-flying supporter of “free market” political economy.

While as enlightened as their adversaries, Gresset, Deschamps and Linguet do not neatly fit in any of the definitions of the Enlightenment now postulated by historians; nor however, can they be relegated to a vaguely conceived Counter-Enlightenment. The

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Enlightenment, I argue, is better understood as the working out in political, economic, and cultural terms of a new, optimistic anthropology, that saw human beings as worthy, and capable of “happiness” (*bonheur*). Seen from this perspective, the difference between the philosophes and their enemies was one of degree rather than one of kind. By adding the horizontal dimensions of history (literary and political, in the case of Gresset, economic and political, in the case of Linguet), and the vertical dimension of metaphysics (Deschamps), the three enemies of the philosophes studied in this dissertation managed to add weight and scope to their enlightened arguments in favor of liberty, justice, and happiness. In this quarrel, the enemies of the philosophes had in many ways the better part of the argument. Their Kantian search for a touchstone of truth combined with an increased awareness of the role of individual consciousness in that quest allowed them to advocate far more sweeping democratic and egalitarian reforms than those advocated by philosophes, too invested as they were in working on the creation of consensus within the existing system.

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CHAPTER I:

A Literary Enlightenment: Jean-Baptiste-Louis Gresset and the Enlightenment as Canonical Temptation

Gresset was born, on 29 August 1709, in a solidly religious bourgeois family dedicated to the Law (“la chicane”). Gresset’s father, Jean-Baptiste Gresset, was royal counselor (“conseiller du roi”), “commissioner of justice” (“commissaire enquêteur – examinateur”) at the court of first appeal in Amiens (“Baillage et Présidial d’Amiens”) as well as a worthy local poet. Jean-Baptiste wrote pious paraphrases of the Psalms, discourses on virtue, ruminations on the nothingness of the world as well as epistles on the bucolic pleasures, a six-part “Art de bien vivre,” and satires in the vein of Boileau against the new literature of the day. Especially heinous in Jean-Baptiste’s eyes was the "cold mania" of those "Apollos for hire" stirred not by their genius but by their material needs to write novels catering to “low” tastes. Gresset’s mother, Catherine Gresset, born Rohault, was a pious bourgeois woman, who would eventually give birth to another nine children after our poet.

Two of Gresset’s sisters would become nuns. The first was Géneviève-Catherine-Françoise, born in 1714, who died on 24 March 1729 in the monastery of the Augustines of Amiens after taking the veil on her deathbed. The death of this sister would inspire Gresset one of his first poems, “Ode à une Dame, sur la mort de sa fille, religieuse à A...,”

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31 “Tandis qu’en son besoin Apollon mercenaire/ Attendra de ses vers un modique salaire,/ Et que M..., gagé comme un vil artisan,/ A quinze sols par jour pourra faire un roman,/ La faim aux plus grossiers tenant lieu de génie,/ Inondera Paris de leur froide manie” (Cayrol, Essai, 1: 7, 17).
32 Cayrol, Essai Historique, 1: 3.
published in July 1731 in *Mercure de France* and then piously reprinted in every edition of Gresset’s works. The death of this sister did not stop another one of Gresset’s sisters, Marguerite-Françoise, born on 13 May 1715, from entering the same convent in 1731 and becoming a nun on 4 October 1733.

Gresset studied at the Jesuit college of Amiens. Encouraged by one of his teachers, Father Lagneau, a close friend of Gresset’s father, Gresset became a Jesuit novice in 1725. After two years (1726-1728) spent in Paris, at Louis le Grand, Gresset functioned as a professor at Moulins (1728-1729), Tours (1729-1733), and finally at Rouen (1733-1734). Gresset’s Jesuit superiors recommended him as “a distinguished spirit, a sound taste [...] a sanguine temperament and yet a friend of moderation.” Gresset also rose to Jesuit literary fame during these years. In 1730, the bookseller Mathieu Masson of Tours published a volume of *Éclogues de Virgile*. The volume contained Gresset’s translation of Virgil’s first six eclogues, as well as two of Gresset’s original productions: “Ode à Mgr. de Chapt de Rastignac, archevêque de Tours,” and “Ode sur l’Amour de la Patrie.” Louis Jacques de Chapt de Rastignac (1684 or 1687-1750, archbishop of Tours between 1723-1750) was what Émile Appolis called a “third party” bishop who adhered to the papal bull *Unigenitus* (1713) and banned from his diocese some of its known opponents, but had Augustinian leanings and harbored anti-Jesuit sentiments. These would flare up with the publication of Rastignac’s *Instruction pastorale de Monseigneur l’Archevêque de Tours sur la justice chrétienne par rapport*...
aux Sacremens de pénitence et d’eucharistie (Paris, 1749). A blazing attack on the Jesuit doctrine of frequent communion and on the dangers of moral decay fostered by Jesuit casuistry, Rastignac's book was denounced by the Jesuits as "Jansenist," while the Jansenists saluted its “orthodoxy” and intimated that Rastignac died an unnatural death, poisoned, in 1750, shortly after the book's publication.\textsuperscript{38} In his 1730 ode, Gresset praised the archbishop of Tours for taking care of the poor, for his love of learning, and for his efforts to act as “a father, an apostle, a hero” on behalf of the afflicted Christians in his diocese. Under Gresset's pen, Rastignac appeared as an example of the virtues of the “primitive Church” (“l’Église antique”): a humble, zealous, enlightened bishop, rooted in his diocese and thus serving his country.\textsuperscript{39} The language of patriotism and the discourse of the golden age, of the “primitive Church,” reinforced one another in a manner that would become a staple of Gresset's poetry and academic discourses, in which he would eulogize Jean-Baptiste Surian, bishop of Vence, Orléans de la Motte, bishop of Amiens, and Jean Ignace de la Ville, bishop \textit{in partibus} of Tricome. Gresset's academic discourses brought upon him the scorn of the philosophes, the wrath of Louis XV, who resented Gresset's attack on Court prelates, and the bitter sarcasm of the Jansenists, who could not square Gresset's denunciation of the abuse of language at the hand of the philosophes with his own eulogy of Orléans de la Motte, an active supporter of the Jesuits.\textsuperscript{40} Gresset’s Catholic “primitivism” did not revolve around dogmas, but around

\textsuperscript{38} For the Jansenist side of Rastignac's story, as found in the \textit{Nouvelles ecclésiastiques ou mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la constitution}, see the \textit{Table raisonnée et alphabetique des Nouvelles ecclésiastiques, depuis 1728 jusqu'en 1760 inclusivement}, part 2, 1767, 724-728. For the Jesuit bewildered reaction at what they considered to be Rastignac's turncoat attack on the Jesuit Jean Pichon's book on the virtues of frequent communion, \textit{L'Esprit de Jésus Christ et de l'église sur la fréquente communion} (Paris, 1745), see Dominique de Colonia, Louis Patouillet, \textit{Dictionnaire des livres Jansénistes ou qui favorisent le Jansénisme}, 4 vols (Anvers, 1752), 2: 297-320, 382, 483.


\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Nouvelles ecclésiastiques}, 17 April 1775, 61-64.
morals. In Gresset’s opinion, Christian virtues such as simplicity, love and modesty could help contain the possibly chaotic consequences of the advances of learning and of the expansion of the public sphere. Spanning the decades 1730-1770, Gresset’s patriotic *cum* enlightened Catholicism discourse would make him one of the most consistent representatives of something akin to a “third party.”

Gresset made his debut at a time when the conflict between the Jansenists and the Jesuits over the papal bull *Unigenitus* had entered a new, systematic, phase due to the launching of the Jansenist underground journal, *Nouvelles ecclésiastiques*, in January 1728. Since the *Nouvelles ecclésiastiques* kept tags on and eagerly denounced any real or imaginary Jesuit misdeed, Gresset’s first, Jesuit and patriotic, volume was withheld from publication by Gresset’s Jesuit superiors, who feared that Gresset’s translation of Virgil’s occasionally homoerotic eclogues might become a target for the Jansenists. In his 1734 collection, Gresset reprinted his translations from Virgil, added a translation of the last four eclogues and, in the second eclogue, changed the name of Alexis to that of Daphne, in order to assuage the moral scruples of his pious readers and to avoid giving the Jansenists any immoral fodder for their anti-Jesuit cannons. Reviewing the volume, the abbé Pierre François Guyot Desfontaines praised Gresset’s translations above his original verses, and slyly questioned the Jesuit school syllabus that would put such ambiguous poems in the hands of the pupils, with the “discretion” of the masters and the “innocence” of the children as only protection against

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the “danger” of moral corruption. Gresset’s decision to change the name of Alexis was also saluted by the fiercely Jansenist historian and man of letters abbé Claude Pierre Goujet, who noted that Gresset’s paraphrase made Virgil more suitable to the modern Christian public by getting rid of the “odious, and justly detestable” original homoerotic “images.”

In the June 1730 issue of the Mercure de France, Gresset published his “Ode sur l’Amour de la Patrie,” a piece that would become one of Frederic the Great’s favorite pieces. “Gresset wrote an Ode sur l’amour de la patrie which I immensely enjoyed. It is full of fire and of accomplished passages,” would write Frederic to Voltaire in 1738, thus initiating an attempt to lure Gresset to Berlin that will be treated later in this chapter.

In that same year 1730, Gresset published a pamphlet containing an Ode sur la Canonisation des Saints Stanislas Kostka et Louis de Gonzague, republished in a

45 “L’auteur, sans s’amuser à vouloir donner un sens favorable à la seconde Eglogue de Virgile, a jugé à propos de remplacer Alexis par une bergère. ‘Par-là, dit-il, les sentiments sont ramenés dans l’ordre ; l’amour se retrouve dans la nature, & le voile est tiré sur des images odieuses & détestées, qui pouvoient cependant plaire au siècle dépravé du Poète [...]’ Cette réflexion est fort judicieuse ; mais si elle est telle, que penser de tant de commentateurs & de traducteurs de Virgile, qui ont du sentir cet inconvénient ? Comment ose-t-on mettre tous les jours cette Eglogue dangereuse entre les mains des enfants, & de la leur expliquer publiquement ? La discrétion des maîtres, & l’innocente simplicité des disciples, ont été jusqu’ici le seul préservatif contre le danger” (Abbé Pierre François Guyot Desfontaines, Observations sur les écrits modernes, 1735, 1: 214-15).

46 “Dans la nécessité [...] de se conformer à nos mœurs & à notre goût, il [Gresset, n. M. P.] s’est permis une liberté plus considérable, c’est le changement de quelques noms de Bergers en des personnages de Bergères, afin que par-là les sentiments soient ramenés dans l’ordre, & que le voile soit tiré sur des images odieuses, & justement détestées. C’est par ces mêmes égards qu’il a risqué la Métamorphose d’Alexis, ne pouvant pas, sans doute, donner autrement à la seconde Eglogue une couleur favorable” (Claude Pierre Goujet, Bibliothèque françoise ou Histoire de la littérature française [Paris], 5 [1742], 134). For another positive review see also Bibliothèque françoise ou histoire littéraire de la France (Amsterdam), 38, first part (1744), 53.


48 Paris: J.B. Coignard fils, 1730, in-4, 8 pag.
February 1731 issue of the *Mercure de France*. Gresset's ode was part of a larger campaign aiming at publicizing the figure of the recently canonized Louis de Gonzague and to push for the canonization of Stanislas Kostka, beatified in the seventeenth century. The celebration of these two Jesuit saints was widely ridiculed in the Jansenist press, although Gresset's effort escaped unscathed. Developing his reputation as a Jesuit religious poet, Gresset published in the same *Mercure de France* an “Ode à une Dame, sur la mort de sa fille, religieuse à A...,” and a poem on “L’Ingratitude.” In 1733, Gresset published a new slim volume containing a patriotic poem of support for the involvement of France in the war of the Polish succession, in which Louis XV defended his father in law, Stanislas Leszczynski. Excerpts of Gresset’s *Ode au Roy, sur la guerre présente* would be published by the abbé Prévost in his *Le Pour et contre*, together with a notice advertising Gresset as “Le R.P. Gresset Jésuite, Professeur de Réthorique à Rouen,” a pillar of the Jesuit and patriotic establishment that nobody could ignore, since Gresset managed to transform the official war bulletins into apologies of patriotic fervor and of the benevolent king who wages war only for just reasons, in this case for helping a “hero” get on his rightful throne: “Fighting and winning without justice,/ Being the enemy of all the other kings,/ Means being a hero due to a whim,/ Means being only half a hero [...] But you engage on this course of action/ Only in order to dispel these conspiracies [...]// Seconded by your felicitous ministers/ You destroy these sinister plots.”

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49 *Mercure de France*, February 1731, 241-246.
51 *Mercure de France*, July 1732, 1463.
52 Rouen: Richard & Nicolas Lallemant (“près le collège des RR. PP. Jésuites”), 1733.
53 *Le Pour et contre (nos 1-60)*, ed. Steve Larkin (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1993), no. 25, 300-301. Since Prévost was incarcerated, it was Desfontaines who published Gresset’s verses.
54 “Combattre et vaincre sans justice,/ De tous les rois être ennemi,/ C’est être héros par caprice,/ C’est n’être
The fact that Gresset signaled out the ministers for praise might indicate that already enjoyed the patronage of the powerful Chauvelin clan, from Amiens. Germain-Louis Chauvelin grew under the tutelage of cardinal Fleury, under whose protection he became garde des sceaux (1727-1737) and the minister of Foreign Affairs (1727-1737). In these capacities G.-L. Chauvelin supported the French intervention in the war of the Polish succession on behalf of the king’s father-in-law. However, G.-L. Chauvelin would be disgraced in 1737 due to his being suspected of harboring Jansenist sympathies and of plotting to take the place of Cardinal Fleury. Germain-Louis Chauvelin was a cousin of the three Chauvelin brothers, some of whom would play an important role in Gresset’s life. Greset dedicated his poem L’Abbaye to François-Claude, marquis de Chauvelin, Voltaire’s friend. Jacques-Bernard Chauvelin was directeur de librairie from 1729 to 1732 and later intendant of Amiens, and master of requests (“maître des requêtes”). In this last capacity, Jacques-Bernard Chauvelin obtained a post for Gresset, after the poet left the Jesuits, from Orry, who was contrôleur général des finances. If, in March 1738, Gresset wrote a poem asking to “M. l’abbé de Chauvelin” for a rabbit and six partridges for his table, it was because he was very good friend with the Jansenist abbé Henri-Philippe Chauvelin, the future initiator of the campaign that would lead to the expulsion of the Jesuits from France. Both Gresset and the abbé Chauvelin frequented the salons of Anne-Josephe Bonnier de la Mosson, duchess de Chaulnes.

héros qu’à demi/ [...] Tu ne parois dans la carrière/ Que pour dissiper ces complots,/ Et lever l’injuste barrière/ Qui ferme un trône à son héros:/ Seconde par d’heureux ministres,/ Tu brises ces trames sinistres,” (Gresset, Oeuvres, 1: 224-226).


Between 1730 and 1734, Gresset managed to avoid becoming a target in the ongoing war between his own Jesuits and the Jansenists. He also managed to look for and perhaps to gain ministerial patronage by skillfully blending neoclassical aesthetics with patriotic themes. In 1734 Gresset published three new works: *Les Poésies de M.G.*, *Vair Vert, ou les Voyages du perroquet de la Visitation de Nevers*, and *Le Lutrin Vivant*. Les Poésies, stuffed with Gresset’s more conformist pieces, such as “Ode sur la Canonisation des Saints Stanislas Kostka et Louis de Gonzague,” “Euterpe ou la Poésie champêtre, ode à Virgile,” or a longer version of the “Ode au Roi, sur la guerre présente,” did not cause any stir. Even the usually friendly abbé Desfontaines was lukewarm, noting that the best pieces in that volume were Gresset’s translations from Virgil. In the absence of any notable reviews, Gresset’s volume got the enthusiastic reception of one of Gresset’s former pupils at the Collège de Rouen, a certain abbé Debecdelièvre. While waxing enthusiastic in the *Mercure de France* on Gresset’s “touching sounds,” Debecdelièvre pointed out that Gresset was reprimanded for his poems, but that he defeated “the morons of Parnassus” by giving them a taste of their own medicine, that is by ridiculing them. Debecdelièvre’s intimations of Jesuit reprisals against Gresset corroborate Cardinal de Bernis’s memories of a pale and frail Gresset, pacing Louis le Grand’s courtyard at night, being spoken of with great sadness by the venerable Father

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57 Rouen: G. Niegart, 1734.
58 Rouen: s.n., 1734.
60 “Je sçai que contre toi mille sots du Parnasse,/ Se sont élevée dans ces Lieux ;/ Mais après tout, qu’a produit cette audace ?/ Leurs propres traits se sont tournés contre eux,” (“Au R.P. Gresset, de la Compagnie de Jésus, Professeur de Rhétorique au Collège de Rouen, auteur des poésies qui paroissent sous le nom de M.G.,” *Mercure de France*, June 1734, 1128-30).
Charles Porée, and living at his Jesuit superiors’ sufferance in his mansarde at Louis le Grand, around 1734.\textsuperscript{61}

The usually cautious Gresset would indeed cause a public scandal with his poems, but not with his Poésies. It would be the anonymously published Ver Vert that would catapult Gresset to fame and to the literary world. The poem, concerning a nuns parrot who learns to swear like a sailor while traveling from one convent to another, was advertised by the bookseller Niegart as “entirely decent” (“tout à fait rempli de bon sens”).\textsuperscript{62} Reviewing on 19 August 1735 a fourth edition of Gresset’s poem, still published anonymously, Desfontaines hinted at its author’s identity, praised its verve, and agreed with Niegart about its wholesomeness.\textsuperscript{63} Louis XV himself enjoyed the poem and read it aloud to his courtiers. Receptive to the royal endorsement, the entire Court started to buy and to praise Gresset’s little poem, already published in pirated editions allegedly printed in the Hague and London.\textsuperscript{64} On 11 September 1735, Voltaire wrote from Cirey to announce to his friend Nicolas Claude Thieriot that he would soon receive Ver Vert among other new and fashionable books.\textsuperscript{65} On 20 September Voltaire let the councilor in the Parlement of Normandy, poet, and founder of the Academy of Rouen, Pierre Robert Le Cornier de Cideville (1693-1776), know that he tried to read Gresset’s poem but that he could not manage to finish it because it was boring, worthy of a disciple of the Jesuit poet Jean-Antoine Du Cerceau (1670-1730). Du Cerceau was a skilful manipulator of stock poetic diction, and author of Jesuit college plays famous for rewriting parts of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{61} Jean-Paul Desprat, Le Cardinal de Bernis 1715-1794: La belle ambition (Paris: Perrin, 2000), 50-51.
\item \textsuperscript{62} Cayrol, Essai, 1: 47.
\item \textsuperscript{63} “Ce petit Ouvrage n’est qu’un Conte orné de plaisanteries innocentes, & assaisonné de sel, & n’est en aucun sens un Poème héroïque, comme le titre le porte mal-à-propos. Il paroit avoir été publié sans la participation de l’Auteur, que vous connoissez, & dont je vous ai parlé plus d’une fois,” (Observations, 1 [1735], 189-91).
\item \textsuperscript{64} “Sous les rubriques de La Haye et de Londres,” (Cayrol, Essai, 1: 46).
\item \textsuperscript{65} D911, 196.
\end{itemize}
Racine's tragedies in order to make them more poetical.\textsuperscript{66} Du Cerceau's plays usually had their first representation at Louis le Grand, Gresset's school, the same Jesuit Parisian high school where Voltaire and Cideville studied and started their long-lasting friendship. So Voltaire must have hinted at some shared high school experiences when he wrote to Cideville comparing Gresset to Du Cerceau. But the fame of Ver Vert grew,\textsuperscript{67} despite the mocking aloofness of Voltaire, who would shortly become one of Gresset's most ardent supporters for reasons that we will discuss later.

Ver-Vert's phenomenal success brought Gresset a whole crop of literary impersonators trying to cash in on his vogue. Thus, François-Joachim de Pierre, the cardinal de Bernis, who otherwise maintained that Gresset was not a very good poet, and that "the infatuation" for Gresset's poems was exaggerated,\textsuperscript{68} bet on being capable of outdoing Gresset at his own game and then prided himself for the public's having mistaken his versified "badinage" or chatter for Gresset's.\textsuperscript{69} The comparison between Bernis and Gresset would resurface in Mme de Graffigny's correspondence, when, in March 1744, Devaux wrote to Mme de Graffigny that Bernis's last volume of poems was


\textsuperscript{67} \textit{Journal littéraire} (The Hague), 23, first part (1736), 237.


“more correct than Gresset and Voltaire.”⁷⁰ Rebuffed by Mme de Graffigny who found Bernis derivative, superficial, lame, and ultimately ridiculous,⁷¹ Devaux charged again and maintained that Bernis’s lyric poetry stood on an equal footing with the best French dramatic poetry of “Corneille, Boileau, Racine, La Fontaine, Moliere, Rousseau [...], Voltaire, Crébillon, Gresset, Bernard.”⁷² Unconvinced, Mme de Graffigny wrote to Devaux that he “ought to die of shame” for daring to compare such great poets with Bernis.⁷³

For now, by the end of 1735, Gresset would be embraced by two anti-philosophe writers, by the ex-Jesuit abbé Desfontaines, a waspish anti-Voltairian,⁷⁴ and by the older Jean-Baptiste Rousseau (1670-1741), who had been living in exile since 1712, first in Switzerland and then in Bruxelles.⁷⁵ Writing from Bruxelles, Jean-Baptiste Rousseau gave a decisive push to Gresset’s literary fame in a series of three letters. The first two letters were addressed to Jean Gilles de Lasseré, counsellor at the Parlement and master of requests at the Palais (“conseiller au Parlement,” and “commissaire aux enquêtes du Palais”), whose friendship with J.-B. Rousseau lasted from 1718 until 1735.⁷⁶ the third one was meant for the Jesuit Pierre Brumoy (1688-1742), a friend of Father Du Cerceau,

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⁷¹ Graffigny, Correspondance, 5: 187 (letter 676).
⁷² Graffigny, Correspondance, 5: 209 (letter 681).
⁷³ "Hem, tu mes en comparaison Corneille, Boileau et la kirielle que tu nomme ave(c) l’abbé de Bernis? C’est toi qui devrois mourir de honte!” (Graffigny, Correspondance, 5: 204 [letter 681]).
and a longstanding collaborator (1722-1739) and even editor of the *Journal de Trevoux*, which had the same Parisian publisher, Hugues Daniel Chaubert, as Desfontaines's journals. On 15 December 1735, Jean-Baptiste Rousseau wrote to Lasseré that *Ver Vert* was the most accomplished literary piece he had ever read, a poem that managed to combine a casual style (“style familier”) with “everything that poetry has the most brilliant, and everything that a thorough knowledge of the world could offer to someone who had spent his entire life in the world.” After applauding Gresset for leaving the Jesuit Society (“l'esclavage d'une condition qui lui convenoit aussi peu”) in order to follow his literary vocation, Rousseau concluded by defying all modern authors to match Gresset’s artistry.

Out of the other seven works that Gresset published in 1735—*Le Caresme in-promptu*, *La Chartreuse, épître à M. D.D.N.*, *La critique de Vairvert, comédie*, *Épître de Monsieur Gresset à sa Muse*, *Lettre à M. l'Abbé Marquet*, *Lettre de l’auteur de Ver-Vert, venant de quitter les Jésuites*, and *Les Ombres, épître à M. D.D.N.*—J.-B. Rousseau chose to praise *La Chartreuse* in his second letter. Written on 17 December

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78 “Tout ce que la poésie a de plus éclatant, et tout ce qu'une connoissance consommée du monde pourroit fournir à un homme qui y aurait passé toute sa vie [...] Je ne sais si tous mes confrères modernes et moi, ne ferions pas mieux de renoncer au métier que de le continuer, après l’apparition d’un phénomène aussi surprenant [...] qui nous efface tous dès sa naissance, et sur lequel nous n’avons d’autre avantage que l’ancienneté, que nous serions trop heureux de ne pas avoir,” in Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, *Oeuvres*, 5 vols (Paris: Lefèvre, 1820), 5: 335-336.

79 Amsterdam, 1735.

80 N.p., 1735.

81 Londres, 1735.

82 Amsterdam, 1735.

83 N. p., 1735.

84 N.p., 1735.

85 N.p., 1735.
1735, the document was addressed to the Jesuit Brumoy, who was actually responsible for bringing Gresset to Rousseau's attention by sending Gresset’s works to him in Bruxelles. Rousseau had also asked Lasseré to thank the bishop of Luçon, Michel Celse Roger de Bussy Rabutin, for “kindly” sending him *Les Ombres* and *Les Adieux*, works that he had already admiratively read “three times in the twenty four hours since I received them.”

Exiled by the Parlement de Paris, but at the peak of his literary vogue, Rousseau was trying to ingratiate himself with the Court and Parlement Catholic circles that might have helped him return to France. Since Gresset’s break with the Jesuits appeared to have been a relatively clean one, and since Brumoy and Bussy Rabutin themselves had pointed out to Rousseau the rising literary star of Gresset, Rousseau could safely assume that he might be able to advance his own cause by writing about Gresset. Sounding the terrain, Rousseau did not turn Gresset's leaving of the Jesuits into an argument against the Jesuits, as Voltaire, with a different agenda, would try to do, but into an example of the careers open to those taking advantage of a good Jesuit education.

According to Rousseau, Gresset came out of the Jesuit womb a both learned and worldly poet, who, although young, wrote works that seemed to be “the result of a consummate study of the world and of the French language.” This indicated that the Jesuits had managed to concoct a form of socially engaged, moderate, and thus enlightened Christianity that could stand up against modern unbelief. Indeed, Rousseau recognized in Gresset a possible champion against a modern spirit that he himself detested, a poet able to push to the brink of despair “our so-called modern fine

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86 “Déjà lues trois fois, depuis vingt-quatre heures qu’il y a que je les ai reçues, et où je ne me lasse point d’admirer le génie surprenant et la riche fécondité qui les a produites” (J.-B. Rousseau, *Oeuvres*, 5: 339-40)
minds/wits.” The third letter, the longest, from 29 December 1735, discussed *Les Adieux*, Gresset’s farewell to the Jesuits poem. Finding that this poem was “more slipshod than the other two,” Rousseau feared that Gresset might have fallen under the influence of “the bad example of some narrow minds of today, who do not care about precision, as if there was any difference between making good verses and making them well.”

Answering these letters on 20 May 1736, Desfontaines wrote to the old exile that both the public and influential figures such as Father René-Joseph de Tournemine, the editor of the Jesuit *Mémoires de Trévoux*, “loved” Rousseau’s open letters published in the *Observations sur les écrits modernes*, seeing in Rousseau an example of wisdom, moderation, courage and dignity in the face of adversity. Making clear that he was “talking as a friend,” Desfontaines’s only suggestion to Rousseau was to soft-pedal his enthusiasm for Louis Racine’s “Ode sur L’Harmonie” and for Gresset’s poems. If Louis Racine shared his father’s Jansenism, Gresset left the Jesuits after what some contemporary readers described as the Jesuits going “Jansenist,” that is censorious, over his poems. Having left France in 1712, just before the bull *Unigenitus* (1713) would start

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88 “Quel prodige dans un homme de vingt-six ans, et quel désespoir pour tous nos prétendus beaux esprits modernes! [...] Si jamais il peut parvenir à faire des vers un peu plus difficilement, je prévois qu’il nous effacera tous tant que nous sommes,” (J.-B. Rousseau, *Oeuvres*, 5: 336-37).
90 “Le P. Tournemine, dans un entretien que nous eûmes ensemble à votre sujet, ne put s’empêcher de verser quelques larmes sur l’oppression que vous souffrez depuis tant d’années. Il me semble que vous avez trop loué l’Ode de M. Racine sur l’Harmonie [...] vous avez aussi trop loué les vers de M. Gresset, quoique dignes de louange. Je vous parle comme votre ami : vous devez être un peu plus réservé sur l’éloge” (J.-B. Rousseau, *Oeuvres*, 5: 479-480).
91 Father Daire noted that this poem received two answers, the first of which started by complaining of the “Jansenist” severity of Jesuits toward Gresset: “Père Ver-Vert, de votre apostasie,/ Le manifeste est à ma fantaisie/ Bien rédigé, mais quel en est le fruit?/ De vos raisons le public est instruit./ A vos dépens vous lui
to empoison the French theological debates and religious life, Rousseau was perhaps out of touch with some of the undercurrents of said ecclesiastical affairs in France. Therefore, Desfontaines had to seize the opportunity to signal to Rousseau and to the public at large that neither the Jansenist Racine nor the ex-Jesuit Gresset were the safest bets for anyone, including an old exile, trying to find favor at a Court dominated by a dévot faction of largely Jesuit extraction or sympathies. Although amiable, Gresset's break with the Jesuits was not easy to swallow, and as the example of Bussy Rabutin might indicate, it was more the worldly, political, and not necessarily believing wing of the dévot party that supported Gresset. In articles written in September and December 1735, Desfontaines himself was more prudent in his praise of Gresset, enthusing about Gresset’s language and ingenuity, but observing that Le Lutrin Vivant, a satirical poem in the manner of Boileau, Pope, and the Jesuit Du Cerceau, was “a tad indecent.” Gresset's case was still, it seemed, under consideration, with both the Jesuits and the philosophes angling for the allegiance of the young poet, and with Gresset himself aware of his difficult position and trying to navigate to safe waters.

Rousseau’s 30 June 1736 answer to Desfontaines’ tactical letters indicated that the old master’s praise for both L. Racine and Gresset was sincere, and that he did not

donnez l’aubade ;/ Quelques lecteurs approuvent l’escapade,;/ Mais le dévot par vous mal ajusté,/ Cherche pourquoi cette société/ Qui de talents fut toujours si friande,/ Vous rend à vous? pour vers de contrebande;/ Vers dont le tour leur a paru trop gai,/ Le ton trop vif... Ce fait est-il bien vrai?/ Eh! depuis quand sur ce genre d’ouvrage,/ Du Janséniste ont-il pris l’air sauvage?/ Quoi! les Bouhours furent-ils molestés!/ Pour s’exercer sur des futilités?/ Jadis La Rue, en homme apostolique,/ Aidait Baron de sa verve comique;/ Et Du Cerceau s’en trouva-t-il plus mal/ D’avoir Marot joint à son Diurnal?" (Daire, Vie de Gresset, 27).

92 Van Kley, The Religious Origins, 115, 139-40; Hours, La Vertu et le Secret, 14-17; McManners, Church and Society, 1: 50-51, 2: 481, 502.
93 Desfontaines, Observations, 1: 239-40. See also, for a good review of “La Chartreuse,” Observations, 2: 234-238.
bargain with his eulogies.\footnote{J.-B. Rousseau, \textit{Oeuvres}, 5: 481.} Trying to cool down Rousseau’s enthusiasm, Desfontaines retorted with a long and in-depth analysis of Gresset’s latest poem “Epître de M. Gresset à sa Muse,” a satire on the world of “Grub Street,” Darnton’sque authors. As one of the first literary journalists in France, Desfontaines tried to defend professional authors, and especially critics, against Gresset’s strictures. But he was happy to enlist Gresset in his own fight against Voltaire, or to throw him in Jean-Baptiste Rousseau’s battle against the new literature and against philosophical incredulity.\footnote{Desfontaines, \textit{Observations}, 5: 202-211.} Noting that Gresset claimed, in philosophe fashion, that it was not possible to be a professional author because there have always been some “infernal tyrants” persecuting poets, Desfontaines argued that poets such as Virgile, Horace, Philippe Desportes, François de Malherbe, Molière, Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux and Jean Racine had patrons without being the worst for it. Philosophes such as d’Alembert depended on patronage while praising the alleged newly found independence of the man of letters who, putting himself in the service of the public or the nation, freed him from the obligation to cater to the biases and prejudices of a patron. Desfontaines, who rather embodied this ideal of a professional author, celebrated the virtues of patronage similarly to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, another anti-philosophe who, while gaining less than the philosophes by way of patronage, would otherwise praise the virtues of the patronage.\footnote{Edward G. Andrew, \textit{Patrons of Enlightenment} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 135-153.} It would therefore seem that praising or disparaging patronage was in inverse proportion to access to it. While the philosophes, heavily sponsored, criticized the servitude of patronage in order to display publicly their independence, the enemies of the philosophes looked wistfully at patronage as a safeguard against the imbalances of a cultural world that they considered to be rigged in the philosophes’ favor. In other words, such anti-philosophes as Jean-Jacques Rousseau
saw patronage as a way to boost, not to dampen, a writer's independence. Desfontaines historicized the analysis of patronage and pointed out that it was only in the eighteenth-century that “the greatest poet France ever had,” Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, “victim of the hate, jealousy, fury, and baseness of his rivals,” became a sort of “exiled Horace,” as Gresset had described him.\textsuperscript{97} Desfontaines implied that the responsibility for J.-B. Rousseau's sufferings lay not with the tyranny of patrons, but rather with that of prominent men of letters such as Voltaire. Desfontaines translated thus what would be a political problem - the relationship between an author and the government - into a question of cultural criticism, regarding the relationship between an author and what should be his peers. Desfontaines pointed out, as Gresset and Linguet would also do many years later, the ascension of the philosophes as cultural brokers replacing the nobility.

This required a new direction of attack. If Rousseau would have liked to see a more satirical Gresset, Desfontaines asked for a less Epicurean Gresset, less inclined to sing the delights of the countryside, of the duchess de Chaulnes’s garden, where he composed his poems,\textsuperscript{98} or of solitude. Desfontaines hoped to see Gresset more keen on attacking “fools” such as Voltaire. “In order to ruin a wise man, one bigot is enough,” wrote Gresset,\textsuperscript{99} and Desfontaines retorted: “Or maybe, one fool is enough; the antithesis is more just, and the thing more fashionable.”\textsuperscript{100} Unfortunately, continued

\textsuperscript{97} Gresset, \textit{Oeuvres}, 1: 88.
\textsuperscript{98} Gresset's epistle “A ma muse,” dedicated to the Duchess de Chaulnes, had been written at the Château de Chaulnes, in a rich garden described by Montmerqué as “remarquable par d'immenses charmilles, qui étaient disposée avec tant d'art, qu'elles imitaient les différentes ordres d'architecture” (Cayrol, \textit{Essai historique}, 1: 117).
\textsuperscript{100} “Pour perdre un sage il ne faut qu'un Bigot,” wrote Gresset. And Desfontaines answered: “Ou plutôt, il ne faut qu'un fou ; l’anthithese est plus juste, & la chose plus à la mode,” (\textit{Observations sur les écrits modernes}, 5: 202-211).
Desfontaines, Gresset was either Anacreontically, bucolically “voluptuous,” or prone to mock the wrong targets, such as Boileau, accused by a perpetually harmony-seeking Gresset to have made “a talent from the crime of speaking ill of someone.”

Desfontaines agreed that, full of “innate sentiments of honor and virtue,” Gresset was right to condemn libelous writing, which Desfontaines defined as: “Those odious verses full of unbridled license and of atrocious calumnies, verses which stunted authors, miserable comics, and anonymous people like to spread in order to tarnish innocence and virtue and to basely avenge themselves.” But true criticism, such as Boileau imparted, was not the same as satire. The first was rooted in tradition, it had certain rules, preserved certain meanings, and had to be used in order to purge society of errors, conformism, and the “insipid adulation.” Satire was just a form of literary and social parasitism, living on the same literature, language, sociability and moral niceties that it corrupted.

This theme would later reappear in Gresset’s academic attacks on the philosophe culture as thriving on a continuous abuse of language, on emptying words of their meaning by way of double talk and tasteless puns. Gresset would oppose to these what he

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101 “Et Despreaux, ce Chantre harmonieux,/ Sur les Autels du poëtique Empire/ Ne seroit point au nombre de mes Dieux,/ Si de l’opprobre organe impitoyable,/ Toujours couvert d’une gloire coupable,/ Il n’eût chanté que les malheureux noms/ Des Colletets, des Cotins, des Pradons,” (Gresset, Oeuvres, 1: 100).

102 “Ces vers odieux d’une licence effrenée, & pleins de calomnies atroces, que des Auteurs étoffez, que de miserable Comiques, des Anonymes se plaisent à répandre, pour fletrir l’innocence & la vertu, & se venger indignement [...] En adoptant les principes vertueux de M. G. je ne puis m’empêcher de remarquer en même tems qu’il les outre dans la suite, & qu’il semble vouloir justifier la fadeur de quelques Moralistes de nos jours, qui confondent la Critique avec la Satyre [...] l’Auteur ose blamer M. Despreaux d’avoir rendu ridicules les mauvais Ecrivains de son siècle ? [...] Il ne fait pas attention qu’il faut donc faire le même reproche au sage Virgile, à Catulle, à Horace, à Martial, à Juvenal, & à plusieurs autres célèbres Ecrivains de toutes les Nations, qui ont écrit en vers & en prose contre les mauvais Auteurs de leurs tems, & sur-tout contre les corrupteurs du goû,” (Desfontaines, Observations sur les écrits modernes, 5: 207). See Olivier Ferret, La Fureur de nuire: Échanges pamphlétaires entre philosophes et antiphilosophes (1750-1770) (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2007), 56-63.
considered to be old fashioned plain language, and good humored criticism. By that
time, 1750s-1770s, Gresset placed himself firmly in the classical French tradition against
the new philosophe culture, in the same manner in which Jean-Baptiste Rousseau
presented himself on the occasion of this 1730s epistolary exchange in which he had to
defend the reputation of the old masters. Thus, J.-B. Rousseau, incensed by Gresset’s
attack on Boileau, spent two letters, from 26 June and 2 August 1736, instructing the
young author that slandering and mocking are not the same: “The first is an odious vice;
the other is a recognized talent of most people of quality, who always considered a good
joke as one of the most lively entertainments of society.” Irony purged society, and the
republic of letters, of phonies, and as such it helped preserve true sociability. Answering
Gresset, who in a letter to Rousseau seemed to have defended himself by pointing out
some passages in which Boileau looked to have been too harsh with his enemies,
Rousseau testified to Boileau’s Christian mildness and moderation: “I knew him
personally, and I can assure you that there never was a more pure and Christian soul, a
more just and equitable spirit than his own.”

As such, Boileau’s hygienic verses were
useful to the public, while Gresset himself was almost slanderous in his attacks on
Boileau. Therefore, J.-B. Rousseau asked Gresset to excise from his poem the attacks on
Boileau.

103 “La médisance et la raillerie ne doivent point être confondues ; l’une est un vice odieux ; l’autre est un
talent avoué des plus honnêtes gens, chez qui la bonne plaisanterie a toujours été regardée comme un des
plus vifs agréments de la société [...] Je souhaiterais donc de tout mon cœur, monsieur, par la tendre amitié
que j’ai pour vous, et par l’intérêt que je prends à votre gloire, que vous retranchassiez ces quinze ou seize
vers, qui me semblent faire une tache à une pièce aussi excellente que la vôtre l’est en tout le reste [...] “Je l’ai
connu particulièrement, et je puis vous assurer qu’il n’y eut jamais d’âme plus pure et plus chrétienne,
d’esprit plus droit et plus équitable que le sien. Le passage que vous citez pour autoriser le titre de
censeur sauvage, et le terme de fougueux délire, que vous lui appréciez, ne conclut rien contre lui. Il n’avait que 21
ans lorsqu’il fit la pièce où le nom de Rollet est employé, et ce nom flétri en ce temps-là par une information
publique, estoit devenu tellement le synonyme de fripon parmi ses confrères, que cette expression passoit
déjà en proverbe dans le public” (Cayrol, Essai, 1: 120-22).
The reason for this demand was that, engaged in a battle against Voltaire, whom he dubbed a “two-bit rhymer” (“un rimeur de deux jours”), Rousseau needed both the support of the neoclassical tradition embodied in Boileau's writings and new allies such as Gresset. Therefore, Rousseau tried to convince Gresset to write in a more “Horatian” vein. Rousseau offered Gresset an initiation into the satirical neoclassical tradition embodied by Boileau and by J.-B. Rousseau himself, a tradition whose aesthetics combined “Reason” with “Good Sense” while stressing the importance of “rules” for both literature and morals, and of proper language and demeanor, or decorum, on stage and in real life. That neoclassicism's condemnation of “folly” (déraison) had deep affinities with the Christian contempt for the world was a fact that did not escape contemporaries and that set Boileau's raillery apart from Voltaire's own brand of wit. As such, neoclassical precepts, with their insistence on a vraisemblance that amounted to a rejection of nominalism, had anti-libertine or anti-philosophe implications and found expression in linguistic, aesthetic and theological grammars of crystal-like complexity and interpenetration. Gresset himself would explore some of these implications, having to do with moral and linguistic austerity, once he chose to adopt this stance in his

104 Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, Épîtres nouvelles du sieur Rousseau, adressées au P. Brumoy, à Thalie, et à M. Rollin (Amsterdam, 1741 [1736]), 6. In response, Voltaire himself wrote an “Utile examen des trois dernières épîtres du sieur Rousseau” (1736) and a “Vie de M. J. B. Rousseau” (1738) that left nothing to be desired in terms of bitterness. Rousseau's epistles also received, in 1736, an answer in verses, Réponse aux trois Épitres de Rousseau. Attributed to Voltaire or to La Chaussée, the pamphlet attacked Gresset. Guyot de Merville, in a “Letter” accompanying his comedy Mascarades amoureuses, played in 1736, defended Gresset: “C'est aussi parce que M. Gresset rend à M. Rousseau la justice qui lui est due, en l’appelant l’Horace de la France […], que l’ingénieux auteur de Ver-Vert est traité de doux et d’hypocrite” (Mascarades amoureuses [Amsterdam, 1737], x). For new light on Voltaire's attacks on J.-B. Rousseau, see Christiane Mervaud, Le dialogue philosophique (Paris: Presses de l’Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2005), 29.

1750s-1770s academic discourses against the philosophes. For now, even though prompted by J.-B. Rousseau, Gresset refused to fully embrace Boileau's neoclassical tradition that saw satire and conversation as manifestations of *honnêtete* and as a defense against specialized boorishness and dishonest, subversive ideological obstinacy. In 1735, Gresset refused to take part in the polemics between Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, Desfontaines, and Voltaire, but he would eventually achieve his greatest literary success with *Le Méchant*, a comedy about cynical, slanderous “philosophes,” and he would attack the philosophes for their “corruption” of the French language and morals. His initial refusal to enlist in a party would continue in the 1750s-1770s by his careful treading between Jesuits and Jansenists.

In 1735, if *Ver-Vert* brought Gresset literary fame and the attention of the king Louis XV, it also attracted some complaints from the Visitandines nuns. The keeper of the seal Germain-Louis Chauvelin, whom Gresset tried to please by publishing patriotic poems in support of the war of the Polish succession, had a sister in the Visitandine order. Gresset’s *Ver-Vert* poked fun at Visitandines keeping a parrot in their convent. According to Saint François de Sales’ *Constitutions* of the Visitandine order, nuns were expressly forbidden to keep any sort of pets (“useless beasts”) in their convents. Spurred by his sister who resented what she considered Gresset’s slanderous attacks on the Visitandines, an order in which the 1727 *Commission de secours* found “pockets of Jansenist influence” and who therefore had to negotiate the need for governmental

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106 Despite this fact, Desfontaines continued to dedicate long, favorable articles to Gresset’s publications.

financial assistance with its own religious orthodoxy already suspect, Germain-Louis Chauvelin complained to Gresset’s Jesuit superiors. As a consequence, Gresset was dispatched from Louis le Grand, in Paris, to La Flèche, in Normandy.

More than Ver-Vert, it was La Chartreuse, a poem singing the melancholy charms of Gresset’s “cell” at Louis le Grand, that worried the Jesuits. If Ver-Vert contained some careless banter, the solitary reveries of La Chartreuse sported, in their manuscript form, an attack on the Parlement. Gresset’s first, manuscript version of La Chartreuse circulated among a public eager to read any new poems of the Jesuit prodigy. In this first version, later printed in various authorized or pirated editions of his work, Gresset denounced the barristers as “mercenary advocates of true and false” things (“l’orateur mercenaire du faux et de la vérité”) and accused the Parlement of being a “den of chicanery” whose inhabitants dared to judge the monarchy and the Church in an “Anglican” manner, that is sophistically “skewing the laws of the Immortal” according to secular and secularizing ideas. According to Gresset, the Parlement was dedicated to subverting the throne and the Catholic church in the name of a “foreign” type of “hate.” Read by a Parisian public already inflamed by the conflict between the Jansenists and the Parlement on one side, and the Jesuits and the Court on the other, these verses caused a sensation in Paris and would be quoted against the Parlement in the following decades, by Jesuits fighting the suppression of their Society, or by turncoat philosophes by the time of the French Revolution. But in 1735, alerted by public

110 The Jesuit André Christophe Balbany, a defender of the Jesuits against Henri-Philippe Chauvelin, Gresset’s friend, would quote Gresset verses to support the Jesuit cause in Tout se dira ou L’esprit des
rumors, the Jesuits asked Gresset to suppress them from his poem, fearing another conflict with the Parlement.

On 18 November 1735, Father Claude Bertrand Tachereau de Linyères (or, Taschereau de Linières) (1658-1746), the Jesuit confessor of the king Louis XV since 1722, wrote to Cardinal André-Hercule Fleury about the measures taken by the Jesuit Society against Gresset. De Linyères informed Fleury, chief minister from 1726 until his death in 1743, that the general lieutenant of police René Hérault de Fontaine was already “informed” about the case of Gresset: “We have a young man, named Gresset, son of a very honorable man from Amiens, a young man who has a true talent for French poetry; and since good judgment is not always joined to this talent, and since reading the French poets does not usually inspire pious thoughts, this young man, after making poems on indifferent topics, accidentally made some verses containing very reprehensible things.” After mentioning that on the occasion of the commotion caused by Ver Vert Gresset seemed to be truly repentant and promised not to write any other “French verses except by orders from his superiors,” De Linyères informed Fleury that Gresset recidivated with

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magistrats destructeurs, analysé dans la demande en profit de défaut de Me. le Goullon, Procureur Général du Parlement de Metz (Amsterdam, 1763), 165-66. For Balbany’s polemics against H.-Ph. Chauvelin, see André Christophe Balbany, Acceptation du défi hazardé par l’auteur d’un libelle intitulé Replique aux apologies des Jesuites (Avignon, 1762). A contrite, post-Revolutionary Catholic anti-philosophe, Jean-François de La Harpe considered these verses to be “vigorouux,” and prescient in their attack on one of the institutions that were responsible for the French Revolution. La Harpe also pointed out that at the time of their publication they were probably dismissed as the work of a “Jesuit.” See La Harpe, Lycée, ou Cours de littérature ancienne et Moderne 16 vols (Paris, 1799-1805), 8: 166.

La Chartreuse, a poem containing verses of a nature to allow the Parlement to legitimately declare itself “shocked” (“très-propres a choquer avec raison le Parlement”). The only support of the Jesuits was Hérault, who, due to “his vigilance” and to his “affection” for the Jesuits, had confiscated the whole edition before the book had the chance to leave the publisher’s shop. In consequence, Linyères asked Fleury to talk this matter over with Hérault and see “what has to be done.” Having already read Ver Vert (which he rather liked), as well as La Chartreuse and Les Ombres, Fleury forwarded Linyères’s letter to the lieutenant-general de police Hérault on 23 November 1735. Fleury was rather amused by the whole affair, but noted anyway that Gresset was a "libertin" not suited to the monastic life and that the Jansenist publication Nouvelles ecclésiastiques would have a field day attacking the Jesuit order through Gresset’s frivolous poems. Hérault forwarded Fleury’s letter to Gresset’s Jesuit superiors, and on 26 November 1735 Father Lavaud assured Hérault and Fleury that the Jesuit superiors

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112 “Monseigneur, j’ai l’honneur d’écrire à votre Éminence pour une affaire qui nous intéresse, et dont M. Hérault est instruit. Nous avons un jeune homme, nommé Gresset, fils d’un fort honnête homme d’Amiens, qui a un vrai talent pour la poésie française; et comme le jugement n’est pas toujours joint à ce talent, et que la lecture des poètes français n’inspire pas ordinairement l’esprit de piété, ce jeune homme, après avoir fait des pièces de vers sur des sujets indifférents, s’est échappé à en faire quelques-unes où il y a des choses très répréhensibles [...] Cette pièce est tombée entre les mains d’un libraire qui l’a imprimée; mais M. Hérault, par sa vigilance et par son affection pour nous, a empêché qu’elle ne sortit de sa boutique,” in Saint-Albin Berville, “Correspondance relative à Gresset,” Mémoires de l’Académie des sciences, des lettres et des arts d’Amiens (Amiens, 1839), 69-75, 71-72.

113 “Voilà une lettre [...] au sujet de ce jeune homme dont vous m’avez donné trois petits ouvrages. Celui du Perroquet est très-joli et passe bien les deux autres; mais il est bien libertin; et fera très-certainement des affaires aux Jésuites, s’ils ne s’en défont. Tout le talent de ce garçon est tourné du côté du libertinage et de ce qu’il y a de plus licencieux, et on ne corrige point de pareils génies. Le plus court et le plus sur est de le renvoyer, car les Nouvelles ecclésiastiques triompheront sur un homme de ce caractère” (in Berville, “Correspondance relative à Gresset,” 73-74).
decided to follow Fleury’s “wise advice” and that the whole matter would be brought to a swift resolution (“sous quatre ou cinq jours ce sera chose tout a fait exécutée”).

Therefore, by December 1735, after Cardinal Fleury’s intervention, Gresset was expelled from the Jesuit Society into a Parisian literary world that eagerly waited to embrace or to devour him. Gresset was something of a cause célèbre, and the noise of his leaving the Jesuits would be overcome only by the noise caused by his refusal to strike back at them. The literary journals were not indifferent to Gresset’s poems. Thus, from Amsterdam, the Jansenist Claude Pierre Goujet’s Bibliothèque Francoise ou Histoire Littéraire de la France, commenting on La Chartreuse, les Ombres, and Adieux aux jésuites, adressés à M. l’abbé Marquet, saluted the “brilliance” and the grace of a poet who knew how to leave the Jesuits without scandal. That same year, Goujet’s publication signaled to its readers Gresset’s growing reputation and sure if careless talent, and in 1737 it would still be writing favorably on Gresset’s Epître au P. Bougeant.

Despite Gresset’s amicable break with the Jesuits, his literary fame was perceived by some as a succès de scandale, although La Chartreuse was considered definitely superior to Ver Vert by many people among whom Jean Baptiste Nicolas Formont, one of Voltaire’s friends, who otherwise held the opinion that Gresset should frequent the right literary circles and salons in order to get rid of his Jesuit pedantry and to polish his rugged edges. Mme du Châtelet also noted on 7 January 1736 in a letter to Francesco

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114 In Berville, “Correspondance relative à Gresset,” 74-75.
115 Goujet, Bibliothèque Francoise, 22: 1st part (1736), 375.
116 Goujet, Bibliothèque Francoise, 24: 1st part (1736), 185; 25: 1st part (1737), 180-81.
117 In October 1735, Formont wrote to Cideville to announce to him the apparition of La Chartreuse: “Il est du p. Gresset, auteur du vert vert. Il a quitté les jésuites depuis peu. Ce nouvel ouvrage est beaucoup meilleur que vert vert” (D968).
Algarotti that Gresset was a better Jesuit than poet.\textsuperscript{118} Jean Bernard abbé Le Blanc (1707-1781) was a devout Catholic yet an enlightened writer on such disparate subjects as political economy, art criticism, and gastronomy. Although his physiocratic *Lettres d'un Français sur les Anglais* (1745) and his translation of David Hume's *Political Discourses* (1752) would enjoy their fair share of success, Le Blanc would also become one of the writers embittered by a perpetual quest for a place among the members of the French Academy which, despite Mme de Pompadour's patronage, he failed to obtain.\textsuperscript{119} Writing to Président Jean Bouhier on 30 April 1736, Le Blanc explained his literary obscurity by his refusal to write “against the Church,” as did Gresset. Talent and literary merits were not enough for a successful literary career, complained Le Blanc: “You have to write against Religion and morals or do something extremely stupid in order to make people talk about you; write a romance in a monastery, or some pretty little verses as a Jesuit, become de-frocked after awhile and here you are, a great man, a man in high demand, the delight of any late night supper.”\textsuperscript{120} It seems though that Bouhier enjoyed Gresset's poems for their own merits, and while not disregarding the ecclesiastical mishaps of

\textsuperscript{118} “Le Gresset me paraît à la mode ; je n’ai point vu sa Chartreuse, dont on dit du bien ; mais pour Vert-vert et le Lutrin vivant ils méritaient qu’on le laissât jésuite” (D981).


\textsuperscript{120} “Ici pour faire fortune ce n’est pas assez qu’de avoir du mérite & des talents. Il faut de plus écrire contre la Religion & les mœurs ou faire quelque grande sottise qui fasse parler de vous ; avoir fait un Roman dans un Cloitre, ou de petits Vers gaillards étant jésuite, Quelque tems après quittés le froc & vous voila un grand homme, un homme recherche, un homme à faire les délices de tous les petits soupers” (D1068).
Gresset, he praised the young ex-Jesuit whom he considered, unlike Voltaire, to be more witty than to Du Cerceau. In a 3 January 1736 letter to Joseph de Seytres, marquis de Caumont, Bouhier wrote that Gresset had perhaps ironically exaggerated his praise of the Jesuits in his *Adieux aux jésuites*, and that, judging by a manuscript piece that Bouhier read and considered a very well turned compliment of the bishop of Luçon, this bishop was right to take the young poet under his wing. On 11 January, Caumont, a Provençal antiquarian, answered that Gresset's pro-Jesuit effusions were not ironical but merely exaggerated, and that this made *Adieux aux jésuites* such a bad literary piece that he had refused for a while to believe in Gresset's literary paternity.

Caumont's epistolary network comprised people as different as Voltaire, Bouhier, the Jesuit Brumoy, Cardinal Fleury, the chancellor Henri-François d'Aguesseau, the antiquarian Scipione Maffei, the reform Catholic historian Lodovico Antonio Muratori, and the medievalist Jean-Baptiste de la Curne de Sainte-Palaye. Answering this letter, on 21 January 1736, Bouhier sent to Caumont the manuscript “Vers envoyés par le sieur Gresset à M. l'évêque de Luçon” together with a copy of an old seal. In the symbolic economy of the Enlightenment public sphere, antiquities and new verses circulated along the same channels and among the same people who were equally interested in the value of circulation of an old ring or a

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121 “Vous jugez très bien du caractère de l'auteur de la *Chartreuse*. Il a pourtant plus de sel et de tour que le P. du Cerceau. Il vint de paraître de sa façon deux pièces nouvelles. L'une contient ses adieux à la Société [*Adieux aux jésuites, adressés à M. l'abbé Marquet*, 1735, in-12, 12 pages.], où il a pour ses anciens confrères des louanges si fortes, qu'on est tenté de les croire un peu ironiques. L'autre est un compliment à l'évêque de Luçon, qui l'a pris sous sa protection depuis sa sortie des jésuites. Cette dernière pièce, qui n'est que manuscrite, est joliment tournée" (Correspondance littéraire du Président Bouhier, eds. Henri Duranton, Jean Marcilhet-Jaubert and Bernard Yon, 14 vols (Saint-Étienne: Université de Saint-Étienne, 1974-2011), 6 (Lettres du Marquis de Caumont, 1732 – 1745): 116-117.

122 “Si les louanges qu'il donne à ses confrères dans ses adieux à la Société ne sont pas ironiques, elles sont du moins bien exagérées. J'ai cru pendant quelque temps que cette pièce était faussement attribuée à l'auteur de *Ver-Vert*" (Correspondance littéraire du Président Bouhier, 6: 118).

young poet. After Gresset left the Jesuits, it seems that the interest of those following
Gresset’s story was focused on the issue of what powerful patron would take him under
his wing. And according to Bouhier, the bishop of Luçon was interested in the fate of the
young ex-Jesuit, and had obtained for Gresset a place as “inscriptionnaire de la ville de
Paris,” with an yearly income of six hundred crowns (écus). 124

Michel Celse Roger de Bussy Rabutin (1669 - 3 November 1736), the bishop of
Luçon (1723-1736), was a prelate without faith and an academician without works.
Nicknamed “le dieu de la bonne compagnie,” celebrated by Voltaire for his sociability,
Bussy Rabutin persecuted the Jansenists for not accepting the bull Unigenitus.125 Praised
by Gresset as both a Horace and a Mecenas,126 Bussy Rabutin was elected to the French
Academy on 21 February 1732 without any published work to his credit, although he
published Mme de Sevigné’s manuscript letters in 1725. As a Mecenas, it seems that
Bussy Rabutin did indeed provide some employment to Gresset, since Bouhier’s
statement can be corroborated by Father Lavaud’s late November 1735 letter to Hérault.
Lavaud assured the chief of police that people of influence were trying to find Gresset an
honorable way of life.127

124 “Voici l’empreinte d’un cachet antique gravé sur une cornaline […] J’y joins le compliment fait par le
sieur Gresset à M. l’évêque de Luçon. Ce prélât lui a procuré l’emploi d’inscriptionnaire de la ville de Paris,
qui lui vaudra six cents écus de rente à ce qu’on dit. Cela vaudra un peu mieux que la chartreuse dont il nous
a donné une si jolie description” (Correspondance littéraire du Président Bouhier, 6: 120).
125 Jean le Rond D’Alembert, “Suite des Éloges historiques,” in Oeuvres complètes, 5 vols (Paris: Belin,
1821-1822), 3: 521.
126 Gresset opened the poem by recalling the glory of the famous memorialist Roger de Bussy Rabutin, the
bishop’s father: “Vous dont le goût héréditaire,/ Et par les grâces mêmes orné,/ Aux talents d’un illustre
père/ Joint l’agrément de Sévigné” (Gresset, “Vers envoyés par le sieur Gresset à M. l’évêque de Luçon,” in
Oeuvres choisies, 226-27).
127 “Quelques personnes de considération s’intéressent, à ce qu’on dit, a lui ménager un honnête
établissement” (Cayrol, Essai, 1: 63-68).
Bussy Rabutin was a familiar of the circle of the duc and duchess of Picquigny (or de Chaulnes, as of 1744). The duc de Picquigny was a member of the Academie des Sciences and on very good terms with Mme de Pompadour.\textsuperscript{128} The hôtel de Chaulnes was frequented not only by Bussy Rabutin and by the Chauvelins, but also by the bishop of Amiens, Orléans de la Motte, Gresset’s future confessor (“directeur de conscience”).\textsuperscript{129} Louis-Elisabeth de la Vergne, count de Tressan (1705-1783), remembered that Gresset was already a regular visitor of the hôtel de Chaulnes a merely three months after he left the Jesuits. Tressan also remembered deploring with Gresset the loss of Bussy Rabutin, a fact confirmed by Gresset’s verses on the death of Bussy Rabutin, dedicated to Tressan.\textsuperscript{130} What seems to have cemented their friendship was Gresset’s initiation into Freemasonry, in the Saint Thomas at Louis d’Argent lodge. The reality of this initiation has to be accepted cautiously, since historians of Freemasonry found only one instance in which Gresset explicitly mentioned Freemasonry. In a letter to the same Tressan, Gresset ended by invoking “la grâce du Dieu des Francs-Maçons.”\textsuperscript{131} However, the same text published by V. de Beauvillé in his edition of Gresset’s \textit{Poesies inédites} lacks the final invocation.\textsuperscript{132} Gresset’s links with Freemasonry seem also to have been limited to his Parisian period, between 1735 and 1749. After Gresset settled in Amiens, both he and Orléans de la Motte seemed to have severed any relationship with Freemasonic circles.\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{128} Wogue, \textit{J.-B.-L. Gresset}, 83-106. See also Antoine, \textit{Louis XV}, 495.
\textsuperscript{129} Wogue, \textit{J.-B.-L. Gresset}, 83-106.
\textsuperscript{131} Tressan, \textit{Oeuvres posthumes}, 1: 217.
Among those who kept an eye on Gresset’s Parisian movements was Voltaire who, unimpressed at first, liked the *Chartreuse*, and by January 1736 settled for being happy that Gresset left the Jesuits: "A poet more, a Jesuit less, that is a great good in the world." If Madame Du Châtelet resented Gresset’s success and hoped that Voltaire would not have to share his public with Gresset, Voltaire kept an eye on Gresset hoping to bring the young ex-Jesuit poet into his fold. After leaving the Jesuits, and while frequenting the hôtel de Chaulnes, it seems that Gresset became amorously involved with the actress Jeanne Françoise Quinault, who on 3 April 1736 received from Voltaire a letter in which he declared himself happy for Gresset’s relationship with Quinault. Voltaire was anxious to let Jeanne Françoise Quinault know that he was not the author of an anonymous poem, probably the versified answer to J.-B. Rousseau’s *Épîtres nouvelles* that we already discussed, attacking J.-B. Rousseau, Marivaux and Gresset. Defending himself from authoring that anonymous libel, Voltaire declared that he could not have written such a poem since he was not given to publishing anything anonymously. Moreover, Voltaire declared not having anything against any of the three aforementioned authors.

In fact, Voltaire’s quarrel with J.-B. Rousseau was of public notoriety. And, in order to sound out the public or to throw the censors off the scent, Voltaire also used to

134 D915. Voltaire would remain unmoved by Gresset’s poem, as indicated a letter from 10 April 1773 to Charles Bordes whose poem *Parapilla* (1776) he compared favorably with Gresset’s *Ver-vert* (D18303).
135 D985 (10 January 1735).
136 “Je n’ay point lu l’adieu aux révérends pères mais je suis fort aise qu’il les ait quittez. Un poète de plus, et un jesuite de moins, c’est un grand bien dans le monde” (D 992).
137 “J’espère que ce n’est pas le même public qui pleure à *Alzire*, et qui applaudit à *Vert-vert*” (D1065).
138 “Mon dieu qu’il nous aura d’obligation, qu’il est heureux d’être entre vos mains, qu’il doit vous aimer, et travailler pour vous ! Comptez à jamais sur le tendre dévouement de ce Gresset” (D1051).
139 “On dit que dans cette réponse, Marivaux et Gresset sont maltraités. Je n’ay aucun sujet que je sache de me plaindre d’eux, et quand je fais un ouvrage, je l’avoue hautement” (D1143 [7 September 1736]).
publish things anonymously or to pass them off as written by somebody else. Thus, in October 1736, Voltaire convinced Quinault and some of his other friends that his comedy *L’Enfant prodigue* was written by Gresset, arguing that the “title is totally Jesuitical” and that Gresset himself was a prodigal son returning to the secular world that he once left for the monastery.\textsuperscript{140} If Desfontaines and Frederic the Great correctly judged that it was Voltaire who wrote that comedy,\textsuperscript{141} the *Mercure de France* (December 1736, II: 2933-41) and Prevost’s *Le Pour et contre* (X:142) criticized the comedy as the unfinished work of some young author. Madame Du Châtelet wrote to Francesco Algarotti that the comedy was a success and that Voltaire’s trick was successful and his reputation remained unscathed. \textsuperscript{142}

Voltaire’s interest in Gresset had also to do with the fact that Frederick the Great wanted Gresset in Berlin and Voltaire hoped to gain the patronage of Frederick and the gratitude of Gresset by recruiting the poet for the prince. Fashioning himself as the philosopher Libanius to Frederic’s “Julian,” Voltaire wrote on 10 September 1736 to a certain merchant Berger, a secretary to Victor Amadeus de Savoy, Prince de Carignan, as well as a contractor for the French army and editor of Voltaire’s *Henriade* and *L’Enfant prodigue*,\textsuperscript{143} that Frederic wanted him to come to Berlin but that he could not leave his friends, unlike Gresset who, if Frederick was to believe Voltaire, did not care about his

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{140} “Il y a pourtant grande apparence que c’est luy qui a fait cet enfant. Il me semble que le titre est tout jésuitique. De plus ce Gresset est un enfant prodigie revenu au monde qu’il avoit abandonné. Enfin c’est Gresset, je n’en démors point” (D1167).}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{141} Desfontaines, *Observations*, 6 (17 October 1736):312. Frederick the Great wrote to Voltaire: “Je crois avoir porté un jugement juste sur l’Enfant prodigue. Il s’y trouve des vers que j’ai d’abord reconnus pour les vôtres ; mais il y en a d’autres qui m’ont paru plutôt l’ouvrage d’un écolier que d’un maître” (D1350).}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{142} “La petite comédie […] a été reçue presque aussi bien qu’Alzire ; mais ce qu’il y a de piquant au milieu de tout cela, c’est que comme on connaît point l’auteur, on la donne à Piron, à Gresset, à tous les poètes possibles. On nome aussi Voltaire ; mais j’espère que ce ne sont pas les mêmes gens” (D1175).}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{143} Gabrielle Émilie Le Tonnelier de Breteuil Du Châtelet, *Lettres*, ed. Eugène Asse (Paris: Charpentier, 1878), 167, n.1.}
\end{footnotes}
friends. In fact Gresset studiously avoided going to Berlin, despite Voltaire’s frantic attempts to find and deliver Gresset. “Try and find the Prussian Gresset”, wrote Voltaire on 28 November to Berger who had the mission to apprehend Gresset and send him to Berlin as Voltaire’s envoy. Voltaire asked Berger to instruct Gresset that in going to Berlin he would arrive in a place where the courtiers disliked J.-B. Rousseau and religious hypocrisy, but where they liked him, Voltaire, “as man and as poet,” as well as “philosophy and the freedom of thought.” Voltaire wanted to transform Gresset into a sort of anti-Jesuit poster boy, to turn him against Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, who supported Gresset’s early efforts, and to advertise him as a new victory of the philosophical spirit. But Gresset eluded being captured in this role, and in February 1737 he was still roaming free in Paris, while Voltaire’s people, and even Jean-Baptiste Rousseau’s envoys, were unable to pinpoint his exact location.

Soured by Gresset’s independence, which only confirmed him in his dislike of what he saw as a sly, “Jesuitical” Gresset, Voltaire wrote on 14 February 1737 to his friend and occasional editor Nicolas-Claude Thieriot, in Leiden, that he did not see “the new Nothing of the exjes[uit].” The “nothing” in question was Gresset’s fifth epistle, Au P. Bougeant, Jésuite, a Horatian satire against “the glitzy baubles” (“la brillante bagatelle”), “the posters and the pamphlets” (“les affiches et les brochures”) that preoccupied the Parisian public sphere, a poem that opened the way for Gresset’s later

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144 “Si Gresset va à Berlin, apparemment qu’il aime moins ses amis que moi” (D1145). For the same rhetoric, see Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, D’Alembert, 85-90.
145 “Il va dans une cour ou Rousseau est regardé comme un faquin de versificateur, dans une cour, où l’on aime la philosophie & la liberté de penser, où l’on déteste le cagotisme, & où l’on m’aime comme homme & poète. Faites adroitement la leçon à son cœur & à son esprit” (D1121).
146 D 1568 (François Marie de Marsy to Jean Baptiste Rousseau, 1 August 1738).
147 “Le nouveau Rien de L’exjes” (D1283).
academic and dramatic denunciations of the *philosophe* culture.\textsuperscript{149} Far from discursively embracing luxury, gossip, and the elite or merely snobbish salon culture of *le tout Paris*, as Voltaire did in his 1735 poem on the *Mondain*, the seemingly frolicsome Gresset made up in writing about the quiet delights of monastic isolation and of bucolic country life what he lost in leaving the Jesuits. Attacking in Boileau’s manner the vanities of Parisian literary (low-)life, Gresset refused to play the role assigned to him by Voltaire of an ex-Jesuit converted to *philosophie*. Jean-Baptiste-Nicolas Formont, the lover of Marie-Anne de Vichy Chamrond marquise de Deffand, and one of the key members of Voltaire’s literary network, intuitively grasping Voltaire’s displeasure with Gresset, started to send the signal of Gresset’s literary failure from Paris to the provinces. At the beginning of February, Formont wrote to Cideville that “le gros de Paris” found Gresset’s epistle to Bougeant “bad,”\textsuperscript{150} and had good reason for doing so, since the epistle did not “say anything.” Formont announced that he was ready to stop reading Gresset’s work in case the poet would not produce something better.\textsuperscript{151}

Formont echoed Voltaire’s readiness to abandon Gresset, in whom he did not find the *philosophe* convert he had hoped for. But *Krönprinz* Frederick entertained a rather different opinion. In a letter from 6 July 1737, Frederick answered Voltaire’s bitter remarks on French literary life by praising Gresset and other contemporary authors. Beside Gresset, it turned out that Frederick enjoyed the works of Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, Claude Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon (Crébillon fils) (1707-1777), author of licentious novels and light poetry educated by the Jesuits at Louis le Grand like his contemporary Gresset, the libertine poet and librettist Pierre-Joseph-Justin Bernard (1708-1775), whom Voltaire nicknamed “Gentil-Bernard.” Frederick also mentioned that


\textsuperscript{150} D1278.

\textsuperscript{151} “Mauvaise, elle ne dit Rien [...] Enfin s’il ne fait pas mieux que cela je l’abandonne” (D1284).
Voltaire’s works also proved that the “degradation of literary taste” was not so widespread in France as Voltaire claimed it to be. Frederick believed that, if Gresset wrote less accomplished poems than Voltaire, it was only because he had a lot of spirit and his genius could not be bound by rules: bursting with ideas, Gresset sometimes neglected certain classical grammatical assiduities.\(^{152}\) Frederick’s adroit flattering reassured Voltaire and something of the Prussian prince’s admiration for Gresset trickled down to Voltaire, who suddenly discovered the poet in what he had considered until that moment as merely an ex-Jesuit. In a letter from 15 February 1738 to Frederick, Voltaire launched himself into a full-fledged digression containing some subtly condescending praise for the purity of the style “gressetique,” which he found lacking mainly in “force” and “concision.”\(^{153}\) A few days later, a more ironic Voltaire wrote to Thieriot that he had not seen the last “gressade”\(^{154}\) and that Thieriot should send it to him only if he considered it “worthy of the attention” of Madame du Châtelet, who appears to have been a staunch enemy of Gresset.\(^{155}\) Although Voltaire had found it useful to pass *L’Enfant prodigue* off as Gresset’s work, it seems that Mme du Châtelet’s worries that he might lose his public to Gresset rubbed off on Voltaire, who started fretting about his brand. Writing to Thieriot on 22 March 1738 in response to news about

\(^{152}\) “Il me semble que la dépravation du goût n’est pas si générale en France que vous le croyez. Les Français connaissent encore un apollon à Cirey, des Fontenelle, des Crébillon, des Rollin pour la clarté et la beauté du style historique ; des d’Olivet pour les traductions ; des Bernard et des Gresset, dont les muses naturelles et polies peuvent très bien remplacer les Chaulieu et La Fare [...] Si Gresset pêche quelquefois contre l’exactitude, il est excusable relativement au feu qui l’emporte ; plein de ses pensées, il néglige les mots. Que la nature fait peu d’ouvrages accomplis ! et qu’on voit peu de Voltaires !” (D1350).

\(^{153}\) “Je voudrois que tous nos petits rimailleurs pussent lire ce que votre altesse royale m’a écrit sur le style marotique, et sur le ridicule d’exprimer en vieux mots des choses qui ne méritent d’être exprimé en aucune langue. Gresset ne tombe point dans ce défaut. Il écrit purement, il a des vers heureux et faciles, il ne luy manque que de la force, un peu de variété, et surtout un style concis, car il dit d’ordinaire en dix vers ce qu’il ne faudroit dire qu’en deux. Mais votre esprit supérieur sent tout cela mieux que moi” (D1452).

\(^{154}\) The “gressade” in question was perhaps the *Épitre de M. Gresset à M. Orry* (Paris: Prault père, 1738).

\(^{155}\) D1462.
some poems circulating under Voltaire’s name, Voltaire lost his temper at the thought that his style could be confused with that of poets such as Gresset, whom he treated as a “poor devil” (“pauvre diable”) an expression that would come back in his later famous satire against Gresset: “What then is that junk on happiness? Is it not the product of some miserable individual prattling about happiness, like Gresset and other poor devils who work up a sweat in their attics singing about voluptuous pleasures and idleness?”

Voltaire’s irritation was again innocently aggravated by Frederick’s enthusiasm for Gresset. On 28 March 1738, Frederick wrote Voltaire that Gresset’s “muse is without a doubt one of foremost muses in the whole French Parnassus”. Although noting that Gresset was too “lazy/idle”, especially when it came to tending the grammar of his poems, Frederick could not be bothered with problems of French grammar, which he himself did not master very well. Frederick did not argue that Gresset had a “correct” French style, only that he had a lively style. Moreover, Gresset was a patriot, and his older Ode sur l’amour de la patrie proved to be one of the future patriot king’s favorite poems. “Gresset wrote an Ode on the love of the fatherland which I immensely liked,” concluded Frederick. This simple avowal made an eager-to-please-Frederick Voltaire launch into a frantic search for Gresset’s Ode. “Please send me an ode by the ex-Jesuit Gresset which, I hear, is very good,” wrote Voltaire to Berger almost instantly. On 23 April, Voltaire had not yet found the piece, so he wrote to his faithful Trompette Thieriot

156 “Qu’es-ce que c’est donc que cette drogue sur le bonheur ? N’es-ce point quelque misérable qui babille sur la félicité, comme les Gressets, et d’autres pauvres diables qui suent sang et eau dans leurs greniers pour chanter la volupté et la paresse ?” (D1471).
157 “La muse de Gresset, [...] à présent, est une des premières du Parnasse français. Cet aimable poète a le don de s’exprimer avec beaucoup de facilité. Ses épithètes sont justes et nouvelles ; avec cela il a des tours qui lui sont propres ; on aime ses ouvrages, malgré leur défauts. Il est trop peu soigné, sans contredit, et la paresse, dont il fait tant l’éloge, est la plus grande rivale de sa réputation [...] Gresset a fait une Ode sur l’amour de la patrie, qui m’a plu infiniment” (D1475).
158 “Je vous prie de me faire voir une ode de l’ex-jésuite Gresset, qu’on dit être très belle” (D1481).
sounding him out about the quality of Gresset’s piece.\textsuperscript{159} It is hard to know if Voltaire found and read Gresset’s ode, but on 20 May 1738 he wrote to Frederick a letter in which he admiringly compared the prince’s verses with Gresset’s: “It is very difficult to make French verses, and yet you compose them at Remusberg as if Chaulieu, Chapelle, and Gresset have the honor of dinning with your royal highness.”\textsuperscript{160}

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Gresset’s reputation was that of a laid back person, of a “paresseux,” of an eminently sociable man devoid of all ambition. Voltaire therefore considered Gresset “young,” a man without the ambition and the staying power of a craftsman such as himself. Voltaire confided to Frederick in June 1738 that, contrary to what Gresset said about the impossibility of writing poems after the age of thirty, he felt that it was precisely after that age that a poet was mature enough to give his full measure.\textsuperscript{161} Frederick agreed and recommended Voltaire for his “laborious life” (“vie laborieuse”), which he opposed to Gresset’s “mollesse.”\textsuperscript{162} Yet, Gresset’s tragedy \textit{Édouard III} indicated that Gresset was a serious craftsman, not just a lucky versifier, and in January and February 1740 Voltaire reported to Frederick about the relative success of Gresset’s play, which had, he assured Frederic, some nice bits.\textsuperscript{163} In March 1740 Gresset sent to Voltaire a copy of his \textit{Édouard III} accompanied by a letter which is unfortunately lost. Voltaire answered with a pat on Gresset’s back, praising his tragedy, defending its “murder on the scene” by declaring it necessary and natural given the story, and, above all, by assuring Gresset that he did not have a hand in any of the anonymous

\textsuperscript{159} “On me parle d’une ode excellente de Gresset sur L’amour de la patrie, et d’une épitre du père Brumoy sur la liberté. Peut-être sont ce de vieilles nouvelles qui arrivent tout usées” (D1483).
\textsuperscript{160} “Des vers français sont très difficiles à faire en France, et vous en composez à Remusberg comme si Chaulieu, Chapelle, Gresset avaient l’honneur de souper avec votre altesse royale” (D1506).
\textsuperscript{161} “Je ne dirai pas avec mr. Gresset que passé trente ans on ne doit plus faire des vers: au contraire ce n’est guère qu’à cet âge qu’on en fait ordinairement de bons” (D1526).
\textsuperscript{162} D2134, D2138.
\textsuperscript{163} D2149, D2169.
attacks on him mentioned by Gresset. Voltaire felt compelled to assure Gresset that he wished no harm to Gresset, whom he did not envy in any way, sensible as he was to true literary merit: “The more you will deserve my jealousy, the less jealous I will be.”

In March-April 1740, Voltaire announced to his circle that, since Gresset had sent him a copy of *Édouard III*, he felt obliged “to speak well” of it, in “polite” and “friendly” terms, and that Gresset was a “good guy” (“bon diable”) after all. Gresset seemed to move in a direction more akin to what Voltaire had in mind, since he decided to flatter both Voltaire with his letter and copy of *Édouard III*, and the now king Frederick II with a manuscript “Ode au Roi de Prusse sur son couronnement,” to which Frederick would answer with an “Ode à M. Gresset.” Voltaire was happy that Gresset looked as though he was starting to move in the right direction, but he could not be entirely sure of the young poet’s allegiance. For Voltaire, Gresset was first a potential recruit in the philosophe “party.” Secondly, gaining Gresset’s trust and then ushering him off to Berlin meant removing a dangerous rival from Paris as well as strengthening Voltaire’s relationship with Frederick II, who liked Gresset and who might have rewarded Voltaire for procuring him such a rare poetic “commodity.” Finally, Gresset was a potential rival, whose star should not be allowed to shine too brightly or by itself. Voltaire’s unease regarding Gresset transpired in verses such as those he sent to Frederick II in December 1740, when he half-mockingly asked the king of Prussia not to forget him but to bestow his favors equally on both Gresset and him. All in all, it was the second move that worked better for Voltaire, since a stint in Berlin, where Voltaire was well regarded,

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164 “Vous trouverez toujours en moi un homme qui applaudira sincèrement à vos talents et qui se réjouira de vos succès. Plus vous mériterez ma jalousie, et moins je serai jaloux” (D 2191).
165 D2193, D2195.
166 Cayrol, *Essai*, 1: 159-172. Voltaire dedicated his own coronation ode to Frederick II in June 1740.
167 “Hélas, que Gresset est heureux!/ Mais grand roi, charmante coquine,/ Ne m’abandonnez pas pour un autre poète,/ Donnez vos faveurs à tous deux” (D2392). See also D 2493, D 2522.
might have exposed Gresset to a *philosophe* atmosphere as well as to convince him about the extent of Voltaire’s influence, and thus of the advantages of joining his followers.

By November 1740, Voltaire started working harder to convince Gresset to go to Berlin. In January 1741, Voltaire wrote to Nicolas Claude Thieriot that if only Gresset would go to Berlin he would convince himself of Voltaire’s good intentions towards him, good intentions that, for some mysterious reasons, Gresset seemed to doubt. Therefore Voltaire asked Thieriot to impress upon Gresset’s imagination the truly Parisian grace of Berlin princesses and the delights and esteem that awaited Gresset at the court of Frederick II, especially since Voltaire had put in a good word for him. In January 1741, Voltaire announced to Helvétius with whom Gresset was probably in conversation at Mme de Graffigny that Gresset could not possibly resist such enticements and that he would probably take the road to Berlin soon. In October 1741, Voltaire announced again to Thieriot that Gresset would “fill” Voltaire’s place in Berlin ("remplir ma place à Berlin"). In the 1750s Louis XV would take umbrage at what he saw as the King of Prussia encouraging a French brain drain and making “a lot of noise with very little money” by investing in upstart intellectuals. Helping Frederick II’s recruiting efforts

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168 “Je vous prie de voir Mr Gresset. S’il savoit comme j’ay parle de luy au roy, il m’aieroit un peu. J’espère qu’il sera un des ornements de la cour de Berlin. Il s’apercevra que je connois l’estime pour les talents, et non la jalousie” (D 2366).

169 D 2397.

170 D2551. By the 1750s, count Hermann Woldemar Schmettow wrote count J. H. E. Bernsdorff (1712-1772), a Hannovarian diplomat who served Denmark as its ambassador in Paris (1744-1750) and from 1754 as Denmark’s foreign affairs minister and main policy maker, that lacking the sufficient means to attract Gresset to Copenhaguen, they could settle for a La Beaumelle. See Laurent Angliviel de La Beaumelle, *Correspondance générale*, eds. Hubert Bost, Claude Lauriol, Hubert Angliviel de La Beaumelle 6 vols (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2005- ), 4: 302 (LB 1003).

were influential intellectual power brokers such as Voltaire, who acted as recruiting agents for the court in Berlin.\textsuperscript{172} By 1742, it became clear even to Voltaire that Gresset would not join the ranks of Voltaire’s Berlin admirers. Consequently, in verses addressed to Frederick the Great, Voltaire attacked Gresset as being “too shy” or too dedicated to carnal pleasures to take the road to Berlin: “He languishes in Picardy/ In the arms of his little tart/ And on verses of tragedy.”\textsuperscript{173} Gresset would remain on good terms with Frederick II, and the king would write to Voltaire in 1761 that he preferred the poetry of Gresset, Boileau, Chaulieu or Voltaire to the “prattling philosophes“ ("bavards philosophes") who peopled his court without being able to help him escape the spleen. As late as 1773, long after Gresset fell out of favor with the \textit{philosophe} party, Frederick II would still put Gresset on the same rank as Fontenelle, Montesquieu and Voltaire himself.\textsuperscript{174}

Gresset’s reluctance to move to Berlin might have had something to do with his not wanting to exchange a brilliant Parisian literary life with the gloomy austerity of Berlin or Potsdam. But Gresset’s attacks on the frivolity of Parisian literary life also suggest that this was not the whole story. Gresset could also have feared that Voltaire was trying to push him into a trap, to get him out of his way. Gresset, after all, enjoyed the protection of the De Chaulnes clan and of their Picard-Parisian social and political networks, such as the Chauvelins, and a move to Berlin would have meant leaving all this behind. Besides, Berlin already had a reputation as a meeting-place for “persecuted intelligentsia,”\textsuperscript{175} and Gresset, both by his publications and by his patronage networks,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{172}“Le roi de Prusse me mande qu’il prend Lanoue & Dupré. S’il enlève aussi Gresset, nous n’aurons guère plus de danseurs, d’acteurs, ni de poètes. Nous acquérons de la gloire en Allemagne, & les talents périssent à Paris” (D 2575).
  \item \textsuperscript{173}“Il languit dans sa Picardie/ Entre les bras de sa catin/ Et sur des vers de tragedie” (D2647).
  \item \textsuperscript{174}D 10188, D18138.
  \item \textsuperscript{175}Chaussinand-Nogaret, \textit{D’Alembert}, 122.
\end{itemize}
tried to make clear that he did not consider himself as such. His brand of enlightened Catholicism was mainstream enough to allow him to pursue his literary career in Paris and to aim at a place in the French Academy, and a move to Berlin would have had the effect of misleading his patrons as to his religious and political allegiances. Voltaire understood all this, and after 1742 Gresset does not reappear in his correspondence until briefly in 1748, when, in a letter to Charles Augustin Feriol, count d’Argental, Voltaire declared that he was “charmed” that Gresset had gained admittance to the French Academy.176 After that date, Gresset became a target of Voltaire’s ironies because he chose to return to Amiens, to court Madame Élisabeth and Madame Adélaïde, the royal sisters,177 and to hamper the ascension of the philosophe party.

One of the best ways to keep track of Gresset’s elusive Parisian presence is through Françoise de Graffigny’s correspondence.178 Unlike Mme du Châtelet, who seems to have disliked Gresset for fear he might steal Voltaire’s public, Mme de Graffigny became quite closely involved with Gresset, whom she did not fear as a literary rival. Mme de Graffigny’s letters cover exactly the period, 1738-1748, when Gresset eluded Voltaire while living the life of a literary lion in Parisian salons and in provincial châteaux. In order to understand Mme de Graffigny’s attraction for Gresset and their ensuing friendship, we have to take into consideration Mme de Graffigny’s rather peculiar life and cult of sensibility.179

Born Françoise d’Issembourg-d’Happoncourt in Nancy on 13 February 1695, Mme de Graffigny came from a noble family, and through her mother descended from

176 D 3616.
177 Cayrol, Essai, 2: 128-130.
the painter and engraver Jacques Callot.\(^{180}\) Without lacking either nobility or talents, she had the misfortune of marrying in 1712 the violent, drunk, and gambling François Huguet de Graffigny, who beat her regularly for the following six years. In 1718, after giving birth to three children who died in infancy, Mme de Graffigny obtained a judiciary separation. Her husband died in prison in 1725, while Mme de Graffigny continued to live independently, on a modest pension.\(^{181}\) Until 1738, Mme de Graffigny’s Lorrain circle included the poet Jean-François de Saint-Lambert, the actress Clairon Lebrun, Léopold Desmarest, Mme de Graffigny’s lover from 1727 to 1748, and her lifelong confident, François-Antoine Devaux, considered by Charles Collé a sort of witty valet (“valet de chambre bel esprit”\(^{182}\)) who had abandoned a judiciary career for literature and the salons.\(^{183}\) In September 1738, Mme de Graffigny left Lunéville for Paris, where she started living under the protection of the duchess of Richelieu. On the road to Paris, Mme de Graffigny made a stop to visit the marquise de Stainville at Demange-aux-Eaux between October and December 1738, after which she moved on to stay at Cirey with Voltaire and Mme du Châtelet from December 1738 to February 1739.

While at Demange-aux-Eaux, the “castle of spleen” (“château de l’ennui”) as she described it, Mme de Graffigny spent her time reading Gresset and other fashionable writers whom her hostess, the annoyed Mme de Stainville, the mother of the future duc de Choiseul, despised. “Seeing me reading La Chartreuse she said: ‘Oh, if it is written by that little fool Gresset...’,”\(^{184}\) wrote an indignant Mme de Graffigny to her friend Devaux,

\(^{180}\) *Année littéraire*, 30 August 1759, 327.


\(^{184}\) “Elle [Mme de Stainville] deteste Lubert ; elle dit que c’est un petit egrefin, un sot, un tout ce qu’elle dit quand elle meprise. Elle dit bien en trouvant La Chartreuse sous ma main : ‘Ah, si c’est de ce petit sot de
who answered that Gresset, like “le Petit (Poucet) [Crébillon-fils]” were “trop aimables” for a curmudgeon such as Mme de Stainville to love them.\textsuperscript{185} It seems that Gresset’s poems kept company to Mme de Graffigny through all these months of insecurity, since in March 1739, in a letter describing to Devaux her uncomfortable position when accused by the imperious Mme du Châtelet of stealing a canto of Voltaire’s \textit{La Pucelle},\textsuperscript{186} Mme de Graffigny compared her homelessness and moneylessness with that of Gresset’s Ver-Vert, the parrot shoved from one convent to another.\textsuperscript{187}

Once settled in Paris under the patronage of the duchess of Richelieu, Mme de Graffigny became familiar with the Parisian intellectual milieu. She renewed her relationship with Voltaire and with Mme du Châtelet and made the acquaintance of such members of the French Academy and Enlightenment figures as Jean-Jacques de Mairan, René-Antoine Ferchault de Réaumur, Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, and Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, as well as with the abbé de Saint-Pierre, Pierre-Louis Moreau, and the scientist Pierre-Louis Moreau de Maupertuis. Her autumn 1739 letters show us that one of the most awaited plays of the season was Gresset’s historic drama \textit{Édouard III} that would contain, it was rumored, a most unusual scene from the point of view of the rules of classical theatre - that is, a depiction of murder on stage.\textsuperscript{188} Mme de Graffigny wrote to Devaux that everything was probably just a Voltairian prank, and that Gresset’s supposed “Coriolan” or “Edouard” was probably “Mahomet” by Voltaire, trying again to

\textsuperscript{185} Graffigny, \textit{Correspondance}, 1: 122 (letter 47).
\textsuperscript{188} Graffigny, \textit{Correspondance}, 2: 280 (letter 224, n.26), 284 (letter 226), 303 (letter 231).
deceive the public until the night of the first representation. Voltaire knew about Gresset’s tragedy, but he did not attempt to increase the confusion between their respective plays, and on 5 January 1740 Voltaire made clear to Jeanne Françoise Quinault that while Gresset flourished at her bosom (“vert vert joint ses lauriers aux votres”), he was busy writing *Mahomet*.

Gresset’s tragedy *Édouard III* had its opening night on 22 January 1740 and closed after nine representations on 8 February 1740. A separate representation would take place at Versailles, on 3 March. On 1 March, Mme de Graffigny wrote to Devaux that: “*Edouart* is dead and burried.” Jean Bertrand le Blanc reported to Jean Bouhier that Gresset’s tragedy was one of the worst he had ever seen and that despite the duc de Chaulnes’ and his son, the duc de Picquigny’s, protection of the play and advertisement of it as a “masterpiece,” it failed. On 21 January 1740, the *nouvelliste* Jacques-Elie Gastelier wrote to Jacques-Louis-Sebastien Héricart de Thury, a counsellor at the Parisian Cour des Aides who resided in his Antilly castle in the Valois region of France, that he was skeptical regarding the dramatic skills of Gresset, “once a Jesuit, expelled by the Society for the little poem *Ver-Vert* and other compositions hardly suitable to his former position.” On 28 January, after seeing the tragedy, Gastelier wrote to the same correspondent that despite the public’s applause of the tragedy – it was probably the De

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189 “Oh, que tu es bete ! Comment, tu n’entens pas que, si c’est la piece d’Atis [Voltaire], on y donne le nom imaginaire d’Édouard pour tromper le public jusqu’à la représentation ? Oh, le sot ! Je ne le sais pas mais je m’en doute” (Graffigny, *Correspondance*, 2: 303 [letter 231]).
190 D 2131, D2141, D2146 (Voltaire to Helvétius), D 2155, D2158, D2187.
191 “*Edouart* est mort et enteré” (Graffigny, *Correspondance*, 2: 363 [letter 256]).
192 D2150.
Chaulnes’s *claque* – he found it lacking in dramatic qualities, with no action and little dramatic interest. As Gastelier’s letters make clear, the view on Gresset the writer was in 1740 still influenced, or clouded, by the memory of Gresset the scandalous “ex-Jesuit.” The scandal was still greater than the literary reputation, which it menaced to stifle in certain quarters.

The mixed, mostly cold, reception reserved to Gresset’s tragedy by the Parisians did not extinguish the interest in the provinces, though, especially since the play acquired the reputation of a good reading piece. From Nancy, Devaux pressed Mme de Graffigny to send him a copy of *Édouard III* as soon as possible. Devaux was acting as the literary agent of prince Paul-Anton Esterhazy, and in May 1741 he would ask Mme de Graffigny to send him Gresset’s two volumes of works for the enlightened prince. Prince Esterhazy, wrote Devaux, liked Gresset because he wrote things that were "delightful" and short. Another Hungarian admirer of Gresset was Janos Fekete, the count of Galanta, who on 23 November 1769 would write to Voltaire a letter of dytirambic praise peppered with admiration for “idle” Gresset. If Gresset's playwriting skills could not yet satisfy an audience, Gresset's works appealed to a reading public that abandoned the perusal of thick folios for extensive reading.

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195 “Cette pièce fut applaudie. Mais n’en déplaise au public, il m’a paru qu’il lui faisait trop d’honneur : peu d’actions, moins d’intérêt et nulle conduite ne sauraient faire une bonne tragédie. Les vers sont faciles, mais ils ne sont pas du ton tragique et d’ailleurs la meilleure versification ne peut faire réussir un ouvrage dramatique” (Gastelier, *Lettres sur les affaires du temps*, 346).
198 D 16008.
Two such readers were Devaux and Mme de Graffigny, who considered Gresset almost the equal of Voltaire, Devaux’s “Idole.”\textsuperscript{200} Closely following Gresset’s career, Mme de Graffigny noted with satisfaction on 30 January 1743 that Philibert Orry, the minister of finance (contrôleur général des finances) (1730-1745) and general administrator/director of the King’s buildings (directeur général des Bâtiments du Roi) (1737-1745) had appointed Gresset to the department of the Bâtiments du Roi.\textsuperscript{201} Gresset remained in this post even after Orry resigned in December 1745, because the poet also enjoyed the patronage of another minister of finance, Jean de Boullongne, who became close to Mme de Pompadour after Orry resigned and who would eventually occupy Orry’s post between 1757 and 1759. Beside Gresset, Boullongne also took under his wing the painter Joseph Vernet, and the writer Alexis Piron.\textsuperscript{202} Orry was an able minister, of bourgeois and parlementairian stock, and one of the pillars of Fleury’s team. After the death of Fleury, Orry fell prey to a “cabal” led by Mme de Pompadour and by the brothers Pâris and resigned.\textsuperscript{203} In 1737, as general administrator/director of the King’s buildings, Orry revived the “salons” of painting and sculpture, suspended since 1715.\textsuperscript{204} It was on this occasion that Gresset celebrated Orry in his Vers sur les tableaux exposés à l’Académie royale de peinture (Paris, 1737), followed the next year by an Épître de M. Gresset à M. Orry.\textsuperscript{205} Gresset’s celebration of the “moderns,” his attack on those seeing

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{200}{Graffigny, Correspondance, 4: 14 (letter 494), and 3: 389 (letter 468).}
\footnote{201}{Graffigny, Correspondance, 4: 106 (letter 517).}
\footnote{203}{Maurepas, Boulant, Les ministres et les ministeres, 314-18; Antoine, Louis XV, 313-25.}
\footnote{205}{The poem, published in the February 1738 issue of Mercure de France (pp. 265-267), is a fine piece of Old Regime flattery: “Nouvel an, compliments nouveaux,\textsuperscript{2} Éternelle cérémonie,\textsuperscript{2} Inépuisables}
in Orry's “salons” proof of the “degeneration” of French taste and talent, and his adroit flattery of the minister brought him the job of comptroller of the Post Office bonds (“contrôleur des rentes constituées sur les postes”), a sinecure delivering him one thousand écus a year.\footnote{Forwarding to Héricart de Thury Gresset's paean to Orry, Gastelier wrote on 13 February 1738 : “Je joins à cette lettre des vers présentés à M. le Contrôleur général par M. Gresset, ci-devant jésuite, auteur du joli poème du perroquet Ver-Vert. Ce poète doit à la protection de ce ministre l'emploi de contrôleur des rentes constituées sur les postes” (Cayrol, \textit{Essay}, 1: 47-8, 71-2).}

It was this post that brought Gresset into Mme de Graffigny's circle. Orry was the brother-in-law of the chancellor of Lorraine, Antoine-Martin Chaumont de La Galaizière whose brother, the abbé Henri-Ignace Chaumont de la Galaizière, had a position in the finance minister’s office and was a good friend of Mme de Graffigny, in whose letters he appeared as “Disenteuil.” Much to Devaux's envy and excitement, Mme de Graffigny asked the abbé de la Galaizière to bring Gresset to her dinner table.\footnote{“Mon Dieu, que je vous envie ce Gresset, que vous allez voir ! Que vous etes heureuse d'etre à portée de vivre avec ces gens-là. Je crois que vous l'aimerez comme une folle : il est si doux, si bon, si paresseux. Je suis enchanté de ce que le controller general a fait pour luy” (Graffigny, \textit{Correspondance}, 4: 133 [letter 521, n. 14]).} But the abbé de la Galaizière assured Mme de Graffigny that Gresset did not resemble his poems, that he was not “pleasant in conversation; he has a Jesuitical tone and demeanor, embarrassed and awkward.”\footnote{“Il a le ton et l’air jésuitique, embarrasé et gauche” (Graffigny, \textit{Correspondance}, 4: 130 [letter 521]).} Therefore, Mme de Graffigny decided in January 1743 that she would not have Gresset at her dinner table, despite Devaux's protests that Mme de Graffigny

\begin{verbatim}
madrigaux,/Vers dont on endort son héros,/Courses à la cour qu’on ennuie;/Faut-il qu'un sage s'associe/A la procession des sots?/Aussi, bien moins pour satisfaire/Un usage fastidieux/Que reconnaissant et sincère/Pour un ministre généreux…” Gresset used sixty verses for saying that, although in bed with a fever, he did not forget his gratefulness for Orry. For the cultural context of Gresset's stance, see Démoris, Ferran, \textit{La peinture en procès}, 18-23.
\end{verbatim}
had shunned Gresset while admitting to her company the abbé Prévost, former Jesuit novice and unfrocked Benedictine who was, according to Devaux, a bore.  

It would be only one year later, in January 1744, that Mme de Graffigny would accidentally meet Gresset in a loge at the theatre, during the representation of a tragedy by Piron. Mme de Graffigny was engaged in a relationship with Pierre Valleré (“Doudou” in Mme de Graffigny’s letters), a barrister of the Parlement de Paris. However, her chance encounter with Gresset was described by Mme de Graffigny as real love at first sight. Entirely disregarding Doudou’s jealousy and Piron’s tragedy, Mme de Graffigny announced that the only other person whose conversation impressed her so much was Crébillon fils, and she regretted that so many “hitches” had for so long prevented Antoine-Albert Chaumont, count de La Galaizière, from introducing Gresset to her. Mme de Graffigny wrote to Devaux that Gresset was “refined, sweet, polite, and wicked enough not to be bland.” During their two hours long chat, she felt as if Gresset and she had known each other their whole lives. Therefore, Mme de Graffigny declared herself “crazy” about Gresset.  

Devaux shared this letter with the poet Saint-Lambert, another

\textsuperscript{209} “Oh, la sotte de ne pas voir Gresset ! Il n’y auroit eu d’ennuyeux que les premiers. Dez que la glace auroit eté fonduë, vous auriez surement adoré sa douceur, son ingenuité, et son esprit. Je l’aimerai beucoup que votre Prevost, qu’à la verité vous n’aimez guerre” (Graffigny, Correspondance, 4: 133 [letter 521, n. 14]).  
\textsuperscript{210} “J’ai eu un hazard charmant hier. Il y a un ans que je tourmente Mareil [François-Antoine-Albert Chaumont, comte de La Galaizièrè, brother of the l’abbé La Galaizièrè, a.k.a. “Disenteuil”] pour m’amener Gresset ; mille contretems l’ont empeché. Il a eté hier dans notre loge et le hazard a fait qu’on me l’a nommé. Nous avons causé deux bonnes heures ; nous sommes comme si nous nous etions vu toute notre vie. Ah, c’est cela qui est aimable : au diable la Douceur [Cahusac], Blaise [le comte de Caylus] et tout le reste ! C’est l’esprit fin, doux, poli, assés mechant pour n’etre pas fade. Enfin j’en suis folle. Je n’ai encore trouvé personne ici dont le ton fut tant à mon gré ; j’ai pensé dire à l’unisson du mien, mais heureusement la modestie et la verité sont venues à mon secours [...] J’ai retrouvé mon ame sensible au bon ton. [...] Ah, qu’il est aimable ! Je te dis que la tete m’en tourne. J’ai deja vingt brocards pour lui. [...] Quand je suis revenu, j’ai conté de bonne foy à Doudou le plaisir que j’avais eu. Il est tombé en letargie et de la soirée nous n’avons pas dit ce qui s’apelle une parolle. Cela m’a encore divertie. Pour ce que je veux faire de Gresset, il n’a rien à craindre, mais tu sais comme j’aime l’esprit quand il est à mon gré. Je te le repete : de ma vie je n’en ai trouvé
Lorrain friend of Mme de Graffigny, who, reading about Mme de Graffigny’s infatuation, ironically pointed out that her next meeting with Gresset would probably end in bed. Saint–Lambert, the future author of *Les Saisons*, who would manage to elope with Voltaire’s Mme du Châtelet and to become J.-J. Rousseau’s rival for the affection of Élisabeth-Sophie d’Houdetot, received from Mme de Graffigny the confirmation of Gresset’s natural charm, superior in her estimation to the cynical, bossy, impatient tone of the Parisian wits and *bon viveurs*. But, concluded Mme de Graffigny taking a shot at Saint Lambert, Gresset was in the end a poet, “and when it comes to love, poets are pitiful people.”

If Mme de Graffigny’s personal attraction to Gresset was clear, from a cultural point of view their relationship had a more complex structure. Mme de Graffigny did not write as an aspiring provincial writer meeting for the very first time a celebrated master. Even though up to that point she had not published any of the works that would establish her reputation, her salon in rue Saint-Hyacinthe boasted the presence of the actress Jeanne Quinault, Gresset’s erstwhile lover, of the philosophe Claude-Adrien Helvétius, of the antiquarian Anne Claude-Philippe de Tubières, count de Caylus, of the writers Crébillon fils, Charles Pinot Duclos, Pierre-Claude Nivelle de La Chaussée and of

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211 “Voilà le Petit [Saint-Lambert] à qui je lis votre article de Gresset, et qui dit une impertinence que je ne veux pas vous laisser ignorer : il pretend que, s’il [Gresset] sait profiter de la première semaine, vous etes… Vous entendez bien” (Graffigny, *Correspondance*, 5: 41 [letter 645]).

212 “Pardi, Mr de St-Lembert est un bon impertinent avec son commentaire sur Gresset. Je ne me dedis pas de tout ce que j’ai dit. Peut-être la lassitude d’entendre des beaux esprit brusque, dessideurs, ecrasons, m’a fait donner des couleurs plus vives au ton de Gresset, mais c’est un poète, Monsieur le Petit, et en fait d’amour, ce sont de pauvres gens” (Graffigny, *Correspondance*, 5: 15 [letter 639, n. 8]).

many other *beaux esprits*. Her decision to become Gresset’s patron was that of an aristocrat, of a high-society woman writer willing to take under her wing a likeminded intellectual. On 14 January 1744, Mme de Graffigny announced to Devaux that she would like to introduce Gresset to her friends by throwing a small party in his honor. The invitations were sent to Helvétius, Gresset, La Chausée, and Duclos. After the 19 January 1744 party, Mme de Graffigny told Devaux that the real hero of the evening had been Duclos, not Gresset, accused a week later of “putting on airs.” Despite his brilliant conversation, Mme de Graffigny decided to cut Gresset out of her social life. Facing Devaux’s needling, Mme de Graffigny peevishly explained that there was nothing she could do, since the poet preferred some less distinguished company to hers: “He is too libertine to have time to spend in good company.”

The figure of a rakish Gresset is something rare, since both the enemies and the adversaries of Gresset focused on his alleged Catholic conservatism. Both groups

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215 “Gresset a bien perdu aupres de moi. Je n’aime pas les gens qui jouent le bel air et l’important. Son esprit ne m’en plait pas moins, et sa tournure de conversation, mais je n’aime point les grand seigneurs. Il ne sera pas de mon souper” (Graffigny, *Correspondance*, 5: 30 [letter 642]).


219 “En quoi Gresset fait l’important ? C’est dans la mine d’abord, un air de mepris dans le port de tete qui offense, quoiqu’il soit bel homme, et dans le propos, quoique poli, un ton de ne faire que grace quand il veut bien se preter. Tout cela avec de la douceur et de la legere polie. Je n’en sais pas davantage. D’ailleurs il est si libertin qu’il n’a pas trop de tems d’etre en bonne compagnie” (Graffigny, *Correspondance*, 5: 79 [letter 652]).

attacked or defended a “doux” Gresset, a Jesuit in disguise. Yet the picture that emerges out of the available sources is more complex. Gresset’s Parisian years offer us the image of a poet who enjoyed both the grand monde and the more Darntonian world of literary bohemia. Cardinal de Bernis remembered personally meeting Gresset only shortly after the poet left the Jesuits, and the meeting took place in a Parisian cabaret, with Gresset surrounded by opera girls.\footnote{Desprat, Le Cardinal de Bernis, 60.} From 1735-36 until 1739, Gresset was a regular member of the famous “drinking and dancing” society of the Caveau, with Alexis Piron and Crébillon père.\footnote{Paul Chaponnière, La vie joyeuse de Piron (Paris: Mercure de France, 1935), 82-84; Brigitte Level, “Poètes et musiciens du Caveau,” Cahiers de l’Association Internationale des etudes francaises, 41 (1989), 161-176.} In 1744, while Mme de Graffigny complained about his absences, Gresset was improvising poems for Mme de Chaulnes.

But the woman for whom he neglected Mme de Graffigny was Jeanne-Catherine Gaussem, called Mlle Gaussin (1711-1767), an actress whom he celebrated first in some verses on \textit{Alzire} (1736), in an \textit{Épître adressée à l’abbé de Bréteuil} (1737), and then in some passionate verses during the same period which proclaimed her his “muse” and “goddess.”\footnote{“Belle Gaussin, mon immortelle,/ A ces brillans lauriers, à ce myrte amoureux,/ Qui couronnent tes beaux cheveux,/ Souffre que j’entrelace une rose nouvelle,/Et sois par ta douceur comme par ta beauté/ Ma muse et ma divinité” (Gresset, \textit{Poésies inédites}, 135-138, 193).} Mme de Graffigny knew about Gresset’s relationship with Gaussin, and resented it, since Gresset read his latest literary creations in Gaussin’s salon, and not in Mme de Graffigny’s.\footnote{In a letter from 24 January 1744, Mme de Graffigny wrote: “Gresset lit sa piece\[Sidney\] à présent chez la belle Gossin. Si elle tombe, devine ce que l’on aura cet hivers” (Graffigny \textit{Correspondance}, 5: 48 [letter 646]).} It was a sort of jalousie de métier among these famous salonnières competing for intellectual recruits. If eighteenth-century writers needed the help of some famous salonnière to advance their administrative or academic career, they
also needed the support of influential actors or actresses, who could advance their
dramatic career, the surest path to academic consecration. Mlle Gaussin played the main
feminine character of Sidney, that of beautiful Rosalie who ultimately argues Sidney
out of his suicidal depression. She also played the main role in Cénie (1750), Mme de
Graffigny’s greatest dramatic success, despite the fact that Mme de Graffigny preferred
her rival, Claire-Josèphe-Hyppolite Léris de la Tude, also known as Mlle Clairon. Over
the years, Mme de Graffigny would constantly massacre Mlle Gaussin in her letters.

Despite his infidelities, Gresset seemed to have become a regular guest at Mme de
Graffigny’s dinner table, where on 6 March 1744 he was expected to dine in the company
of Crébillon, Duclos and the brothers La Galaizière among others. Mme de Graffigny’s
plan failed again because the abbé La Galaizière “forgot to look for Gresset” and invite
him. At this point we have to stop and ask whether, jealously guarding their place near
Mme de Graffigny, the clan La Galaizière was not trying to stop Gresset from
becoming too close to Mme de Graffigny. First, the abbé La Galaizière (Disenteuil) tried
to persuade Mme de Graffigny that Gresset was awkward and unpleasantly “Jesuitical”
in conversation. Then, the abbé’s brother, the count La Galaizière invoked “mille

225 Graffigny Correspondance, 5: 77 (letter 652).
226 Voltaire was deeply affected by this black comedy, that depressed him, unlike Édouard III. See
Bestermann D 4364 (letter from Voltaire to Sophia Fiderika Wilhelmina of Prussia, written on 30 January
1751, a day after attending a private representation of Sidney).
228 Graffigny Correspondance, 5: 128 (letter 664).
229 The abbé La Galaizière “a oublié de faire chercher Gresset [...] Nous avons été reduits à Crébillon et la
Carpe [Cahusac], que j’ai fai venir en qualité de bonne œuvre” (Graffigny Correspondance, 5: 133 [letter
666]).
230 For the relations between Stanislas I, King of Poland and Duke of Lorraine and the La Galaiziere clan
and the Antoine de Chaumont de la Galaiziere’s land reform ideas, see Peter Jones, Liberty and Locality in
Revolutionary France: Six Villages Compared, 1760-1820 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003),
64-98, Philip T. Hoffman, Growth in a Traditional Society: The French Countryside, 1450-1815 (Princeton:
contretemps” to justify his failure to invite Gresset to Mme de Graffigny’s salon. Then, the abbé “forgot” to look for Gresset and forward to him Mme de Graffigny’s invitation to come and dine with her and her friends. The abbé and the count La Galaizière were the sons of the powerful Antoine de Chaumont de La Galaizière, the royal intendant of the armies of Lorraine (1737-1766). The count La Galaizière, a future justice, police, and finances royal intendant of Lorraine (from 1758, with his father), married Orry’s sister. Orry was one of the main beneficiaries of Chauvelin’s disgrace. As Keeper of the Seals (garde des sceaux) and minister of foreign affairs, Chauvelin had tried to control the intendant of Lorraine. La Galaizière strongly opposed having to report to Chauvelin, and asked to deal directly with Orry and Louis XV.231 If it is true that the La Galaizière clan was trying to elbow Gresset out of Mme de Graffigny’s circle, then maybe it was because they perceived Gresset as one of Chauvelin’s men. In this case, Gresset’s reluctance to show up at Mme de Graffigny might be explained by his wariness of making powerful enemies that might endanger his post. Gresset, it seems, did not avoid Mme de Graffigny, but her circle, preferring to frequent her theater loge rather than her salon. Thus, in June 1744, Gresset dropped by Mme de Graffigny’s opera loge, and she wrote to Devaux that she was quite taken with his wit.232 However, Gresset’s witty conversation could not compensate for his lack of salon attendance. Whereas Devaux waxed enthusiastically over Gresset’s social skills and consummate grace even as a Jesuit,233 Mme de Graffigny made clear in an 18 September 1744 letter that she had lost her

232 “Je fus hier au jeudi [...] à l’Opéra ou on jouoit pour la premiere fois un balet de Fuselier qui s’appelle L’Ecole des amants [...] Nous n’y fummes pas arrivée que Gresset arriva dans la loge à coté de moi. Nous causames beaucoup, nous lumes les parolles qui nous amuserent beaucoup par leur platitude et les comentaires que nous faisions” (Graffigny Correspondance, 5: 303 [letter 705]).
233 Graffigny Correspondance, 5: 476 (letter 746, n. 10).
patience with an ever elusive, bohemian Gresset who refused to come back to the right fold: “As Jesuit, Gresset kept better company than he does now. Only God can overcome stubbornness.”  

While he clearly liked Mme de Graffigny, Gresset avoided frequenting her salon, where he might have met with members of the “party of humanity.” Gresset recognized Voltaire’s talent, but he refused his offers. Therefore, Gresset did not become the man of a party, and least of all of the party of the philosophes. When Gresset sought the support of Mme de Pompadour for his candidacy to the French Academy on 21 March 1748, the royal favorite wrote to her brother, Abel-François Poisson de Vandières (1727-1781), marquis de Marigny, and future general administrator/director of the King’s buildings, arts, academies, gardens, and manufactures (“Directeur général des Bâtiments, Arts, Académies, Jardins et Manufactures du Roi”) between 1751 and 1773, that she had already offered her protection to the physiocratic abbé Leblanc. Leblanc was a perpetual candidate who, as we have seen, resented Gresset’s success. But Mme de Pompadour promised to support Gresset at the next opening, since she found Gresset a “sage and virtuous man, but with very few friends.” The Academy therefore elected Gresset without the support of Mme de Pompadour. D’Alembert himself acknowledged this fact when answering the reception discourse of the ex-Jesuit historian abbé Claude-François-Xavier Millot (1726-1785), elected to the French Academy in 1777 in Gresset’s place. D’Alembert, a consummate insider in matters regarding the French Academy, made very clear that there was “no need for any woman to put in a good word” for Gresset’s election. In 1750, Gresset tried to obtain the job of royal historiographer, a post

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234 “Gresset aux Jesuites voyoit melieurs compagnie qu’à present. Il n’apparten qu’à Dieu de vaincre l’opiniatreté” (Graffigny Correspondance, 5: 474 [letter 746]).
235 “Un homme sage et vertueux, mais qui a peu d’amis,” in Gresset, Poesies inedites, 60.
236 Gresset “fut reçu aux acclamations du public et des gens de lettres, sans qu’aucun criât à l’injustice, sans
vacated by Voltaire’s move to Prussia. Due to Mme de Pompadour’s influence, the job went to Duclos.237

D'Alembert pointed out that Gresset's election to the French Academy was secured by his play *Le Méchant*. Indeed, Gresset’s merits as a playwright were recognized even by the otherwise astringent Grimm,238 and by 1755 Gresset was recognized as one of the foremost writers of France, a French Catullus, as he was described by the popular novelist Nicolas-Edme Rétif de la Bretonne.239 Gresset’s academic consecration brought him some enemies too. Thus, the poet Pierre Charles Roy, “the most beaten up poet of his day,” an enemy of Voltaire and a protégé of Madame de Pompadour, resented Gresset, whom he considered stiff and “gluttonous” (“pédant de
collège et [...] glouton”).

240 Obsessed with the idea of becoming a member of the French Academy, Roy treated any member of that august gathering as his personal enemy. Since Paradis de Moncrif, author of a *Histoire des chats*, had beaten Roy in 1734, adding to this injury the insult of being a member of the French Academy, Roy took his revenge by penning a venomous satire that depicted the Academy as a menagerie full of inane cats and parrots. In 1748, the year of Gresset’s election to the French Academy, Roy circulated in manuscript some “Vers de Roy sur les Beaux Esprits du Temps, à son Ami, juin 1748” containing an attack on Gresset’s discourse of reception at the French Academy as yawn-inducing. But, Roy wrote, there was a certain “old Sybil” who rejoiced at Gresset’s triumphs and in whose salon, a real “brothel of spirit” (“bordel d’esprit”), the games were made by a decayed “old pedant” who did not know better than to put Gresset, Virgil, and Racine on the same level. In the key that accompanied these verses, Roy explained that the “vieille Sibylle” was “Mme de Tencin, unfrocked nun, sister of the Cardinal [Dubois],” while the “old pedant” was François-Joseph de Beaupoil, marquis de Saint-Aulaire (1643-1742), member of the French Academy and author of light verses who, according to Voltaire, wrote his best work only in his nineties. Indeed, Claudine Alexandrine Guérin, marquise de Tencin, d’Alembert’s mother who after a rather agitated youth became a dévote, or at least a leading anti-Jansenist figure, was a


patron of the Caveau, the convivial society frequented by Gresset in the mid 1730s. But after that period it is difficult to find any trace of Gresset among the writers who usually frequented Mme de Tencin’s salon such as Marivaux, Montesquieu, Fontenelle and Piron. Piron, who frequented Mme de Tencin’s gatherings and who otherwise considered Roy “a dog always beating his tail around the doors of the Academy,” resented Gresset’s election. Piron would give vent to his resentment in a 22 July 1754 letter to the historian Charles Marie Fevret baron de Fontette (1710-1772). Piron wrote to Fontette that he considered himself to be unjustly overlooked by an Academy consecrating mediocrities such as Gresset, whose only merit was to know how to toot his own horn, while he and Roy (“Roy et Moy”) had to ”crawl in shame, deprived of any literary honors.”

Ensconced in Amiens, Gresset disregarded most of these attacks. It would be only in 1774 that he would sketch a letter to Voltaire. The context of that letter was the pamphlet wars started between the philosophes and their enemies after the death of Louis XV, when Jean de Beauvais, bishop of Senez, used his funeral oration for the king,

244 “Un chien qui va toujours battant queue autour des portes de l’Académie” (Polinger, Pierre Charles Roy, 289).
245 Lenel, Gresset et Voltaire, 21.
on 27 July 1774, to attack the philosophes and deplore the dissolution of the Jesuits. Beauvais claimed that the eighteenth century “attacked simultaneously the principles of love, justice, virtue, and natural virtue,” and expressed his hope that Louis XVI would restore morals.\footnote{Jean de Beauvais, Oraison funèbre de très-grand, très-haut, très-puissant, et très-excellent prince, Louis XV, le bien aimé, roi de France et de Navarre, prononcée dans l'église de l'abbaye royale de Saint-Denis le 27 juillet 1774 (Paris, 1774). See also Louis de Sambucy, Vie de Monseigneur de Beauvais, évêque de Senez (Paris, 1842), 61-5.} On 4 August 1774, Gresset gave the reception discourse for the election of Suard, and as, we have seen, he also attacked the philosophes. In that same month, Voltaire published a famous public letter \textit{Au Révérend père en Dieu Messire Jean de Beauvais, crée par le feu roi, Louis XV, évêque de Senez} (Paris, 1774), in which he presented himself as a defender of the king’s memory against the slanders of Beauvais and argued that Louis XVI would not be the restorer of morals but their “preserver,” since Louis XVI inherited from Louis XV a morally and intellectually flourishing country.\footnote{Voltaire, \textit{Oeuvres complètes}, 66 vols (Paris: Renouard, 1819-25), 41: 294-298. See also Jeffrey Merrick, “Louis XV’s Deathbed Apology,” in \textit{European History Quarterly}, 2008, 38: 2 (2008), 205-226.} Gresset’s letter, written in the same August 1774, was an answer to Voltaire’s own public letter, but it seems that it remained unsent, and it certainly is not included in Voltaire’s correspondence. Writing like one great man of letters to another, Gresset also spoke to Voltaire in a Christian manner, asking him to repent at least in old age, and to cease playing the role of a “brilliant fool.”\footnote{“Au lieu de finir en sage, en chrétien, vous ne voulez donc mourir que comme vous avez vécu, en brillant insensé” (Lenel, \textit{Voltaire et Gresset}, 37).}

Gresset’s exhortations to repentance addressed to Voltaire might throw a light on Gresset’s own reasons for publishing his famous \textit{Lettre sur la comédie} (1749). The eighteenth-century has been seen by the historians of family life as the century of a growing attention paid to children and to adolescents considered not as “little men” or as “immature” human beings, but as ages of life with their own specificity. The most
important two factors influencing this change were the influence of Rousseau’s pedagogy and a social and economic life encouraging the mononuclear family and the beginning of the dissolution of the traditional extended families. It is therefore significant to note that Gresset warned Voltaire that he was misleading the youth. Gresset prompted Voltaire to publish an open disavowal of his anti-Christian works, as Gresset himself had done, in order to educate the youth, to offer a good example of what a great literary master should believe: “You led many people to perdition, and your mockery and blasphemies will still lead to perdition the present young generation. Let them learn from your solemn repentance, from your public retraction, that your impious statements were just frantic witticisms, the dreams of vanity. You will be great, you will be Christian, and the all-merciful God will forgive you.” While we do not know if Gresset intended to publish his letter to Voltaire or just to send it to him privately, it is clearly written with a Christian audience in mind, and as a warning not only to Voltaire, but also to the young generation that Gresset, once a teacher, still cared for. It might also be an indication of the development of a public sphere that played an important role in the creation of new ties between generations. If none of the seventeenth-century moralists cared about the “young generation,” the much more professionalized writers of the eighteenth-century included among their duties or opportunities that of educating or addressing the young people. They became concerned not only with their personal pupils or disciples - and here J.-B. Rousseau’s letters to Gresset come to mind, but with an


251 “Vous avez perdu beaucoup de gens, vous perdez encore par vos dérisions et vos blasphèmes la jeunesse actuelle. Qu’ils apprennent par votre repentir solennel, par votre rétractation publique, que vos assertions impies n’ont été que le délire du bel esprit, les rêves de la vanité. Vous seriez grand, vous seriez chrétien, et le Dieu de toute miséricorde vous pardonnerait” (Lenel, Voltaire et Gresset, 37-38).
abstract young public that was seen as a legitimate part of the public sphere, if not yet of
the public opinion to which writers or lawyers appealed to.

In the same year, 1774, Gresset seized an opportunity to oppose the philosophes
not just ideologically, but institutionally as well. The 1774 competition for the French
Academy poetry prize opposed La Harpe, supported by the philosophes, and Louis-
Robert-Parfait Duruflé (1742-1793). Despite his friendship with caustic writers such as
Nicolas Chamfort and Antoine de Rivarol, Duruflé was a pious and patriotic poet who,
having abandoned a legal career for a literary one, went on rather modestly to
collaborate with the Journal Encyclopédique between 1769 and 1793. Duruflé was also a
valet (valet de chambre) of Monsieur the Comte de Provence (the future Louis XVIII), a
position that Duruflé sold after the young Monsieur scolded him for not being able to slip
properly the silk stockings on his princely feet. Duruflé’s supporters included the
antiphilosophes Anne Gabriel Meusnier de Querlon from Fréron’s Année littéraire, the
dévot abbé, royal censor, and one of Charles Gravier, comte de Vergennes’s, journalistic
hit men, Jean Louis Aubert, from the Journal des Beaux-Arts, and Gresset, the
president of the French Academy in 1774. In 1773, Duruflé entered the competition
with an Epître à un ami malheureux, a long Christian poem against suicide. Duruflé lost
to La Harpe’s more political economic Ode sur la navigation. Publishing Duruflé’s poem
in his Année littéraire, Fréron wrote that Duruflé’s piece “competed for the poetry prize

252 Alexandre Jovicevich, Jean-François de La Harpe, adepte et renégat des lumières (South Orange: Seton
diplomatique, 3: 4 (1987), 351-370; Munro Price, Preserving the Monarchy: The Comte de Vergennes, 1774-
1787 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 19, 163.
255 Philippe-Jacques-Etienne-Vincent Guilbert, Mémoires biographiques et littéraires, par ordre
alphabétique, sur les hommes qui se sont fait remarquer dans le département de la Seine-Inferieure, par
leurs écrits, leurs actions, leurs talens, leurs vertus, 2 vols (Rouen: F. Mari, 1812), 1: 420-429.
founded for M. de Laharpe.” In 1774, Duruflé competed again with a patriotic poem, *Le siège de Marseille par le connétable de Bourbon*. Gresset liked Duruflé’s poem and found fault with the way in which d’Alembert, the secretary of the Academy who as such had to recite the various poetic prize entries, read Duruflé’s poems. According to Bachaumont, Gresset found that d’Alembert sabotaged Duruflé for the benefit of La Harpe by offering “a bad rendition of [Duruflé’s] very good verses.” Bachaumont also wrote that, in order to ensure La Harpe’s success, d’Alembert proposed that no candidate obtain the prize in 1774, hoping to arrange something for La Harpe in 1775, when Gresset would have returned to Amiens. And indeed, in 1775, La Harpe again obtained the first prize for poetry, with some *Conseils à un jeune poète*, and a first prize for eloquence for his *Éloge de Catinat*.

Gresset was not simply opposing progress. In 1755, 1756, and 1757, the Academy of Amiens crowned the physiocratic essays of Simon Clicquot de Blervache, a protégé of Vincent de Gournay. And, according to the philosophes, nothing happened in the Academy of Amiens without Gresset’s approval. Gresset even managed to muster support for an errant Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who passed through Amiens and met with

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256 “A concouru au prix de poésie fondé pour M. de Laharpe” (*Année littéraire*, 5: 41-49 [September, 1773]). For la Harpe as the dauphin of the French eighteenth-century letters, see Christopher Todd, *Voltaire’s disciple: Jean-François de la Harpe* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association Texts and Dissertations, 1972), 22-23.


Gresset in May 1767. Gresset understandably started to oppose what he saw as the machinations of the philosophes to advance the careers of their disciples. One of these disciples was Jacques Delille, elected member of the Academy of Amiens on a philosophes ticket while Gresset was away. Back in Amiens, Gresset annulled Delille’s election. La Harpe circulated the story in order to illustrate Gresset’s “despotic” rule over the Academy of Amiens. The authenticity of this story was contested by Cayrol, Gresset’s best biographer, but perhaps Delille’s later attempt to discourage Princess Czartorinska to put Gresset alongside Vergilius and Gessner on a garden column dedicated to the best bucolic poets had something to do with these past conflicts.

The story of Gresset’s rise and fall from Mme de Graffigny’s graces shows us a Gresset that was neither in the philosophes camp, nor a solitary, lay ascetic who refused to enjoy worldly pleasures. Rather, Gresset appears as a worldly Catholic and a cautious social player willing and able to maintain a certain degree of independence. Gresset managed to combine a steady fidelity to the Chaulnes and the Chauvelins with a careful cultivation of finance ministers such as Orry or Jean de Boullogne, and with a rather bohemian life in the company of actresses such as Mlle Gaussin or Mlle Quinault, both of whom helped advance Gresset’s literary career. Gresset liked scouring the shadows of bohemia, he enjoyed not keeping “good company.” He was also at home in the world of

262 Cayrol, Essai, 2: 207-8.
263 Cayrol, Essai, 2: 220-21. See also Delille, L’Homme des Champs ou les Géorgiques francaises (Strassbourg, 1800), 185.
old fashioned intellectual patronage, seeking and obtaining the protection of rich and powerful ministers in exchange for literarily supporting their policies and lavishly celebrating their virtues. In other words, Gresset seemed to be at ease with both “the people” and “the nation,” that is with either those politically powerless or with the traditional power elites. Gresset frequented either those persons living humbly or, if in comfort, outside the pale of respectability, such as actresses, or the representatives of the “political nation,” people in power. But if Gresset was at home in both the low and the high society, in pubs or in ministerial castles, he was not very comfortable with “society,” or “le monde,” that is with the world of Parisian salons dominated by intellectual power brokers. Gresset’s “idleness” prevented him from taking an active part in the overheated symbolic economy whose stock exchanges were the salons and whose intellectual factories and “workshops,” such as the Encyclopedists or the physiocrats, generated new ideas as well as an inflation of signs that Gresset would later denounce. Whereas “the nation” represented both “the people” and its rulers (court, nobles, clergy, parlements) in historically grounded and thus legitimate ways, “society,” or “le monde,” was still struggling to self-legitimize itself, by making itself the only source of valid axiological criteria that both the “public” and the government would merely recognize and defend. Gresset would later denounce the political reduction of the nation, that is of history, to “the public,” that is to the moment, by pointing out the possible despotic avatars of such an historically unmoored society. He would also deplore the cultural takeover of the people by society, that is by an elite “public” mercenary generating and imposing a language and a parallel ideological reality (similar to that denounced by Linguet when talking about the physiocrats).

Gresset opposed the philosophes while sharing many of the Enlightenment ideals regarding the role of literature in improving social conditions, and in the creation of a responsible public sphere. He was also in the forefront of the aesthetic renewal of French eighteenth century literature. Gresset, if not an Anglomaniac, certainly wrote his plays under the influence of English playwrights. He also shared with the philosophes patrons such as Mme de Graffigny and Frederic II, king of Prussia. His attacks on the philosophes were rare, and did not match in intensity the campaigns led against him by the philosophes, who branded him an apostate. Gresset was less interested in his literary reputation than in the fate of the French literature. His opposition to the academic maneuvers of the philosophes was hardly unenlightened, stemming from principle rather than from personal pique or bigotry. If he was not a complete stranger to the salons, Gresset rejected the “salonization” of French literature. Therefore, he felt prompted to defend a wandering Rousseau, persecuted by both the philosophes and various (Catholic and Reformed) church authorities. If anything, Gresset was perhaps more enlightened than his opponents, since his upholding of firm axiological criteria allowed him to denounce any arbitrary, factional twisting and muddying of literary life. Gresset avoided cultivating disciples and building himself a literary chapel, while firmly believing that any writer has a duty towards his public, especially his younger public. While not pretending to create in front of his public, like Rousseau, Gresset refused to commodify his readers, to treat them as a market. That is why, if the philosophes accused Gresset of mounting a publicity stunt with his letter on the comedies, we have to point out that he nevertheless fully embraced the idea that a writer is responsible for his writings not merely toward his patron, but toward the reading public. Gresset tried to prolong into the eighteenth century some literary standards that were about to die – such as a certain aesthetic - while embracing some innovations – such as the relationship
between a writer and his abstract reading public, or the pioneer forays into English literature – that made it impossible for him to become a party writer. Gresset saw himself as a national writer, and as such he considered that he had an obligation to be a patriot and a Christian, while not forgetting all the civilities of an enlightened century.
CHAPTER II:
Enlightenment as realist temptation: Gresset’s Literary Canon Revisited

When, in 1779, Father Daire, a Celestin librarian, anonymously published his Vie de M. Gresset, the first monograph dedicated to Jean-Baptiste-Louis Gresset, he summed up Gresset as: “One of the most felicitous geniuses, and perhaps the most accomplished spirit that ever existed.” Almost seventy years later, in 1844, Louis de Cayrol published his two volume Essai Historique sur la Vie et les Ouvrages de Gresset. Cayrol noted that, despite the fact that Gresset had received a lot of attention from literary historians, he was still a somewhat mysterious character, perhaps “the least known among eighteenth-century writers.” Yet another fifty years later, in his J.-B.-L. Gresset. Sa Vie – Ses Oeuvres, Jules Wogue was puzzled by the fact that there were in fact not one, but two “Gressets”: one, considered in Amiens a "great man," the second, rated by professional critics as a "lovely" "second tier" writer.

Yet, Gresset’s split reception was not merely an expression of an easily understandable conflict between his local pantheonization and his national oblivion. Gresset was not a local worthy who failed to gain the attention of Parisian cultural brokers. Gresset was an extremely well-known and celebrated eighteenth-century French

267 Cayrol, Essai Historique, 1: ix.
writer whose fortune declined because the cultural paradigm on which he depended changed. P. Frantz argued that Gresset’s lack of literary status was the result of Romanticism, the lyricism of which made obsolete Gresset’s type of writing as social praxis. Yet, before Romanticism, Gresset clashed with the philosophes, and if some Romantic poets, such as Edgar Allan Poe or Alexander Pushkin, would still be able to appreciate the quaint Roccoco charm of Gresset’s poetry, the “party of humanity” failed to do much justice to their contemporary.

The following two chapters offer an exploration of the ways in which Gresset’s “social practice of writing” differed from that of the “philosophes.” My contention is that, measured against Gresset, the French Enlightenment appears not as a Kantian triumph of individual emancipation, but as something more akin to the emergence of a specific way to socialize reason, as analyzed in the works of Augustin Cochin, Karl Barth, Reinhart Koselleck, and François Furet. Gresset’s conflict with the philosphe was, I


will argue, motivated by what Gresset saw as a decay of reason, as a discursive collapse of Old Regime French monarchy. Gresset rejected the *philosophes* not in the name of a counter-Enlightenment, but in the name of Enlightenment, and of the reason that the philosophes, Gresset argued, compromised. Gresset saw himself as opposing, in the name of reason, the irrationality hidden in the “party’s” egg laid by the *philosophes*. This partinic egg would be hatched in the nineteenth and twentieth century by Left or Right-wing totalitarian movements. Indeed, Gresset presents us with the double challenge of a Jesuit who abandoned his “vocation” in order to live like a writer, and who afterwards renounced the writing game at the peak of his fame in order to live a pious patriarchal provincial life, far from the Parisian writers who started to ridicule him as a Tartuffe-like character. Gresset’s career could help us rethink what being part of the Enlightenment meant, since the existence of group orthodoxies precluded the use of autonomous reason.

Gresset’s literary posterity has been shaped by eighteenth-century prejudices and literary politics. Gresset’s literary output was divided in three phases and disputed by two ideological camps. First, there is the young Jesuit poet, the author of some pious poems and of such witty *badinage* as *Ver-Vert* (1735) and of *La Chartreuse* (1735). After 1735 there is the ex-Jesuit dramatic poet, author of the tragedy *Édouard III* (1740), of
the drama *Sidney* (1745), and of the comedy *Le Méchant* (1747). After 1748, the year of his reception in the French Academy, we have to deal with the myth of the obscurantist Gresset, a character whose irrelevant literary output was matched only by the absurdity of his counter-Enlightenment pronouncements. This chapter argues that much of this three stage legend is largely the creation of the *philosophes* and of their Old Regime and post-1789 Catholic foes. It was convenient for both camps to see in Gresset’s literary output a sharp contrast between the alleged “radicalism” of his younger days and the Catholic “bigotry” of his mature years. Seen in this way, Gresset’s life became a morality play: a story of dark betrayal and fall for the *philosophes*, a redemption story for the Catholics. The philosophes appropriated the first phase and bitterly denounced the old Gresset as an opportunist and an impostor. The Catholic conservatives could use the old Gresset as an example of a religious conversion in a century of many Lights and no God. So they, too, exaggerated the fracture between the pre-1748 and the post-1748 Gresset in order to make him a more edifying figure.

Yet, as this chapter will prove, Gresset never stopped being a Christian, and he never stopped being an enlightened Christian, that is one who valued the practice of Christian virtues more than the virtues of sectarian disputation and mechanical piety, who therefore asked for the Church’s more active social involvement, and hence who argued for the necessary reforms of the Church, such as the reform of the monastic orders. What is more, this “moderate,” “mainstream,” and even “conservative” stance was not motivated by opportunism, but by Gresset’s understanding of literature and authorship. Steeped in the religious and aesthetic traditions of the French classical age, Gresset’s neoclassical aesthetics went hand in hand with a sort of reformist Catholicism. This combination produced a discourse of patriotism focused on defending the “ancient constitution,” that is the set of laws, customs, privileges and institutions deemed to
constitute the politico-theological foundations of Old Regime France. This discourse could be used with equal allacrity against idle monks, royal or ministerial despotism, parlementarian rebellion, and the *philosophes*. I will argue then that it was from a position combining an enlightened Catholicism with patriotism that Gresset attacked the *philosophes*. This ideological and theological perspective found its expression in a neoclassical aesthetics that was in itself developed in a very “modern” way, with Gresset boldly challenging the conventions of the French stage and managing to not only get away with his innovations, but actually to convert them into stepping stones for his academic consecration.

One of the most important themes of Gresset’s writings was that of monastic life and of the spectacle of devotion. From the early days of *Ver-Vert*, *Le Carême impromptu*, *Le Lutrin vivant*, *La Chartreuse*, *Adieux aux Jésuites*, through *L’Abbaye*, his most fiercely anti-monastic satire, and until the lately written *L’Ouvroir*, and the posthumously published *Le Parrain Magnifique*, Gresset found in the intricacies of the ecclesiastical world, with its penances, holidays, petty intrigues and characters, and in the internal frictions of the monastic life, one of his richest topics. Eighteenth-century British reviewers considered Gresset a poet so close to Catholic subject-matters as to be hard to grasp for Protestant readers unfamiliar with the rituals of the Catholic Church. In France, Voltaire and some of his fellow *philosophes* mistook Gresset’s occasionaly fierce charges against certain particular aspects of the monastic world for anti-

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272 For the story of Gresset's British reception, from John Gilbert Cooper’s translations published in the context of the Seven Years War, when Gresset was largely dismissed by reviewers as too Catholic and conservative, and consequently as a pernicious influence upon English letters, to Alexander Geddes’s "Cisalpine," that is anti-ultramontane and quasi-Jansenist, interest in Gresset, whose *Vert-Vert* Geddes translated and modified in order to score some of enlightened Catholic points, see my "Le Vert-Vert de Gresset en Angleterre: Comment, dans le dix-huitième siècle, on a fait d’un perroquet français un Déiste, un Jésuite, un patriote irlandais et enfin un Catholique libéral," in Mircea Platon, *Les Aventures critiques d’un poète dans le Siècle des Lumières* (Iasi: Timpul, 2006), 39-86.
Christianity. As will become clear in the next chapter, Voltaire hoped he could enlist this “ex-Jesuit” poet in his fight against the Church. Yet, if it is true that after leaving the Jesuits Gresset would never repeat the early pious performance of a poem such as “Ode sur la canonisation des saints Stanislas Kostka et Louis de Gonzague” (1730), his antimonastic touches were rather signs of his enlightened, reform Catholicism, than of an anti-Christian thrust.\textsuperscript{273}

The most striking example of Gresset’s attacks on the monastic life is his epistle on the “Élection d’un Moine abbé,” also known as “L’Abbaye.” The epistle was written around 1740-41 and was dedicated to François-Claude, then chevalier, later marquis de Chauvelin (1716-1773), brother of the fiercely anti-Jesuit Jansenist abbé Chauvelin.\textsuperscript{274} The poem remained unpublished until 1800, but in 1748, in the aftermath of his election in the French Academy, it was included by Gresset in the summary of an authorized edition, projected but never published, of his own works.\textsuperscript{275} Gresset therefore did not disown this piece as a philosophic excess, as an anti-Christian pamphlet written while under Parisian philosophe influence. Indeed it was not, despite its fierce anti-monastic language. Starting with the first strophe that described an abbéy on the brink of elections as “a monastic tavern” where everything is “fermenting” due to infights for the abatial...


\textsuperscript{274} See Gaston Maugras, The Duc de Lauzun and the court of Louis XV (London: Osgood, 1895), 41-42.

\textsuperscript{275} Cayrol, Essai, 1: 189.
licensure,\textsuperscript{276} the poem went on to touch, in a torrential manner, on every possible vice exhibited or hidden by monks. Thus, the abbot was just a “mitred ass” abusing his position and using his "priestly villainy" in order to get drunk unpunished. The monks themselves had an oily, "hypocritical tone" of voice and were little else than "dull and obese cockroach[es]," "dim and heavyset reptile[s]," base, "imbecile" creatures.\textsuperscript{277}

It was not anti-Christian prejudice, but political and economic concern that prompted Gresset’s diatribe. Gresset was revolted by the fact that the lands accumulated by that abbéy over the centuries would serve no other purpose than to fatten some monastic idlers: “Those homicidal cadavers/ Those bloodthirsty vampires.”\textsuperscript{278} Gresset was not attacking all monks, but just those monks who were not useful to society. His point of attack was not that of the secular Enlightenment, but that of reform Catholicism with physiocratic overtones. Gresset’s poem signalled the emergence of the themes that would dominate French political economic debate in the 1740s and 1750s, namely the demographic decline, the importance and desirability of a \textit{noblesse commerçante}, the role of agriculture for a national economy, patriotism, the debate over the role of luxury, and finally the reform or streamlining of monastic orders according to social utility, a preoccupation resulting most famously in the expulsion of the Jesuits from France, the creation of Lomenie de Brienne’s Comission des Reguliers,\textsuperscript{279} and, to the dismay of both

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{276} Gresset, \textit{Oeuvres}, 2 vols (Paris: Renouard, 1811), 1: 156.
\item \textsuperscript{277} “Un obscur et pesant reptile,/Un être plateamont tondu,/Simulacre ignare, imbécile,/ De la terre poids inutile” (Gresset, \textit{Oeuvres}, 1: 158).
\item \textsuperscript{278} Gresset, \textit{Oeuvres}, 1: 160.
\end{itemize}

If the anti-luxury discourse was, in many ways, a noble discourse meant to defend the impoverished sword nobility against rich Third Estate social climbers,\footnote{281}{Renato Galliani, \textit{Rousseau, le Luxe et l'Idéologie Nobiliaire: Étude Socio-Historique}, (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1989).} Gresset used the anti-luxury discourse to defend the old, impoverished military noble families against rich ecclesiastics of humble extraction. Gresset deplored the possibility of a monk of humble origins becoming, as abbé, master over lands that otherwise, as a peasant, he would have had to work upon.\footnote{282}{“L’âne mitré va se montrer,/ Et régner sur ces mêmes terres/ Qu’il étoit né pour labourer” (Gresset, \textit{Oeuvres}, 1: 158).} Gresset was not upset at the idea that a peasant could become abbé, but that nobles, evoked in their medieval accoutrements in a manner that reminds us of Villon (“Preux barons à courts manteaux/ Hauts justiciers, grand-senechaux”), had ruined themselves making land donations to monasteries in which monks did not actually perform their religious or social duties, did not pray for their benefactors’ souls or work for the benefit of the poor.\footnote{283}{“De gros moines en repos,/ Munis de vos chartres moisies,/Broutent et boivent sur vos os,/Sans prier pour vos effigies,/Bons seigneurs, que vous étiez sots!/Vous avez cru de vos largesses/Doter l'Honneur, la Piété,/Et laisser avec vos richesses/Des pères à la Pauvreté;/Que le Dieu juste récompense/Vos benoîtes intentions!” (Gresset, \textit{Oeuvres}, 1: 158-59).} Taking up the theme of the influence of religion on demography and economics, a theme launched by Montesquieu’s
Lettres Persanes and that would flourish during the 1740s-1760s, Gresset echoed the enlightened opinion that the economic decline of France was caused by the malign influence of the monasteries that both decreased the population and kept very rich lands out of the economic circuit.

Gresset elaborated on both of these themes, showing that France only lost in labourers, craftsmen and useful citizens in return for what it gained in “solitary little runts” ("avortons solitaires") who devoured all the riches of France. Gresset also argued that the economic decline brought by the inefficient administration and corrupt morals of the monks subverted the well-being of many French families, especially of the noble families who, after years of military service forcing them to neglect their lands, returned to impoverished ancestral manors. Indeed, the chevalier de Chauvelin, to whom Gresset dedicated this poem, was at the time serving in the French army stationed in Westphalia, and would go on to distinguish himself in the War of Austrian Succession (1740-1748), before being appointed lieutenant-general in 1749, a position that led him to a successful military cum diplomatic career in Italy, and later to being a courtier and favorite of Louis XV, at whose card table he would die on 24 June 1773. It is thus possible to read Gresset’s poem as the sign of a conflict between the provincial, small noblesse d’épée and those rich monasteries and churchmen whose existence could not be justified by their public utility. Gresset deplored that the military nobility as well as the secular clergy (“That poor and virtuous priest,/ Surrounded by misery,/ Sad pastor of the


287 “Ce guerrier, qui des sa jeunesse/ T’immola ses biens, son repos,/ Chargé du poids de sa tristesse/ Et d’une indigente noblesse,/ Après soixante ans de travaux,/ Traîne sa pénible vieillesse” (Gresset, *Oeuvres*, 1: 162).
all the unhappy people/ Which he edifies, enlightens,/ Consoles and suffers more than")\textsuperscript{288} and the man of science or of letters ("All those wise men whose lights/ Spread throughout other nations")\textsuperscript{289} had to live lives of deprivation, while monks such as those lambasted in his poem flourished. But the military nobles, the secular clergy, and the man of letters and of science composed a sort of ideal Estates General of "necessary men" ("hommes nécessaires") whose lack of adequate means of subsistence led to the decline of France.\textsuperscript{290} In order to halt this decline, Gresset called upon a "compassionate and generous king" whose "pacific and charitable" hand ("main triomphante/ Et pacifique et bienfaisante")\textsuperscript{291} would help restore a more natural state of things. By reforming "the old abuse of monkish robbery" ("l’abus antique/ Du brigandage monachique") and returning the monastic lands to their rightful users and uses, the king would reclaim the "honour of humanity."\textsuperscript{292}

Gresset finished his poem by arguing that he was not anti-Christian, but just a reasonable Christian who would be understood as such by any "friend of Homer and of Plato," that is by any truly enlightened person who would surely not fail to detect the soundness of a line of reasoning that bigots would decry as criminal.\textsuperscript{293} Gresset, "always sincerely faithful" to Christianity, made clear that he did not intend to attack the useful, active, socially involved monastic orders, those dedicated to social works, to preserving

\textsuperscript{288} "Ce prêtre pauvre et vertueux,/ Environné de la misère,/ Triste pasteur des malheureux/ Qu’il édifie et qu’il éclaire./ Les console, et souffre plus qu’eux" (Gresset, \textit{Oeuvres}, 1: 162-63).
\textsuperscript{289} "Tous ces sages dont la lumière/ Va dans les autres nations" (Gresset, \textit{Oeuvres}, 1: 63).
\textsuperscript{290} Gresset, \textit{Oeuvres}, 1: 162-63.
\textsuperscript{291} Gresset, \textit{Oeuvres}, 1: 169.
\textsuperscript{292} "On reverra de ces biens/ Couler enfin les sources vives/Sur les utiles citoyens" (Gresset, \textit{Oeuvres}, 1: 165, 169).
\textsuperscript{293} "Tu ne peux qu’approuver le ton:/ Un bigot y verra des crimes;/ Tu n’y verras que la raison" (Gresset, \textit{Oeuvres}, 1: 166).
culture, advancing education, or to ministering to the poor.\footnote{294} If the monastic dens of iniquity were threatened by Gresset with “a new law,/ Making better use of their revenues,” the monastic establishments that gave France and the world such people as Bourdaloue, Massillon, Dom Calmet, Louis de Sanleque, Mabillon, Malebranche, Vanière, the Jesuit Porée and other such “inextinguishable lights” (“lumières inaltérables”) had to be cherished for the sake of France, whom they rush to serve without degrading their competition into bitter "division," and of civilization, since their "intelligence" is the best bulwark against "ignorance" and atheism.\footnote{295}

The perception of the Jesuits as a society dedicated to the pursuit of learning, to education and missionary work appeared in Gresset’s warm poem \textit{Les Adieux aux Jésuites} (1735-6), dedicated to the abbé Marquet [first name unknown].\footnote{296} Fondly recalling the time he had spent in the Society of Jesus, Gresset wrote that it was just his

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[294] “Je n’attaque point les asiles/ Où le Savoir et la Vertu/ Ont réuni leurs domiciles” (Gresset, \textit{Oeuvres}, 1: 166).
\item[295] “Qu’ils vivent! qu’au bien de la France/Concourant sans division,/ Ils mettent tous d’intelligence/ Une barrière à l’ignorance,/ Un frein à l’irréligion!” (Gresset, \textit{Oeuvres}, 1: 167).
\item[296] Marquet’s most important publication is a \textit{Discours sur l’esprit de société} (Paris, 1735) in which he celebrated the new, enlightened sociability while denouncing the idle rich and the solitary misanthropic philosophers. Marquet argued that people are born "for society," that solitude only added to our "natural powerlessness," and therefore that it was important to shun "philosophical pride" in favor of sociability, since it was in society that people could cultivate their "lights" and thus foster the stability of the state. See \textit{Mercure de France}, November 1735, 2448-2452. See also, Robert Mauzi, \textit{L’idée du bonheur dans la littérature et la pensée françaises au XVIIIe siècle} (Geneva: Slatkine, 1979), 593. Marquet is also credited with writing a "waspish" \textit{Lettre sur Pamela} (Paris, 1742), Samuel Richardson’s sentimental novel. See Tom Keymer, Peter Sabor, eds, \textit{The Pamela Controversy: Criticisms and Adaptations of Samuel Richardson’s Pamela, 1740-1750}, 6 vols (London: Pickering, 2001), 2: xix-xxii, 224-225. This abbé Marquet might be the same as the abbé Marquet de Villefonds, author of \textit{Panégyrique de saint Louis, prononcé à l’Académie française, le 25 août 1738} (Paris, 1738). Quérard considered them one and the same, while Conlon listed them under separate entries. The discourse was well reviewed by the \textit{Mémoires pour l’histoire des sciences et des beaux arts} (otherwise known as the Jesuit \textit{Mémoires de Trévoux, or Journal de Trévoux}, November 1738, 2287-2289. This fact that might support the idea that the second Marquet had something to do with the Jesuits, and so that maybe these two authors were one and the same, that is, Gresset’s Jesuit Marquet from the Sorbonne.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
love of “independence” that prompted him to leave the Society of Jesus. Gresset’s farewell became thus an occasion for attacking the enemies of the Jesuits. Gresset deplored the fact that the Jesuits were “too much fought against, too poorly known," despite the fact that the Jesuits were really patriotic, dedicated to serving God, the poor, “la patrie,” and the king. Gresset left the Jesuits but decided not to join the group of those who in getting out of the Society started to blast it immoderatly. He declined to make a career out of a fashionable anti-Jesuitism.

It would be easy to dismiss Gresset as an opportunist, as some historians did, particularly since, as we will see in the next chapter, he remained close to Jesuit dévot circles and networks of patronage. But his writings and, as we will see in the next chapter, his career show us a man who abhored France’s division into parties. One of the reasons why Voltaire wanted to take Gresset under his wing was precisely in order to sell him as an angry young ex-Jesuit, a role that Gresset refused to play. And if Gresset refused to attack what he regarded as the socially useful religious orders, he also, after an early outburst in La Chartreuse (1735) against the Parlement (that "cave of chicanery," a "profane court/ Bending the Immortal’s law,/ And subverting throne and altar/By an Anglican eloquence"), refused to take any part in the Jesuit-Jansenist controversy or in the literary scandals opposing Moreau or Palissot to the philosophes, and on those

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299 “Que d’autres, s’exhalant, dans leur haine insensée,/En reproches injurieux,/Cherchant, en les quittant, à les rendre odieux:/Pour moi, fidele au vrai, fidele à ma penséee,/C’est ainsi qu’en partant je leur fais mes adieux” (Gresset, Oeuvres choisies, 228-29).
300 “Antre de la chicane [...] tribunal profane/ Pliant la loi de l’Immortel,/ Par une éloquence anglicane/ Saper et le trone et l’autel” (Gresset, Oeuvres, 1: 60).
occasions when he raised his voice he did so in his own name, as a French writer and a Christian defending Gallican virtues, not as a faction leader.

Moving between the world of his anti-Jesuit and pro-Jansenist friends such as the brothers Chauvelin, the dévoté duchess of Chaulnes, the fluctuating circles of Mme de Pompadour, the ultramontane patronage of bishops such as Bussy Rabutin in the middle 1730s and La Motte in the 1750s, Gresset argued for the importance of “harmony”. Thus, in an early Discours sur l’Harmonie, written in Latin in his Jesuit days, in 1733, and published in French in 1737, Gresset argued that harmony is a natural law: “The entire natural realm is the realm of harmony; everything that breathes, everything that is sensitive is under its empire.” Using stock quotations and references from Osiris and Orpheus to King David and Saint Augustin, Gresset claimed that philosophy was less socially useful than musical harmony, because musical harmony civilizes and binds people together. Arguing that there are two kinds of “republics,”

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302 "Tout l’empire de la nature est l’empire de l’harmonie; tout ce qui respire, tout ce qui est né sensible, subit sa loi" (Gresset, Œuvres, 2: 170). Gresset (Œuvres, 2: 174) proclaimed the “sublime Lulli” as the greatest French composer, the same composer whose “harmonic” cause would later, in the Querelle des bouffons days, be embraced by the anti-philosophes, anti-“melodic” parti de la Reine. The whole dispute only served to reinforce Gresset’s point, by making a composer who could bore everybody into submission into a point of acrid ideological debate.

political and literary, Gresset wrote that any science had to be useful to the first and to embellish the second.\textsuperscript{304} And philosophy failed to do this since it did not touch the “heart,” it did not transform citizens, it just irritated them by subjecting them to a continuous barrage of sophisms, of “vagues systems,” and “preposterous pipe dreams.” If philosophy was decried as a “specious and too sterile a science, that imparts to the state the most stubborn discourse makers without offering it better citizens,” the exact sciences were “too cold sciences, which give all to speculation, a little to sentiment, and nothing to man.” Grammar was a science “which teaches us to name the virtues without teaching us to acquire them,” while history, a “science often distressing” ("souvent désolante") dealt only in a parade of human follies that would better be forgotten.\textsuperscript{305}

If literary historians saw in this discourse just a scholarly exercise of little value, its importance lies in the fact that it allows us to determine that Gresset was heavily indebted to the sort of "fideist skepticism" (\textit{apud} Richard Popkin) that, while berating the “uncertainty and vanity of the sciences and the arts” ever since the days of Cornelius Agrippa until those of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, would play an important role in the advance of the new science and of a new philosophy by the continuous appeal to a \textit{prisca sapientia}, to some form of ancient and/or natural wisdom, religion or laws that would

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\textsuperscript{304} Gresset, \textit{Oeuvres}, 2: 192.

have an authority guaranteed by continuity and tradition, not by reason alone.\textsuperscript{306} This appeal could translate, as it did in the case of Gresset, into an interest in practical, empirical matters, into a discourse of renewal aimed at stressing the importance of practice over that of dogma, be it philosophical, scientific or theological. “The usefulness of these sciences has rarely to do with morals,”\textsuperscript{307} argued Gresset who, in a civic-republican mood, applauded Sparta, bashed useless “erudition,” not unlike the \textit{philosophes},\textsuperscript{308} and argued that cultural wars, fostered by “philosophy” and “fake zeal,” were ruinous for “la patrie.”\textsuperscript{309} Gresset’s scepticism regarding the utility of sciences was civicly minded, and had patriotic undertones. "The unity of the citizens is the basis of thrones, the seal of monarchies, the support of crowns,"\textsuperscript{310} proclaimed Gresset in a phrase that announced the political philosophy of his patriotic historical tragedy \textit{Édouard III}, that we will discuss later in this chapter.

A supporter of “harmony,” Gresset wrote in his \textit{L'Abbaye} that he would have liked to see all the religious orders “competing without rift” for the glory of France, the spreading of culture and the defeat of atheism. The point of view that allowed him to contemplate such an alliance was an enlightened Christian patriotism balancing truly


\textsuperscript{310} “L’union des citoyens est la base des trônes, le sceau des monarchies, l’appui des diadèmes” (Gresset, \textit{Oeuvres}, 2: 201).
contemplative virtues with social engagement for the advancement of the common good. It is perhaps appropriate to note here that Gresset was known and advertised himself, in poems such as La Chartreuse, as the “lazy Gresset” (“le paresseux Gresset”), the "kind" (“doux”) and “solitary” Gresset. Gresset’s Horatian odes to the countryside, to a life lived far from the cities and their agitation, together with his Hoffmanesque apology of the mansarde marked him as one of the first modern poets of urban alienation,\textsuperscript{311} influencing such Romantic poets as Thomas Gray, Edgar Allan Poe, or Sergey Pushkin. Daniel Gordon, discussing the way in which Jean-Baptiste Suard used this trope in the 1750s, found that this “laziness” was meant to indicate a writer above factional disputes and “enthusiasm,” a man who was more interested in socializing than in social climbing.\textsuperscript{312} We could hazard the hypothesis that Gresset’s repeated representation of himself as “lazy” might not only indicate him as one of the creators of the “enlightened” language of sociability, but also, since the image was accepted as such by many other writers, as a man of irenic temperament and eminently sociable virtues. For Gresset, being “paresseux” was a consequence of being a “favorite of the muses,” and it did not mean laziness as much as a detachment from current affairs, from factional intrigue, in order to embrace an enlightened patriotism. Gresset’s patriotism was related to his neoclassical aesthetics of impartiality, of detachment, that made him write as a moralist, not about individuals but about generic moral types, and to shun personal attacks and the sort of party politics that fostered them.\textsuperscript{313}

\textsuperscript{311} For this tradition, see Denis Donoghue, The Old Moderns: Essays on Literature and Theory (New York: Knopf, 1994), ix-31.
\textsuperscript{312} Gordon, Citizens Without Sovereignty, 141-45.
Gresset’s politics, like his poetics, were based on respect for "the good old times" ("la bonne antiquité"), for what he called "the felicitous innocence guiding the soul and the language" in those happy times before the advent of party politics and of factional struggle. Like many supporters of the “ancient constitution” discourse, which he delivered in his historical drama Édouard III, Gresset was a “patriot” modernizer. The ancient constitution, the ancient laws, a “pure,” classical French language were principles of development, of modernizing France, not of a neomedieval reaction. For Gresset, the corruption of the monks denounced in L’Abbaye was the result of perpetuating some empty ecclesiastical and political forms, such as those brilliantly depicted in Le Parrain Magnifique, a poem written quite late in life, in the 1760s. Le Parrain Magnifique was composed therefore after Gresset’s famous 1758 Lettre sur la comédie, a public act of contrition denounced by the philosophes as a tartouffade. Gresset made public readings of Le Parrain Magnifique at the Academy of Amiens, his fief, and in 1774 he presented the poem to Queen Marie-Antoinette together with a dedication in which he stressed the “patriotic usefulness” of his poem, the “old fashioned mirth” that fostered the patriotic harmony spoiled by the philosophes (“people with plans, died in the wool quibblers, legislators of any and all doctrines”).

If Gresset took pride in the fact that his poem managed to be funny without using any of the "three big fashionable" propellers of success, that is "nastiness, filth, and atheism" ("la méchanceté, l’ordure, et l’irréligion"), Le Parrain Magnifique was nothing but a satire on “feudalism,” on the medieval aspects of the Old Regime. It is, in

24:4 (December 2010), 550-575.
315 Cayrol, Essai, 1: 356-57.
316 Cayrol, Essai, 1: 351.
many ways, a Tocquevillian reading of the alienating effects of a society given to preserving and multiplying meaningless social distinctions and hierarchies, and a brilliant attack on the disjunction between the political and social signifier and signified, between for example the face value of a rank and the meager virtues and skills of the man occupying it, an attack similar to that mounted, in economic terms, by the physiocrats with their discourse about the confusion between money and real wealth.\footnote{1}{Having its starting point in an anecdote recounted by the duchess of Chaulnes, who even prompted Gresset to develop it into a comedy or a poem, \textit{Le Parrain Magnifique} described the way in which a vain \textit{abbé de Cour} with illusions of grandeur and the benefice of an abbéy in Saint-Médard ruined a solid citizen ("bon bourgeois") of Soissons. The abbé, or "Monseigneur," wanted to be a godfather but did not have the money, so he acted as "honorary godfather," while the mayor had to cover the costs of being allowed to stand in for such an august character as "Monseigneur." This religious fiction, similar to the legal and financial fictions used in Old Regime France, offered Gresset the occasion to comment upon the larger questions of debt, public credit, and the inadequacy of France's corporate structure, topics that were extremely salient in the 1760s and 1770s, in the midst of frantic governmental attempts to solve the rising public debt of the French XVIIIème siècle: \textit{de la féodalité aux lumières}, (Bruxelles: Éditions Complexe, 1984); Harold A. Ellis, \textit{Boulainvilliers and the French Monarchy. Aristocratic Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century France} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); John Markoff, \textit{The Abolition Of Feudalism: Peasants, Lords, And Legislators In The French Revolution} (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); Jay M. Smith, \textit{The Culture of Merit: Nobility, Royal Service, and the Making of Absolute Monarchy in France, 1600-1789} (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); James Lowth Goldsmith, \textit{Lordship in France, 1500-1789} (New York: Peter Lang, 2005); Annelien de Dijn, \textit{French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville. Liberty in a Levelled Society?} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).}{107}
monarchy. Torn between his valet’s warnings regarding his fragile financial situation, and his desire to cut a figure, the abbé found a way to avoid bankruptcy while satifying his desire to act magnanimously in appealing to the "esprit d'administration," that is using the same spurious contractual tokens as those used by tradesmen who knew how to "keep their word without actually keeping it." The abbé lived in order to rule his little world according to outdated rules and baseless ideas, musing on: "Little imaginary laws,/ Nice speculative rules,/ And decrees without any consequence whatsoever." The result of these idle thoughts, fueled by erudition and by an ideological clinging to the past, was a desire to revive those feudal rights and ceremonies that might help “Monseigneur” show off. It was, in Gresset’s description, what later historians would like to describe as an “aristocratic reaction,” aiming at reviving obsolete feudal prerogatives that irritated the people without serving any social purpose.

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320 “Avec esprit d’administration/ On se tire de tout. L’auguste solitaire/ Résout, sublime invention!/ De n’être plus que Parrain honoraire./ Et de nommer l’enfant par procuration./ Ainsi par d’heureux tours, des marches étrangères,/ Les négociateurs, les aigles des affaires,/ Expliquent les traités, et, dans tous les cas/ Que les engagements sont des mots arbitraires/ Ou des faiblesses populaires,/ Savent tenir parole en ne la tenant pas” (Jean-Baptiste-Louis Gresset, Le Parrain Magnifique [Paris, 1810], 31-32). On the post-revisionist fate of the once fashionable “aristocratic reaction” thesis used to explain the origins of the French Revolution, see Smith, Nobility Reimagined, 217-221.

321 "De petites lois d’imagination,/ De jolis règlements de spéculation,/ Et des arrêts sans conséquence” (Gresset, Le Parrain Magnifique, 71).

social currency at face value, petrified by respect and admiration for otherwise meaningless distinctions, the mayor of Soissons rushes to represent “Monseigneur,” contributing thus to an inflationary "bubble" of representations: "Mister Pommier [...] Will represent him who represents/ Everything that could be represented." The result of this perpetuation or revival of the minuties of a society of orders in which most of the things did not actually served their purpose and where the rules of representation were broken by a sort of fake social currency, was that French social life became empty and bitter, and the people came to envy and resent those situated just above them on the social ladder, a sort of alienation of the sort later described by Tocqueville when talking about the Old Regime France as a "société groupusculaire."

If there is a continuity between the attacks on the social economy of the monastic orders from *L'Abbaye* (1750s) and the attack on feudalism in *Le Parrain Magnifique* (1760s), there is also a further development of the patriotic theme in the work undertaken by Gresset on Pierre Fulcrand de Rosset’s poem *L'Agriculture* (1774), which Gresset revised during 1771 and 1772. Gresset took upon him this strenuous task at the suggestion of Henri-Léonard-Jean-Baptiste Bertin, count de Bourdeilles. Bertin was controleur général des finances (1759-1763) and secrétaire d’État between 1763 and 1780, a protégé of Mme de Pompadour, and a minister who was in such favor with Louis

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323 “Monsieur Pommier, rempli de la scène frappante/ Ou son goût pour éclat va se manifester,/ Sent d’autant mieux combien ce jour doit le flatter,/ Qu’il va représenter celui qui représente/ Tout ce qu’on peut représenter” (Gresset, *Le Parrain Magnifique*, 41).


that the king created for him a small department of state dedicated to the administration of the mines, manufactures, and the agriculture of France. Bertin was a qualified physiocrat, who also protected the historian and man of letters Jacob-Nicolas Moreau, a staunch defender, like Gresset, of monarchical absolutism and the creator, with Bertin’s support, of the “cabinet de Chartes” which aimed to put historical erudition in the service of the rationalization of French public administration.\textsuperscript{326} Patriotism and enlightened absolutism went thus hand in hand with physiocratic political economy.

Gresset participated in this movement by helping Bertin’s propaganda efforts. Rosset’s \textit{L’Agriculture} was meant to be a sort of French \textit{Georgics}, and was printed by Bertin at the Imprimerie Royale, with very beautiful and expensive engravings. Unfortunately, and despite Gresset’s exertions, the poem failed to attract much glory and was overshadowed by the abbé Delille’s translations of Virgile’s \textit{Georgics} and by Saint-Lambert’s \textit{Les Saisons}.\textsuperscript{327} Gresset’s observations and suggestions were overwhelmingly rejected by Rosset, but Gresset’s criticisms were raised in the name of “utility” and of defending the “purity”, “nobility” and “elegance” of French language.\textsuperscript{328} “Utility” and “purity” could preside over both language and institutional reform, and had a good claim to be grounded in the French national character that found its expression in fundamental institutions such as the monarchy, in ancient virtues and in classical French.

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grammar of language and that of political reform were, for Gresset, of the same vintage and did not allow the tortuous ways of neo-feudal institutions or of “neologisms,” of philosophical jargon. "Feudalism" and neologisms were, for Gresset, social and ideological idioms united in corrupting the essentially national, sound, plain, French language, moeurs, and laws. Bertin sponsored in Rosset the physiocratic apology of a king, Louix XV, who allegedly recognized in agriculture “the source of the real wealth of the State” and who accordingly prepared “salutary laws” received by his subjects with that “filial submission born less out of the force of authority than out of the sweetness of persuasion.” This theme chimed in with Gresset’s own discourse of a patriotic king developed in Édouard III (1740). The image of the king proposed in that tragedy was that of a sovereign who, like Rosset’s king, would restrain himself only to “conquest[s] of wisdom and benevolence” such as securing the properties of his subjects and ruling by “persuasion” and by benevolent lawmaking instead of by despotically imposing his will. To the extent to which the free circulation of grains meant not only breaking the royal Court-created monopolies and a return to a more “natural” economy, but also a strengthening of provincial life, and thus a reinvigoration of the political nation freed from ministerial despotism, the physiocratic discourse also fitted well with Gresset’s own early and perpetual denunciations of life in the cities, and of courtisan imposture, as well as with his pastoralism.

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329 Pierre Fulcrand de Rosset, L’Agriculture (Paris, 1774), iv.
330 Rosset, L’Agriculture, iii-iv.
331 Rosset, L’Agriculture, v.
332 From his early translation of Virgil’s Eclogues (published first in 1734, and then in a revised and supplemented edition in 1741), to his much admired and influential idyll on Le Siècle pastoral put to music by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, to his various Épîtres filled with celebrations and descriptions of the country life that were neither wholly conventional, nor entirely devoid of acuity of feeling, to his celebration of the urban “mansarde,” Gresset remained consistently a writer keeping his distance from the urban huffing and puffing celebrated by authors such as Voltaire.
But if Gresset attacked the neomedieval excesses of the first two orders, and if in *L’Abbaye* he appealed to a strong central authority to curb these excesses and to reform the social and economic structures that made them possible, he also insisted that it was only by respecting the “ancient constitution” that the absolute power did not become a despotic power. If the exercise of authority was grounded in social utility, in the desire to progress, and thus in the future, liberty was grounded in the “ancient laws,” in the past. Moreover, it was a republican and aristocratic liberty, guarded by an austere military nobility dedicated to the state, and by a political nation that had the role to “seal” the king’s will. However, Gresset did not argue for a sort of “English constitution” with intermediary orders and institutions acting according to their own self-interest and thus serving unwittingly as bulwarks against despotism.333 There was no place for corporate self-interest and self-absorption in Gresset’s paradigm, in which despotism and neofeudalism were self-interested distortions of monarchy and aristocracy respectively. On the contrary, Gresset grounded his political thinking on the idea of a common good, argued for a harmony of the Three Estates, and combined a classical republicanism with enlightened despotism. The interval between the past (of the republican ancient constitution) and the future (of the modernizing monarchy) was arched by the mediatory presence of a socially useful Church that stood, with God as witness to the rights and wrongs of both people and the king. This debate was most clearly articulated by Gresset

in his tragedy *Edouard III* (1740), the first to be published and the only political one of his three plays.

The story of *Edouard III* is melodramatically complicated. Alzonde, the successor to the throne of Scotland usurped by the English king Édouard III, was captured by the English while trying to return from her exile in Norway. As a prisoner at the English court, Alzonde hides her real identity under the name of Aglaé and falls in love with Édouard III whom she plans to leave in order to go to Scotland and regain her throne by fomenting a rebellion. Her ally in this enterprise is the villainous captain of the guards, Volfax. Volfax, although trusted and showered with rewards by Édouard III, betrays his king because he is full of spite against the prime minister, the duke of Vorcestre. The duke of Vorcestre is a pacifist, and advises the king not to pursue further military campaigns against the Scots, but to make an alliance with them by marrying their queen who was, the duke of Vorcestre believed, still in exile in Norway. But Édouard III is enraged by the old duke because he is in love with Vorcestre’s daughter, the beautiful Eugénie. Vorcestre, the very image of a dignified father if ever there was one, strongly forbids his daughter to answer Édouard III’s passion. Therefore, angry at Vorcestre and unable to fulfill his love, Édouard III is more than ready to take treacherous Volfax’s advice to pursue further military campaign against the Scots and thus to take revenge on the battlefield for his unrequited love. In offering the king this advice, Volfax hoped to prompt Édouard into acting foolishly, thereby fomenting a Scottish rebellion that would bring Alzonde/Aglaé back on the throne. Volfax convinces the king that Vorcestre is a traitor, who preaches peace in Scotland in order to usurp the Scottish throne for himself. Édouard III throws Vorcestre in prison, and the only means left to Eugénie to save her father is to give herself to the king, whom she in fact loves. But her father opposes this, even if it means losing his head to a spiteful Édouard III. At this moment, an *amicus ex*
machina, Arondel, returns from Norway and, after trying to help Vorcestre escape from prison, stabbs Volfax, recognizes Alzonde for the queen of Scotland that she was and that he knew from Norway, and proves Volfax’s and Alzonde’s treachery to the king. Escaping the guards, Alzonde poisons Eugénie and then kills herself, while Vorcestre is freed from his prison.

Gresset’s contemporaries did not dislike this Cornellian tragedy, but they concentrated more on the question of whether having Arondel stab Volfax on the scene was defensible from the point of view of the classical dramatic rules or not. Voltaire, then still an admirer of Shakespeare, approved of this innovation and liked the English complexion of this tragedy. On the other hand, Françoise de Graffigny, Gresset’s good friend, noted that, startled at the first representation by such a cynical "English" hero as Arundel, who talked bitterly and slayed his enemies in the open, the Parisian public embraced him by the third representation. Mme de Graffigny, who as playwright produced sentimental comedies such as Cénie (1750), and La Fille d’Aristide (1758), did not agree with having a murder on the stage and considered the whole scene scandalous from the point of view of the French national manners. She contested the right of

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335 “Edouart Trois [...] fait parler, dit-on, un milord Arondel en philosophe englois et hardi, mais ce qui est etonnant, c’est que ce milord assassine un Ferfax sur la scene. La premiere fois, cette nouvauté a etonné du premier mouvement et du second a fait rire. Les autres fois on l’a aplaudit et c’est a present le bel endroit de la piece. Que dis-tu de ces faquins de comédiens qui chicannent pour des choses authorisée par des exemples et qui recoivent une nouvauté si fort contre nos mœurs, car ce n’est ny comme Camile ny comme Zaire, c’est au beau milieu de la scene. Le blessé veut mettre l’epée à la main, mais le coup qu’il a recu lui traverse si bien le cœur qu’il meurt,” in Françoise de Graffigny, Correspondance, 13 vols (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1985-2010), 2: 323 (letter 241). Camille in Pierre Corneille’s Horace, and Zaiire in Voltaire’s Zaire are killed in the wings.
dramatic authors to kill their characters “live,” on the stage and not backstage, even in her bestselling *Lettres d’une Péruvienne* (1748). In that novel, the “good savage” Zilie cannot abide this spectacle, while the “civilized” French enjoy seeing their heroes suffering and dying on the stage. For Mme de Graffigny, being civilized meant being humane and natural, while being artificial, enjoying overly refined pleasures, meant being a barbarian. Mme de Graffigny argued that enjoying the death of a hero, the suffering of others, was not natural, and therefore not humane, therefore not civilized. Consequently, Mme de Graffigny, rejected the butchery of neoclassical theatre with arguments similar to those that would be used by a repentant Gresset in his *Lettre sur la comedie* (1758): “They took me to a place where they represent [...] the actions of people that are not alive anymore; with this difference that while we keep alive the memory of the wisest and the most virtuous among us, I think that here they celebrate only the fools and the cruel ones. Those playing them shout and shake furiously; and I have seen one pushing his fury so far as to kill himself(336) [...] Could you believe, my dear Aza, that an entire people, whose appearance is otherwise so humane, can take pleasure in the re-enactment of miseries and crimes that once debased or overwhelmed their fellow men?”(337)

(336) “Il (le Petit Cornette) m’a conté la pièce nouvelle qui s’appelle *Sidnay*, qui est de Gresset, et qui établit le suicide,” wrote Mme de Graffigny to Devaux on 6 May 1745 (Graffigny, *Correspondance*, 6: 352 [letter 843]). Since *Sidney* had its premiere in 1745 and Mme de Graffigny started his work on the *Lettres d’une Péruvienne* in that same year, I think that Zilia’s letter takes aim at Sidney’s suicidal musings.

(337) “On m’a conduite dans un endroit, où l’on représente [...] les actions des hommes qui ne sont plus; avec cette différence que si nous nous ne rappelons que la mémoire des plus sages et des plus vertueux, je crois qu’ici on ne célèbre que les insensés et les méchants. Ceux qui les représentent, crient et s’agitent comme des furieux; j’en ai vu un pousser sa rage jusqu’à se tuer lui-même [...] Pourrait-on croire, mon cher Aza, qu’un peuple entier, dont les dehors sont si humains, se plaise à la représentation des malheurs ou des crimes qui ont autrefois avili, ou accablé leurs semblables?” (Françoise de Graffigny, *Lettres d’une Péruvienne*, ed. Jonathan Malinson [Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2002], 152).
Despite, or maybe because, of its murder on the stage, the play enjoyed a certain degree of success as a reading piece, and we know of at least one instance when nuns wanted to stage this tragedy in their monastery. One of the nuns was Diderot's sister, Denise, a nun in Langres who wrote in 1771 to ask her brother's opinion about staging this tragedy in her convent. As it turned out, Diderot, probably the best French dramatic critic of his age, a former student of both the Jesuits and the Jansenists, proved to be less enlightened than his cloistered sister, whose interest in a political play Diderot tried to discourage. Thus, Diderot wrote on 6 January 1772 that he did not approve of theatrical representations in convents because they tend to foster a "vanitous and profligate spirit" that is hard to exorcise afterwards. As for Édouard III, Diderot did not consider it appropriate for a nunish representation, since the first two acts contained "a series of political discourses that young persons will not understand," and the rest of the play displayed "beauties" more appropriate for a secular theatre than for a monastery. For example, Alzonde's death speech, Diderot continued, was a touching scene, but hardly a Christian one, such as those contained by Racine's "holy" tragedies. All in all, Diderot's rather conservative answer was that: "Either no tragedy at all, neither Edouard, nor Athalie, nor any other play; or, if there must be a theatrical representation, then make it of Racine's Athalie or Esther." 339


339 "L'on n'en retient qu'un esprit de vanité et de dissipation qu'on a dans la suite bien de la peine à réprimer [...] Ce [Édouard III] n’est pas un mauvais ouvrage ; mais il s’en manque bien que ce soit un chef d’œuvre. Il seroit facile de choisir mieux. Je le dirois devant l’auteur, qu’il ne seroit pas assez sottement vain pour s’en offenser. Les deux premiers actes sont une suite de discours politiques où de jeunes personnes n’entendront presque rien. Le reste de la pièce a des beautés ; mais ces beautés sont pour un théâtre fréquenté par des gens du monde, et non dressé dans une maison religieuse [...] Cette [Alzonde’s] mort est
In fact, Gresset’s tragedy was one of the best examples of his style of canonical innovation, of renewal through appeal to tradition. That was probably why the play still appealed to Diderot even long after Gresset’s public break with the philosophes in the 1750s. Diderot admired the political discourses of Gresset’s play that indeed was a patriotic and anti-despotic tragedy. But I will argue that its point of view is also an anti-philosophic one. Gresset’s apology of the ancient constitution was part of his discourse of plainness that would play such an important role for his moderate but real brand of Enlightenment.340 For Gresset, liberty was associated to plainness, to a straight access to meaning, to a public owenership and reference to the political or literary meaning that made the ruler’s economic credit and political credibility possible.341 The main character of the play was Vorcestre, described in Gresset’s dedication as: "A wise man, happy, and worthy of being so,/ The oracle of integrity,/ The father of the subjects, the adviser of his king,/ An honour for his fatherland and for humanity." 342 The tragedy is less about love des plus touchantes, mais n’est pas des plus chrétiennes. Il y a dans *Edouard trois cent autres morceaux tels que celui là, que nous admirons fort, nous autres profanes, mais qui doivent choquer des oreilles un peu scrupuleuses... Pourquoi ne pas se tenir à l*Athalie* de Racine ? C’est une pièce sainte... Voici donc mon avis: ou point de tragédie du tout, ni *Edouard*, ni *Athalie*, ni aucune autre ; ou, s’il y a nécessité de représenter une pièce de théâtre, que ce soit ou *l’Athalie* ou l*’Esther* de Racine" (Denis Diderot, *Correspondance*, eds. Georges Roth et Jean Varloot, 16 vols [Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1955-1970], 12: 18-22). The austerity of Diderot’s remarks and his bias towards the “sanctity” of Racine’s plays betrayed probably those traces of Jansenist culture identified in his writings by Monique Cottret, *Jansénismes et Lumières* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1998), 76-83.


342 “Un Sage, heureux, digne de l’être,/ L’oracle de la probité,/ Le Père des Sujets, le conseil de son Maître,/ L’honneur de la Patrie et de l’humanité” (Gresset, *Oeuvres*, 2: 3, "Introduction").
than about despotism and the ways in which a king might be lured into becoming a tyrant. The main conflict is that between Vorcestre, the virtuous, civic-minded, and peaceful Vorcestre, and the aggressive, plotting, resentful Volfax, who is empoisoned by unruly passions going from jealousy to love. Alzonde, in neoaugustinian fashion, trusts Volfax because she knows that, while jealous of Vorcestre, he is too “weak” to match Vorcestre in virtue. Therefore, Volfax decided to accomplish by crime what he was not able to do in an honest way. That’s why, Alzonde claims: “His ambition guarantess his faith towards me.”

Alzonde and Volfax are also, for Gresset, representatives of the “esprit de parti” which, contrary to the English model, was conceived by Gresset as a “seditious spirit.” Opposed to this seditious spirit, to this pursuit of a very passionate self-interest, fueled by anger, jealousy, revenge, desire to conquer, and love, is Vorcestre’s duty, centered on the ancient constitution, on republican virtues otherwise invoked by Alzonde also when it suits her. In a series of Cornellian dialogues between Vorcestre and Alzonde, between

343 Gresset, Oeuvres, 2: 83, Édouard III, act 1, scene I.
Vorestre and Edouard, and between Vorestre and Eugénie, Gresset laid out a systematic defense of the ancient republican virtues that underpin a truly enlightened monarchy. Alzonde invokes “la voix de la patrie” as a “tendre instinct” that calls upon her even in the middle of her comfortable captivity at the court of Edouard. Her desire, she says to Vorestre, is to lighten the burden of her own unhappy people. This impulse, she believes, should be “the most flattering right of an authority,” a duty to be accomplished by any means: "Love for your own country disregards any danger,/ And the hearts ruled by it ignore the ways to change."\textsuperscript{345}

Vorestre, while agreeing with Alzonde, stresses the importance of concord and cautions Alzonde on the hidden dangers of rash politics and of courtly affairs, depicting a world of imposture and machinations not far from that depicted by the French moralists of the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{346} That was why Vorestre stresses the importance of the virtuous minister, a subject of growing importance in an eighteenth-century France always denouncing "ministerial despotism."\textsuperscript{347} With roots in the Renaissance favorites of the king, but taking on an increasingly technocratic and thus somehow independent role, the ministers played an important role in eighteenth-century literature on political philosophy, when "great men" such as Sully, Richelieu, and Colbert were paraded as

\textsuperscript{345} “L’Amour de la patrie ignore le danger,/ Et le coeurs qu’il conduit ne sçavent point changer” (Gresset, Oeuvres, 2: 88, 90, Édouard III, 1:IV).


models of patriotic zeal and enlightened authority. Vorcestre himself pointed out, rather anachronistically since the play took place in the fourteenth century, that exercising authority for the common good was difficult after the state’s role had increased with the absolutist reformulation of the monarchy: “To foresee everything, to manage everything,/ Surrounded by envious persons united for the purpose of destruction,/ [...] Are just some of the dangers, slavery and hardships/ That the minister of any state has to endure." According to the patriot Vorcestre, the task of any good minister is to serve both the Throne and “la Patrie” by helping a patriot King, a citizen King, to preserve the liberty of his subjects: "Minister of a state ruled by two powers,/ Where I have, uniting Throne and Fatherland, to save the liberty and serve the monarchy,/ Strenghtening one by the other, and helping to bind together/ A people forever free and a citizen king." In order to stay this course, a minister should not fall prey to despair, vices or a desire for power, remaining a good Christian aware at all times "of the nothingness of greatness as of humanity." The people's frequent lapses into fanaticism require a minister sometimes to disregard the people's desires in order to better serve the people. In almost Pascalian tones, Gresset's Vorcestre talks about how, in order to be a a great man, a great ruler, one has to despise the people a little bit, to avoid nurturing any illusions about the people, and therefore not to crave its approval at all costs.

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349 “Vous ne pénétrez point les sombres profondeurs/ Des maux qui sont caches sous l’éclat des grandeurs;/ Quel accablat fardeau! Tout prévoir, tout conduire,/ Entoure d’envieux unis pour détruire[...] C’est peu que
Sceptical about popular virtues, Vorcestre urged caution against the attraction of the model of the great man as warrior and hero. Announcing the discourse of commercial virtue popularized by the philosophes and the Académie Française-sponsored cult of great men and Frenchmen, and adding his voice to a Court-prompted campaign to celebrate Louis XV as a pacific king, "le bien-aimé," Gresset’s Vorcestre argues that although war had been a “necessary evil” (“un malheur nécessaire”) for a long period of time, the true field of glory for a modern king is peace and justice: “And Heaven, which allows all of them to rule, will hold all the kings accountable for the blood they could have spared.” "Forget even the hero, a just king is greater,” says Vorcestre to a rash king Edouard who, spurred by his thwarted love for Eugenie and poisoned by Volfax’s intrigues, would like to let loose his passions by waging incessant wars and would like to allow London to count "my days by my conquests.”  

 lesions périls, l’esclavage et la peine/ Que dans tous les États le ministre entraine [...] Jugez quels nouveaux soins exigent mes devoirs,/ Ministre d’un Empire ou règnent deux pouvoirs,/ Ou je dois, unissant le Trône et la Patrie, sauver la liberté, servir la Monarchie,/ Affermir l’un par l’autre, et former le lien/ D’un peuple toujours libre et d’un Roi citoyen [...] Maître et Juge de tout, de tout on est l’esclave,/ Et régir des mortels le destin inconstant,/ N’est que le triste droit d’apprendre à chaque instant/ Leurs méprisables vœux, leurs peines dévorantes,/ Leurs vices trop réels, leurs vertus apparentes,/ Et de voir de plus près l’affreuse vérité/ Du néant des grandeurs et de l’humanité” (Gresset, Oeuvres, 2: 90-91, Édouard III, 1: IV). For the necessary emotional distance that a minister should keep from the people, see Montesquieu’s L’esprit des lois, and La Beaumelle’s Mes pensées, in which he attributed the fall of Mazarin to the fact that he allowed himself to become unduly affected by the mazarinades, both of them discussed in Mircea Platon, "Newtonian Science, Commercial Republicanism, and the Cult of the Great Men in La Beaumelle’s Mes pensées (1752)," History of Political Economy 43: 3 (Fall 2011), 553-589.


351 "Et tous les Rois au Ciel, qui le laisse regner,/ Sont comptables du sang qu’ils peuvent épargner” (Gresset, Oeuvres, 2: 92-94, Édouard III, 1: V-VI).
Vorcestre trusts religion to remind people of their true nature, which in Vorcestre’s neo-Augustinian opinion is not to be trusted since it could easily envelop its vices in the cape of virtue. But the liberty of a people could be safeguarded by the institution of the Estates-General, the guardian of the ancient constitution and of the will of the people. The people has the duty to obey the king only if the royal will does not neglect the authority of the laws: "The king’s word is the oracle of the world./ Otherwise, you know this, the Fatherland spoke,/ And sanctioned by the voice of the whole State in assembly;/ Your choice, checked like this, becomes inviolable." It is therefore only by accepting the “frein” of having his will confirmed, “sealed” by the estates that the king’s will becomes law. The consequences of disregarding this rule, ruminates Vorcestre, would be hard to disregard: "This people, in its fury does not know its kings;/ Once the kings disregard the authority of the laws;/ The throne is on the edge of an abyss;/ It falls, when it is not grounded in justice anymore." 352 The will of the people that Vorcestre talks about is not the whim of the populace, but the wisdom of ages, the politically mature people of the parlementary tradition.353 A faithful Montesquieusian, Gresset's Vorcestre maintained that, since laws had to be the expression of a nation’s morals and character, the king had to take into consideration a historically informed body of customs and precepts: "Behold the misfortunes of our ancestors’ days;/ Their virtues are our laws, their misfortunes are our masters." Édouard III’s father, boldly states Vorcestre, lost his throne precisely because he neglected his duty as a protector of the

352 “La parole des Rois est l’oracle du monde./ D’ailleurs, vous le savez, la Patrie a parlé,/ Confirmé par la voix de l’État assemblé,/ Votre choix, par ce frein, devient inviolable [...] Ce peuple en sa fureur ne connoit plus ses Rois,/ Des qu’ils ont méconnu l’autorité des loix,/ Le trône est en ce lieux au bord d’un précipice,/ Il tombe, quand pour base il n’a plus le justice” (Gresset, Oeuvres, 2: 95-95, Édouard III, 1:VI).

ancient liberties. And everything is legitimate when defending those liberties: "He could have lived happily and die on the throne,/ If only he would not have forgotten that here our first masters are,/ After Heaven, the rights of our ancestors,/ That in this same palace the proud liberty/Had already smashed the bloody throne once,/ That here despotism is a tyranny,/ And that anything that serves to avenge the Fatherland is virtuous." Despotism was therefore a form of “tyranny,” since ruling without being bound by the ancient constitution constituted a usurpation, and as such it delegitimized the ruler.

Vorcestre appeals to a historically grounded notion of the people's will, understood as a set of traditions and institutions which sanction and thus legitimize the acts of any king who accepts to represent and be bound by the will embodied in those traditions and expressed through those institutions. To this, Édouard III opposes the image of the people as a mass and an altogether different type of legitimacy. Vorcestre’s king is legitimate only insofar he represents the will of the people as sedimented in tradition, in the historically confirmed virtues of his people. The legitimate king is an inheritor, he embodies and represents a meaning (that is a purpose, a culture, and methods) that he inherits and further elaborates upon only in tune with the will of the people. Édouard III, as a king, would like to make his own meaning, and that meaning is confirmed not by tradition, or by the historically informed and organized people, but by what could be called the mob, by the acclamation of a multitude eager to hear news and to cheer about the last conquests of the king. A warrior king makes his own meaning, he

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354 “Contemplez les malheurs des jours de nos Ancêtres,/ Leurs vertus sont nos loix, leurs malheurs sont nos Maîtres [...] Il pouvait vivre heureux et mourir couronné,/ S’il n’eut point oublié qu’ici, pour premier Maîtres,/ Marchent après le Ciel les droits de nos Ancêtres;/ Qu’en ce même Palais l’altière liberté/ Avoit déjà brise le trône ensanglanté;/ Qu’ici le despotisme est une tyrannie,/ Et que tout est vertu pour venger la Patrie” (Gresset, Oeuvres, 2: 95, Édouard III, 1:VI).
invents it on the battlefield, and he takes the people with him by infusing it with warriorlike enthusiasm. If Vorcestre invoked the political nation, the king talks about what seventeenth and eighteenth century lawyers, theologians and philosophes considered to be the “nation multitude,” the populace (“menu peuple”) easy to enflame by any impostor. Édouard III acts the part of an impostor, and thus of an illegitimate ruler, when he claims that he could lead by virtue of creating his own legitimacy by means of perpetual wars. In doing this, he does not represent the will of the political nation, but his own will, to which he would yoke the “rabble” and the soldiers living off his victorious campaigns and therefore ready to defend him: "A throne surrounded by heroes of my own making/ Does not have to fear this kind of mishaps [such as the older revolts against despotic kings];/ And if the revolt puts me in danger,/ Many victorious arms will be ready to defend me." Unwilling to accept the laws and the examples of his ancestors, Édouard wants to follow only the example of the lawmaker kings: "Inheriting their name, if I imitate your kings,/ I imitate only those who gave you laws." 356

There is thus, in Gresset’s tragedy, a tension between the old concept of the king as judge and defender of the laws of the realm, and the otherwise enlightened idea about the king as legislator.357 While Gresset was supporting a strong monarchy, and a modernizing one, he was worried that the legislator might use his power to overturn the fundamental laws of the realm and to rule by means of an alliance with the people as “multitude,” as Édouard III, and Linguet after him, proudly proclaims: “The fickle people
like any change,/ It supports you or not depending on the news:/ No matter how much one might have exposed himself in the course of an action,/ If he succeeds, then he was not foolish."

On the contrary, Édouard argues that it would be foolish to accept living and respecting the ancient constitution, and to learn from the virtues of the old kings, since those are mere "prejudices," which a real king is ready to discard for the sake of carving his own world with his own rules. A winner does not receive laws, he makes them, and doing otherwise would be a sign of blind superstition, of submission to a dead past that the new "hopes and lights" awarded by Heaven to the victorious kings encourage them to disregard.

Prompted by Volfax, who argued that Vorcestre wanted to limit "to merely reigning" a king destined to be a hero, Édouard III claimed that in revolting against him his subjects would only prove themselves to be foolishly "proud" ("orgueilleux"), and that their "savage and strange virtues" ("vertus farouches et bizarres") exposed them as barbarians. And at the root of all this stood a notion of "duty" that prompted people to resist the will of their kings. To the model of an independent people and of a peaceful and dutybound king that he rejected as mere prejudices, Edward opposed the idea of an independent king and an adoring people, bound not by duty but by its monarchs’ wishes and glory.

358 "Tout changement d’ailleurs plaît au Peuple volage,/ C’est sur l’évènement qu’il règle son suffrage:/ A quelque extrémité qu’on se soit expose;/ Qui parvient à succès, n’a jamais trop osé" (Gresset, Oeuvres, 2: 96, Édouard III, 1:VI).

359 "Élevé dans la paix, nourri dans des maximes/ Dont le préjugés seul fait des droits légitimes,/ Vous pensez qu’y souscrire et régner foiblement,/ Est l’unique chemin pour régner sûrement;/ Mais des Maîtres du monde et des âmes guerrières/ Le Ciel étend plus loin l’espoir et les lumières,/ Et couronnant nos faits, il apprend aux États/ Qu’un vainqueur fait des loix, et qu’il n’en reçoit pas,/ Par quel ordre e n effet faut-il que je me lie/Aux exemples des tems qui précédent ma vie?/ Qu’esclave du passé, Souverain sans pouvoir,/ Dans les erreurs des morts je lise mon devoir" (Gresset, Oeuvres, 2: 98-99, Édouard III, 1:VI).

360 Gresset, Oeuvres, 2: 114, Édouard III, 2:VI.

361 Gresset, Oeuvres, 2: 111, Édouard III, 2:V.
Vorcestre countered this new kind of legitimacy founded on the mere assent of the populace by showing that, in fact, by accepting this kind of legitimacy, the populace accepted a tyrant, a man who would rule according only to his will, rather than according to the laws of the realm. The king would lose himself and his country in the pursuit of military victories and in courting the favour of the populace. Without laws, the fate of the king and of “la Patrie” rest only on sheer force, and force can only produce slaves, not citizens: "Force is not a good guarantee of an Empire's destiny; / The people, putting their faith in the laws of a single man,/ Thought to give themselves a Father in giving themselves a King/ The people did not attempt to degrade nature and make slaves/ By using shameful hindrances." Vorcestre claims that in the political realm there is only one happiness: that of doing your duty, of being a citizen. And in order to be a good citizen, the king has to obey the laws and to make his subjects happy according to the laws and the will of the political nation: "Our accomplished duties are our only greatness."\(^{362}\)

This confrontation that reads like a page from Thucydides’s *History of the Peloponnesian Wars* is complemented by the the Platonic dialogue between Vorcestre and Arondel, who tries to save the emprisoned Vorcestre by arranging his escape. Arondel is as keen as Vorcestre on the old virtues and the ancient constitution, but is more skeptical about the possibility of obtaining justice when the Court is corrupt.\(^{363}\) Dissapointed that an "unworthy fatherland" ("une indigne Patrie") and the populace ("la foule") let down her most virtuous men,\(^{364}\) Arondel makes an appeal to Vorcestre either to escape or to

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\(^{362}\) "La force assure mal le destin d’un Empire; /Le peuple, aux lois d’un seul asservissant sa foi,/ Crut se donner un Père en se donnant un Roi/ Il n’a point prétendu par d’indignes entraves/ Dégrader la nature et faire des esclaves […] "Ce n’est point dans des noms que réside l’honneur,/ Et nos devoirs remplis sont seuls notre grandeur." (Gresset, *Oeuvres*, 2: 98, *Édouard III*, 1:VI).


commit suicide. But in being consistent with his idea of Christian duty, Vorcestre rebukes such appeals on the grounds that virtue does not need the approval of anyone. Unlike the will of the despot, who needs the crowd to mirror itself, virtue is selfless, and therefore autosufficient, in a way in which passions are not. If virtue has to do with being, ambition has to do with becoming. Therefore, ambition finds its justification in triumphs only, and is always enslaved to public opinion, to swings of fashion, while virtue suffers life and accepts death with equal composure. Suicide is unacceptable, even though the fact that some people regard it as a sign of inner strength and therefore as an honorable way to leave this life: "Virtue does not know any other prize than itself:/ It is not its renown, but virtue itself that I love [...] Knowing how to suffer life and how to watch the death coming/ Is the duty of any sage, and it will be my fate." 

There is a clear continuity between this tragedy, with its denunciation of political despotism, of ministerial despotism, and Gresset’s later denunciation of the philosophes, first announced in Gresset’s greatest dramatic succes, the comedy Le Méchant (1747). Gresset denounced both the way in which a despotic ruler falsified the social


366 “La vertu ne connoit d’autre prix qu’elle même:/ Ce n’est point son renom, ce n’est qu’elle que j’aime [...] Quelque honneur qu’à ce sort la multitude attache,/ Se donner le trépas, est le destin d’un lâche;/ Savoir souffrir la vie, et voir venir la mort,/ C’est le devoir du Sage, et ce sera mon sort” (Gresset, Œuvres, 2: 141-43, Édouard III, 4:VII).
construction or understanding of reality, and the divorce between words and their meaning encouraged by sophistic philosophes. Similarly to Rousseau, Moreau or Linguet, Gresset pioneered cultural criticism, pointing out the symbiosis between political despotism and the factional control and distortion of a hegemonic discourse.\footnote{367} Despotism was, in fact, the result of the "esprit de parti," of factionalism neglecting the common good and hijacking the common language. But if for Gresset patriotism found its most adequate expression in plain language, the discourse of plainness was an eminently enlightened one.\footnote{368} The philosophes, like agressive kings, were factional because they created, and attempted to draw others into, their own "reality" or meaning, instead of trying to preserve and work within the boundaries of a common, socially

agreed upon, consensual meaning. Tyrants, like the philosophers, falsified reality by doing away with ancient liberties and accepted political norms, or by inventing a new language, by playing with the meaning and definitions of the words. If it is impossible to disconnect the reality of words from their history, then kings who disregarded the ancient laws were like the philosophers who disregarded the "good old French" ("bon vieux langage").

The equivalent of Édouard III in the salons was Le Méchant (1747), a person who created his own meaning, who distorted the language and falsified reality, who played after his own ever changing rules, and who, in pretending to be the paragon of the "commerce," of sociability, was just one of its maladies, an impostor of sociability. In 1761, Nicolas-Joseph Sélis (1737-1802), a professor of rhetoric, in Amiens and later at Louis le Grand in Paris, and royal censor who married one of Gresset’s nieces, published a bitter satire on Voltaire in which the philosophe, on his deathbed, confesses to the devil that he recognizes himself in certain passages in the Méchant, and that he would like Gresset to purge those passages.369 Gresset’s understanding of the philosophers as méchants, as a nasty bunch of people, was probably one of the sources of inspiration for Jacob-Nicolas Moreau’s Histoire des Cacouacs (1757), the famous anti-philosophe pamphlet in which the “Cacouacs” ("méchants" in French translation) were described as a tribe of savages with poisonous tongues and a sort of linguistic “magic” that allowed them to yoke anyone to their destructive "fanaticism" and "spells" ("enthousiasme" and "charme").370 A sophism is an aggression against language and liberty because it falsifies

the relationship with reality and the way in which people can defend, transmit, and inherit liberty. Gresset criticized the “reason” of the philosophes, which was neither his almost Humean “common sense” reason, nor Deschamps’ metaphysical reason, nor Linguet’s political-environmental reason. All these kinds of reasons amounted to a sense of duty because they amounted to a sense of reason as related to a reality that transcended the will. The reason of the philosophes against which Gresset protested was an instrumental reason. Gresset criticized the "reason" of the philosophes as a way of hijacking the modernization project - that is the drive to reform certain institutions and to actively seek the public opinion’s support for these reforms - for their own purposes, which precluded any objective standard and reference.

Gresset would side with Rousseau, who also denounced the philosophes as “sophists.” Although “enlightened” in their own fashion, both Gresset and Rousseau denounced the limits of what they considered to be the “sophistic” reason of the philosophes. If language needs to be consensual in order to be “true,” then the philosophes tried to confiscate the “truth” of the language by making it submit to their own will. They rejected the “ancient constitution” of the French language, the common and current meaning of the words, the ancient values, as “prejudices”. Instead of plainness, which would be a sign of reasonableness, they came up with what Gresset would call “neologisms” and “paradoxes”, a term whose use by the philosophes against Linguet will be discussed in a later chapter. Gresset warned that, snatched from society’s control, language became the preserve of certain elite salons which, instead of acting in harmony with the rest of society and thus proving their honnêteté, that is their true sociability, factionally imposed their own meanings.\footnote{For the intricacies of the relationship between Old Regime salons, the philosophe culture, and honnêteté, see Peter France, \textit{Rhetoric and Truth in France: Descartes to Diderot} (Oxford: Oxford University Press,}
public action of the *philosophes* who, not unlike Édouard III, made their own laws and created their own meanings by flattering the populace with their victories in what might be called the “cultural wars” of the day.

The action of *Le Méchant* is quite simple. The “méchant” Parisian Cléon wreaks havoc in the provincial patriarchal family of Géronte. Géronte lives with his sister, Florise, and her daughter, Chloé. Chloé is about to marry young Valère. This union would solve the lawsuits between Géronte and Valère, whose properties are adjoined. This marriage would also guarantee that Géronte’s inheritors, Chloé and Valère, would take good care of Géronte’s property after his death and would develop and embellish his estates according to his wishes. Cléon wants to block the marriage between Chloé and Valère, himself hoping to marry either Chloé or Florise, depending on who among them would inherit Géronte’s property. In order to do this, Cléon takes care to corrupt Valère by introducing him to Parisian salons and libertine life. Cléon also spreads gossip and rumours about everybody. He whispers to Géronte that Valère is not an honest man, tells Valère that Géronte is an imbecile, and makes sure that Florise believes that her brother Géronte is mad, while convincing Valère that Chloé is a cold, heartless courtisane.

The comedy was read as a “comedie-à-clef” depicting the aristocratic milieu of Monsieur and Mme de Forcalquier, whose circle was called the *Société du Cabinet Vert*. While Gresset’s participation at the meetings of that circle could not be proved, and leaving aside the question of the exact identification of the possible models for Cléon (M. Wogue, *J.-B.-L. Gresset*, 172-186).
Forcalquier, the count d’Argenson, M. de Maurepas or the duc d’Ayen), what Gresset depicted in the Méchant was a world in which things were named not according to what they were, but according to some gossip’s (méchant) wish. The méchant used the “public sphere” to redefine any person or situation according to his own interests. Identities, under the méchant’s spell, became weak, fluctuant, without any relation to reality. Far from celebrating the “public sphere,” Gresset seemed to warn that under the guise of an attack on “prejudices” it was possible to mount an attack on decency, honesty, virtue, and truth. Cléon gives the impression of being a reasonable person only because his kind of reasoning caters to the public’s desire to demean other people, to break down reputations, to mock any sound virtue. As such, Gresset described a reason that functioned in the discursive field of the “ridicule.”

In Cléon’s world, reason is recognized as such only as long as it targets as “prejudices” any reasonable defense of common-sense and plain, unadorned truth. Cléon’s reason is a sophistic reason, creating its own reality. If the physiocrates denounced mercantilism for equating gold or money in general with real wealth, Gresset indicated the consequences of confusing the signified with the signifier in the moral and social world.

Therefore, in the Méchant, Gresset mounted an attack not on a certain aristocratic circle, but on the esprit philosophique as sophism in general. In the end, Cléon’s spell was broken and he failed to redefine reality my manipulating the signs, the words, the social currency. But he goes far enough to indicate what might happen when such false currency is thrown on the market in the “public sphere” in large quantities. Gresset’s apology of tradition, of a benevolent absolute king, and of physiocracy, all

373 Wogue, J.-B.-L. Gresset, 182, n. 4.
375 See Nicolas Baudeau, Ephémérides du citoyen, 1 (1767), 104.
pointed to a society in which nobody's will would have the force to falsify reality, but merely to improve it. But one cannot improve reality, or the world surrounding him, by disregarding it, by not having a starting point in it. On the one hand France had to be reformed because there were too many "feudal" institutional, economic and political clusters that did not have any political utility or significance in a rational order of things, based on a truly national political life. On the other hand, replacing those empty hyerogliph of the Middle Ages with the empty signs of a modernity dominated by méchants was not something to be desired. Gresset refused modernity as a triumph of the will in the name of an Enlightenment seen as a triumph of truth, or at least of reality. In economic terms, this led Gresset to embrace the first version of physiocracy, civic-republican/aristocratic, not liberal. In political terms, it promoted the centralized authority of an enlightened monarch ruling with the support of an educated citizenry. In social terms, it required promoting benevolent social utility, not a mechanical social utility. In moral terms, it implied promoting virtue defined as dedication to the common good and as plain, old-fashioned, Humean valorization of "common life". And in cultural terms, it found its expression in a neoclassical art with a “natural” artistic canon, promoting decency, and a rhetoric of plainness.

Gresset's Picard gentilhomme Géronte is instead caught in the web of philosophe rhetoric, and defends Cléon by claiming that the méchant is merely an honest man who has the courage to speak the truth and who is therefore the subject of calumnies aimed at his character by weaker, more conniving spirits: "They say that he is nasty! Because he is sincere:/ After all, he is a good hearted, straightforward man." Cléon, that

377 "Toujours la calomnie en veut aux gens d'esprit./ Quoi donc! parce qu'il sait saisir le ridicule,/ Et qu'il dit tout le mal qu'un flatteur dissimule,/ On le prétend méchant! c'est qu'il est naturel:/ Au fond, c'est un bon
quintessential “cacouac,” manages to manipulate the unsuspecting Géronte into believing him a “plain,” sincere man. Géronte perceives Cléon as a natural because the méchant knows how to feign telling the unadorned truth, how to self-fashion himself as a man with the courage to take on hypocrits and prejudices. Lisette, the faithful servant, admonishes Géronte and argues that Cléon uses his “style” in order to destroy and to harm, in order to mistify: “I’m speaking of his penchant for trouble and destruction./ Of his talent to mix up things, of his pleasure to harm:/ To sow bitterness, hate, and discord./ In conclusion, of being evil, this is our Cléon.”

Gresset praised “harmony,” and harmony could be obtained only by adhering as closely as possible to truth, that is to a faithfully accurate representation, in either political or philosophical terms, of reality. Everything else was, for Gresset, the sign of a factional spirit, be it that of a despotic king, of an institution or of a méchant gadfly. For Gresset, if the signs of wealth (currency) were not wealth, the discourse of unmasking imposture did not preclude the imposture of the person peddling it. That is why Lisette, the reasonable soubrette whose livelihood depended upon studying her masters' most minute reactions in order to anticipate their wishes, or angers, saw through Cléon’s apparent sincerity. Lisette deciphered the meaning of Cléon’s words in the context of his body language and of his general rhetoric, both of which revealed him as a shifty and self-conceited person. For Lisette, honesty had to do with sociability not in the sense of frequenting society for the sake of advancing one’s own self-interest and satisfying one’s own desire to shine prompted by self-love, but in the sense of sympathy, of caring for our fellow men. If honesty was related to sociability, this was because sociability was an cœur, un homme essentiel” (Gresset, Oeuvres choisies [Paris, Garnier, n.d.], 252-53, Le Méchant, 1:II).

378 “Je parle de ce goût de troubler, de détruire./ Du talent de brouiller, et du plaisir de nuire:/ Semer l'aigreur, la haine et la division, / Faire du mal enfin, voilà notre Cléon” (Gresset, Oeuvres choisies, 252-53, Le Méchant, 1:II).
expression of sympathy for other human beings. And being a sophist, or a méchant, meant despising people and thus feeling free to cynically manipulate them in any given social setting. Indeed, confronted by the valet Frontin on the subject that he seems to enjoy being “universally hated,” Cléon answers in terms that leave no doubt that he is not interested in truth, but in manipulating the “public sphere”. Cléon takes pleasure in pulling the levers of this new mechanism: “It’s all equal to me: they hate me, they respect me [...] Being quoted, mixed up in all quarrels,/ Complaints, dealings, and gossips,/ Being hated by all and desired everywhere,/ This is my fate and my sole pleasure.”

This extension of the self, of a méchant self, by way of the public sphere led to a new form of absolutism: to the ubiquity of the vacuous, auto-abolishing self. While the insidious discourse of the méchant permeated the public sphere the same way as the royal discourse of reason, justice, and will permeated the political body, the Méchant self abolished itself for the sake of a pure affirmation of will that left out justice and reason. The Méchant is a sort of philosophical Don Juan who seduces and betrays consciences and slays meanings. Always following the next prey, the mechant’s philosophe self enjoys being without roots, acting at a distance, being mediated, living in the pure virtuality of the “public sphere,” without any connection with a real world that might hamper his strife for perpetual self-actualization. Thus, when the valet Frontin

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379 “Au ton dont il s’explique,/ A son air, ou l’on voit dans un rire ironique/ L’estime de lui-même et le mépris d’autrui,/ Comment peut-on savoir ce qu’on tient avec lui?/ Jamais ce qu’il vous dit n’est ce qu’il veut vous dire./ Pour moi, j’aime les gens dont l’âme peut se lire,/ Qui disent bonnement oui pour oui, non pour non [...] Je n’y vois, je vous jure/ Qu’un style qui n’est pas celui de la droiture,/ Et sous cet air capable, ou l’on ne comprend rien,/ S’il cache un honnête homme, il le cache très-bien” (Gresset, Œuvres choisies, 263-64, Le Méchant, 1:V).

380 “Cela m’est fort égal: on me craint, on m’estime;/ [...] Être cité, mêlé dans toutes les querelles,/ Les plaintes, les rapports, les histoires nouvelles,/ Être craint à la fois et désiré partout,/ Voïla ma destinée et mon unique goût” (Gresset, Œuvres choisies, 274, Le Méchant, 2:1).

says that he is tired of being continuously on the road, going from place to place accompanying his master, Cléon responds that he goes wherever he likes and leaves when bored with a place and its people. Roots, such as a family, relatives, one’s native place, are merely "chains," obsolete "prejudices," "old-fashioned miseries" good only for common people.  

Cléon switches discourses and makes an attempt to impress Florise with his love for an independent life in the countryside, not because he would really like to establish himself in the provinces (“dans sa terre fixe”), but because, after all, he despises Paris as well as the countryside, although he admits thriving on Parisian vacuity. After describing a Parisian cultural and social life dominated "by reputations based on I don’t know what;/ By protégés so servile, and by patrons so stupid [...]/ And by celebrated books without head or tail,"  

Cléon promises Florise to write precisely such a book, the history of his love exploits. Like Gresset's Édouard, who thought that military victories might help him dispense with notions such as good or bad, Cléon thinks that his literary success would serve as moral justification: "What do you think? This could cause a huge scandal,/ A mere pamphlet only, a marvelous piece of work,/ Quite scandalous and quite good: the style does not matter;/ As long as it is nasty, it will always do."  

Out of Cléon's hedonistic, pleasure seeking morals ("Everything around exists only for our pleasure") grows up his conviction that since only his person counts then

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382 "Je vais ou l'on me plait, je pars quand on m'ennuie,/ Je m'établis ailleurs, me moquant au surplus/ D'être hai des gens chez qui je ne vais plus/ [...] La parenté m'excède, et ces liens, ces chaînes/ Des gens dont on partage ou les torts ou les peines,/ Tout cela préjugés, misères du vieux temps;/ C'est pour le peuple enfin que sont faits les parents" (Gresset, Oeuvres choisies, 274, and 278, Le Méchant, 2:1, and 2:III).  
383 “Des réputations on ne sait pas pourquoi;/ Des protégés si bas, des protecteurs si bêtes.../ Des ouvrages vantés qui n’ont ni pieds ni têtes” (Gresset, Oeuvres choisies, 280, Le Méchant, 2:III).  
384 "Qu'en dites vous? cela peut faire un bruit du diable,/ Un brochure unique, un ouvrage admirable,/ Bien scandaleux, bien bon: le style n’y fait rien;/ Pourvu qu’il soit méchant, il sera toujours bon" (Gresset, Oeuvres choisies, 281, Le Méchant, 2:III).
everything is permitted to him.\textsuperscript{385} And since the common-sense is the result of social experience and tradition, Cléon despises it from his individualist stance. Therefore, he describes Géronte as a relic of the past, opposing progress out of sheer prejudice, a narrow minded bigot ensconced in his castle and possessed by a "demon of property," by an unreasonable love for what he perceives as being his own: "his" customs, countryside, parochy, architecture, and honor.\textsuperscript{386} In fact, Gresset made Cléon despise in Géronte a noble patriot, a country squire working to improve his domain, and representing an early physiocratic version of "modernity," fueled by that eminently "valid" form of wealth, agricultural wealth, and managed by gentlemen farmers.\textsuperscript{387} Cléon, on the other hand, represents the paradoxical "modernity" of the philosophes: a public sphere devoid of content, a medium without a message. Géronte makes clear that he is not just a \textit{hobereau}, that he has at heart not only the "petite patrie," but the whole of France, and the French nation: "Because, even if far from the world, buried in this place,/ I always care about the good of my own country."\textsuperscript{388} He is not interested in gossip and frivolous

\textsuperscript{385} "Tout ce qui vit n'est fait que pour nous rejouir [...] Je ne trouve que nous qui valions quelque chose" (Gresset, \textit{Oeuvres choisies}, 284, \textit{Le Méchant}, 2:III).

\textsuperscript{386} "Notre oncle est un sot, qui croit avoir reçu/ Toute sa part d'esprit en bon sens prétendu;/ De tout usage antique amateur idolâtre,/ De toute nouveauté frondeur opiniâtre,/ Homme d’un autre siècle, et ne suivant en tout/ Pour ton qu’un vieux honneur, pour loi que le vieux goût;/ Cerveau des plus bornés, qui, tenant pour maxime/Qu’un seigneur de paroisse est un être sublime,/ Vous entretient sans cesse avec stupidité/ De son banc, de ses soins, et de sa dignité/ [...] Ivre de son château, dont il est architecte,/ De tout ce qu’il a fait sottement entêté,/ Possédé du démon de la propriété" (Gresset, \textit{Oeuvres choisies}, 294, \textit{Le Méchant}, 2:VII).


\textsuperscript{388} "Car, quoique loin de tout, enterré dans ces lieux,/ Je suis toujours sensible au bien de ma patrie" (Gresset, \textit{Oeuvres choisies}, 316, \textit{Le Méchant}, 3: IX).
news, but he is able and willing to pay attention to matters of real importance for France.

Like Vorcestre in Édouard III, though, Géronte cannot move decisively against his enemy without the help of a friend, there Arondel, here Ariste, who is able to see through the imposture of the Méchant. Facing a perverted version of the “public sphere,” only true sociability and friendship could restore normality and lead to the exposure of impostors such as Cléon, disturbing social harmony with his self-serving double talk. Ariste does not unmask a religious impostor or a “great man,” but a someone making a living from pretending to unmask imposture. It was, therefore, a second degree imposture, and Gresset's Ariste describes to young Valère the different types of impostors that one might encounter in society, the cheerful ones, as well as the severe ones, whose “sententious tone” and “disdanniful air” hide their “nullity.” Cléon is one of these “cold” people whose mere silence is “nasty.” The best way to discover such a

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389 Gresset, Oeuvres choisies, 317, Le Méchant, 3: IX.
391 “La méchanceté suppose un goût à faire du mal; la malignité une méchanceté cachée; la noirceur, une méchanceté profonde […] L'imposture est le masque de la vérité; la fausseté, une imposture naturelle; la dissimulation, une imposture qui veut nuire; la duplicité, une imposture qui a deux faces,” wrote Luc de Clapiers, marquis de Vauvenargues, in his Introduction à la connaissance de l'esprit humain (1746). See Vauvenargues, Oeuvres (Paris, 1820), 38.
392 “Gens laconique, froids, à qui rien ne peut plaire;/ Examinez-les bien, un ton sentencieux/ cache leur
méchant, thriving on spreading gossip and lies and on enmeshing everyone in his tortuous language, was to look at his way of living, at his “heart.” Instead of being allowed to flow, disembodied, in the public sphere, language has to be traced back to its source, has to be judged by its roots and reason has to be appreciated according to the ways of life it leads to. The autonomy of reason is not the best guarantee of the autonomy of human beings. However, the heteronomy advocated by Ariste is a benign, undogmatic, one. Reason is socialized by way of sentiment, of the "heart," and right reason leads to a good life only if sympathy steers it in an unselfish direction, in pursuit of the common good, of humanity: “Friend of what is good, of order, and of humanity,/ True reason walks hand in hand with goodness./ Cléon gives us a false light only:/ Good moral reputation comes first;/ Without it, believe me, any success is deceitful./ I always start respecting somebody first for his heart;/ Without it reason is nothing, and despite your maxims,/ It produces only errors and crimes.”


Denouncing the “false light” of “reason,” Ariste talks in the name of that plainness stemming from the heart. Like Rousseau, Gresset’s Ariste denounces the “sophistic” developments of the arts and letters, fruit of a society ruled by *amour propre*, by the desire to control our image, our appearance in the eyes of others. Instead of appearing as he is, Cléon “is as he appears.” If concern for the common good does not keep selfishness at bay, then reason is not actually autonomous, but enslaved by self-love: caring for society can liberate, caring about society, about one’s own status in the eyes of society can enslave. The exclusive concentration on managing one's avatars in the public sphere leads to a loss of inner substance and autonomy. Criticizing the philosophe culture, Rousseau pointed out that dependence on the opinion of the others and accepting to exist mainly as a projection, one's own or other people's, leaves one at the mercy of the public sphere. Living as an impostor, the méchant leaves himself at the mercy of the manipulations of the symbolic economy by adroit gangs (be it a “sect” or a “party”) of cultural brokers like himself. Considered as a way of unmooring the axiological criteria by way of deregulation, the philosophe culture (that is, one brand of Enlightenment) would have as a result not the emancipation of all human beings, but the loss of their lives’ intrinsic meaning and therefore their un-negotiable value. And this would lead to slavery. Indeed, Cléon appears to Ariste as a parasite of both language and social hierarchies. Cléon depends on other people’s benevolence, which he ultimately destroys by robbing it of any social and linguistic support. Ultimately, Cléon is an anti-enlightenment figure because he destroys social commerce, or sociability: his vagueness and furtiveness are infectious and contribute to subvert the same society on which he

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ultimately depends for making a dishonest living. Plainness would be the attribute of a person speaking sincerely, from the heart, and living in a stable society, where people would share emotions, meanings and the pursuit of the common good. Amplified by a booming public sphere dominated by méchants, vagueness, false sophistication, gossip, double talk and licence would make happiness hard to define or to defend and impossible to live in. The lack of confidence fostered by frivolity, by linguistic and social rootlessness and shiftness, would breed unhappiness, and would therefore go against the eminently enlightened concern with happiness.

After portraying the philosophes as méchants, Gresset would pointedly raise his voice against the “sect” and its culture in his academic discourses and in his Lettre sur la comédie (1759). Gresset’s Lettre sur la comédie was denounced by Voltaire in letters to

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396 “Vous le croyez heureux? Quelle âme méprisable!/ Si c’est la son bonheur, c’est être misérable,/ Étranger au milieu de la société,/ Et partout fugitif, et partout rejeté./ Vous connoinitez bientôt par votre expérience/ Que le bonheur du cœur est dans la confiance:/ Un commerce de suite avec le mêmes gens,/ L’union des plaisirs, des goûts, des sentiments,/ Un société peu nombreuse, et qui s’aime,/ Ou vous pensez tout haut, ou vous êtes vous-même [...]// Voila le seul bonheur honorable et paisible/ D’un esprit raisonnable, et d’un cœur né sensible./ Sans amis, sans repos, suspect et dangereux,/ L’homme frivole et vague est déjà malheureux” (Gresset, Oeuvres choisies, 340, Le Méchant, 4: IV).

397 Michèle Bokobza Kahan, Libertinage et folie dans le roman du 18e siècle (Louvain: Peeters, 2000).

his circle as the work of a “conceited fool,” of a “naughty” and “insolent ex-Jesuit,” and finally of a “fanatic.” Nicolas Claude Thieriot wrote to Voltaire that “some people of quality” (“quelques honnêtes gens”) believed that Gresset’s *Lettre sur la comédie* was prompted by Gresset’s desire to become the tutor of Dauphin’s children. The rumor might have had a grain of truth in it, since Gresset was on good terms with persons reputed to be influential in the Dauphin's circle, such as Christophe de Beaumont, archbishop of Paris (1746-1781), Louis François Gabriel d’Orleans de la Motte, bishop of Amiens (1733-1774), or even the daughters of Louis XV, Sophie, Louise-Elisabeth, and the pious Adélaïde and Victoire, the future famous Mesdames “tantes royales.” On the other hand, Gresset’s *Lettre sur la comédie* was written on the same premises as Gresset’s earlier discourse of reception in the French Academy (1748), as his answer to the reception of d’Alembert (1754), and as his discourse as president of the French Academy on the occasion of the election of Jean-Baptiste Antoine Suard (1774). This last address was criticized as merely “grammatical” by a Voltaire savoring Suard’s own “very philosophic” (“très philosophique”) address. However, Gresset’s “grammatical” stance was motivated by his enlightened conviction that, by influencing morals, language had a bearing on society and therefore on politics: a “pure” language was a polite language. Truly representative laws had to spring from the “constitution” of a people. Morals gave

399 “Fat orgueilleux,” “plat fanatique,” “fanatique orgueilleux,” “insolent exjésuite,” and “polisson” are the expressions used by Voltaire in D 8374 Voltaire to count d’Argental (29 June 1759), D 8375 Voltaire to Cideville (29 June 1759), D8397 Voltaire to count d’Argental (20 July 1759). See also, for other echoes D8357 Cideville to Voltaire (June 1759), D8377 Voltaire to Germain Gilles Richard de Ruffey (29 June 1759).

400 D 8382 Thieriot to Voltaire (July 1759).


402 D19082 Voltaire to François Louis Claude Marin (16 August 1774).
rise to laws, and laws were representative only insofar they expressed and tended to preserve natural and historical societies or institutions. Plain, meaningful language was one of the conditions of existence of a good society, of sociability, while a corrupt language betrayed a corrupt reason, and therefore fostered a corrupt society, with meaningless or tyrannical laws. The plainness and “purity” of French language was thus a condition for the existence of French liberty.

Indeed, Gresset’s Lettre sur la comédie (1759) could be read as a devout Christian denunciation of Gresset’s former theatrical activity. It came at a most unwelcome moment for the philosophes, caught in a battle with Rousseau over his Lettre à d’Alembert (1758) against the establishment of a Genevan theatre. Rousseau himself was, like Gresset, interested in the way in which the “authority of language” helped to subvert the “language of authority.” Rousseau’s motivation for publishing his anti-theatrical diatribe was to support the Genevan people against the French-influenced patricians. For Rousseau, the problem of the theatre was related to the larger issue of defending an ancient, democratic constitution against a Genevan Frenchified patriciate.

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403 D19081 Voltaire to Jean Baptiste Antoine Suard (16 August 1774).  
who might use the theatre as a tool to foster popular moral decay and thus aristocratic despotism. The patricians acted under the spur of the French diplomats in Geneva as well as under the influence of philosophes such as Voltaire or D'Alembert. Voltaire played a crucial role since he actually staged private theatrical performances, near Geneva, in Ferney, starting with 1755. Both Voltaire and D'Alembert argued that establishing a theatre in Geneva would strengthen morals and that the result would be a Genevan republic allying Spartan virtue to Athenian civilization. Rousseau restated traditional Christian claims that the theatre endangers virtue both by the subject of the plays and by the morally loose theatrical environment itself. But he also argued that, by distracting the people from its political and Christian duties, the theatre would threaten “public liberty.” Bitterly resenting the alliance between Rousseau and Gresset on this matter, Voltaire would defiantly continue his private theatrical representations, what he called “our conventicles of Satan, banned by Jean Jacques and by Gresset” (“nos conventicules de Satan, proscrits par Jean Jacques et par Gresset”). Moreover, he would denounce the antitheatrical discourse as the fruit of an alliance between “those Calvinist and Jansenist knaves who, not being made for honest pleasures, forbid them to those made to enjoy such pleasures.” Indeed, the early 1760s revival of Jansenist convulsionary activity, coupled with these attacks on theatre, made Voltaire write that the only solution to this lack of regard for civilization would be to just throw “all those

407 See d'Alembert's original article on Geneva published in the seventh volume of the Encyclopédie as well as d'Alembert's answer to Rousseau in Jean le Rond d'Alembert, Lettre de M. D'Alembert à M. J.-J. Rousseau (Amsterdam 1759).
409 “Ces faquins de calvinistes et de jansénistes, qui n’étant faits pour des plaisirs honnêtes, en ont privé ceux qui sont faits pour les goûter” (D9164 Voltaire to Jacques Pernetti, on 22 August 1760).
animals, Jesuits, Jansenists” in chains and force them to work on building roads. The supervision of these chain gangs would also have to go to some “brave and honest Deist, good servant of God and of the King.”

Gresset’s arguments were indeed similar to those of Rousseau, and were religiously motivated. Woven in the customary Christian denunciation of theatre as an object of scandal for the truly pious Christian souls was a denunciation of eighteenth-century culture. Gresset’s main target was not the theatre, but the whole literary culture, the way in which the “public sphere” functioned creating a world of illusion, almost a parallel reality. Describing the entrapments of literary success, Gresset stressed its illusory nature by talking about the “tyranny of imagination” (“l’empire de l’imagination”), the “intoxication with fake glory” (“l’enivrement de la fausse gloire”), and by declaring himself “dazzed,” “seduced,” and “abused” (“ébloui,” “séduit,” “dupé”) by the manifold impulses coming from friends, admirers, authorities, patrons, and public. What Gresset denounced was not merely the “immorality” of the theatre, but the alienation caused by a successful literary life with its whirlwind of reviews, arguments, intrigues, and solicitations. The literary milieu was full of “spurious anecdotes” (“anecdotes fabriquées”), of “my own and other people’s sophisms” (“sophismes des autres et des miens”), of “disingenuous doubts” (“doutes de mauvaise foi”), of “weak free-thinkers” (“foibles esprits forts”) content with the “aureole of a wit” (“gloriole de bel esprit”). Gresset did not primarily renounce the theatre: like Rousseau, he pressed a case against the whole philosophe culture. Gresset predicted that the “demi-raisonneurs” would ridicule his step and would point out that he was not famous enough to set himself

410 “Faire travailler aux grands Chemins, tous ces animaux là Jésuites, Jansénistes, avec Collier de fer au cou, et qu’on donnât l’intendance de l’ouvrage, à quelque brave et honnête Déiste, bon serviteur de Dieu et du Roy” (D 8879 Voltaire to Nicolas Claude Thieriot, on 26 April 1760).

as a relevant example. But, retorted Gresset, if the echoes of his "repentance" would match the feeble renown of his "mischiefs," that should be enough.412

Gresset announced that, prompted by the spiritual guidance of La Motte, bishop of Amiens, he publicly renounced all his works that might have caused a scandal among pious, virtuous, honest people ("les gens sensés et vertueux," "les âmes honnêtes et pieuses").413 What Gresset divested himself of was a literary and cultural world as empty of meaning as the “feudal” institutions and social contracts denounced in his *L’Abbaye* or in *le Parrain magnifique*. The literary world that Gresset renounced was one in which: “We only want to shine, we talk against what we believe in, and the vanity of words is more important than the truth of things.”414 It was a world in which style was taken for substance, and in which principles were mere verbal accidents or happy retorts. Therefore, continued Gresset, the “solitary voice of duty has to speak louder to a Christian than all the voices of fame,” 415 since these last ones were actually empty. Acknowledging to oneself and to others the shoddiness of the new *philosophe* glory was the only sign of a “sound reason,” in contrast to “the outrageous independence and the impious audacity” helping the “vain and petty speech makers” come up with their “systematical deliriums.”416 “Times flies, the night advances, and the dream will be over,” intoned Gresset in a phrase borrowing brevity from Horace and poignancy from

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412 “Mes foibles talents n’ont point rendu mon nom assez considérable pour faire un grand exemple; mais tout fidele quel qu’il soit, quand ses égarements ont eu quelque notoriété, doit en publier le désaveu, et laisser un monument de son repentir” (Gresset, *Lettre sur la comédie*, Oeuvres, 2: 226).


414 “On se laisse entraîner a établir des principes qu’on n’a point; un vers brillant décide d’une maxime hardie, scandaleuse, extravagante [...] on ne veut que briller, on parle contre ce qu’on croit, et la vanité des mots l’emporte sur la vérité des choses” (Gresset, *Lettre sur la comédie*, Oeuvres, 2: 227).

415 “La voix solitaire du devoir doit parler plus haut pour un chrétien que toutes les voix de la renommée” (Gresset, *Lettre sur la comédie*, Oeuvres, 2: 226).

Watteau. Facing this truth, Gresset proposed that his reader should ponder: “This phosphorus that we call spirit, this nothing that we call fame, this moment that we call life, let him [Gresset's reader] question religion which should speak to him as it does to me, let him steadily contemplate death, let him look beyond, and then let him judge me.”

One way of fighting against the precariousness of life was to restore the capacity of language to actually name things, and thus to preserve reality, to refuse language's decay into a mere tool for spinning colourful, entertaining webs. Dedicating oneself to producing or consuming frivolous works meant for Gresset wasting one's life: “How can we sacrifice our lives to works rarely applauded, often dangerous, and always useless?”

Far from merely rehashing old Christian utterances against immoral literature or Puritan strictures against the theatre, Gresset, like Rousseau, mounted a deeply thought out and well focused attack on what he perceived to be the mainstream Parisian Enlightenment culture: on the philosophes's ideas, morals, and rhetoric. Gresset engaged in this campaign not as a conformist, but as a nonconformist whose old-fashioned plainness helped him advance rather iconoclastic arguments. While presenting himself as a man still possesed of an “old fashioned simplicity when it comes to the style of writing, the [word] usage, and the habit and good will to think well of other people,” Gresset managed to mount an attack on the stale “modern” strategies of advertisement and publication used not only by radical writers or by the Voltairean circles in their more radical publications, but also by many early modern and Enlightenment writers. Thus, Gresset argued that “introductions” to literary works fell out of favor with the public.

417 “Le temps vole, la nuit s’avance, le rêve va finir [...] ce phosphore qu’on nomme l’esprit, ce rien qu’on appelle la renommée, ce moment qu’on nomme la vie, qu’il interroge la religion qui doit lui parler comme à moi, qu’il contemple fixement la mort, qu’il regarde au-delà, et qu’il me juge” (Gresset, Lettre sur la comédie, Oeuvres, 2: 230).

418 “Comment immoler nos jours à des ouvrages rarement applaudis, souvent dangereux, toujours inutiles?” (Gresset, Lettre sur la comédie, Oeuvres, 2: 230).
because they did not do what they were supposed to do. Introductions should mainly throw some honest light ("eclaircissements") on the work to follow in the same way in which an alley announces "a house in the countryside" ("une maison de campagne"). Instead, pointed out Gresset, introductions were used as means of dishonest advertisement, part of a meaningless ritual that nobody cared much for anymore, and consisting in saying to readers "who do not believe it that we publish that book despite our own wish, in order to prevent a friend from doing it or the risk of seeing a corrupt version of the work printed," or "inventing prior editions that do not exist," and "foreign translations that we ourselves paid for." 419 If the introduction was in fact one of the ways in which early modern authors attempted to preserve in the print age a certain intimacy with their public, the sort of casual immediate presence that the printed word made more difficult, 420 then by defending what he perceived as the old-fashioned way of writing forwards, Gresset was defending sociability, and thus Enlightenment. An introduction could be used for sociable or for purely venal, strategic goals, both in order to meet the public, or to manipulate it. And Gresset argued that only the first use, the sincere, straightforward, sociable use was civil and therefore civilized, and enlightened. Aware of the necessity to modernize France, to clean up abuses and to restore to their pristine glory some laws and meanings, Gresset was also worried that this process might

419 "Dire à gens qui ne le croient pas, qu’on n’imprime que malgré soi, pour prévenir le larcin d’un ami, ou le risque d’un ouvrage défiguré; ne plus supposer d’éditions qui n’ont jamais été faites, ni de traductions étrangères qu’on a fait faire soi-même; rendre gloire dans les avant-propos aux sources d’où l’on a tiré les choses neuves que l’on va produire" (Gresset, “Fragment de Preface pour Le Parrain Magnifique,” in Le Parrain Magnifique [Paris, Renouard, 1810], vii-viii).

be confiscated by a group of people trying to use it as an excuse to cut French politics, literature and morals loose from the moorings of any meaning.

That was why Gresset’s last public, academic pronouncement would be on the problem of the relationship between language and morals, between what he called “neologisms” and moral corruption. This was the topic of his presidential address on the occasion of Suard’s reception in the French Academy. If in 1747 Gresset was attacking in *Le Méchant* a certain salon culture, by 1774 he was forced to attack the academic culture itself. Indeed, by 1774, despite the opposition of the “parti dévol,” the *philosophes* largely controlled the Academy, as an otherwise given to self-pity D’Alembert boasted to Frederic II in 1772, and as Linguet fiercely denounced in 1771. A confirmation of this philosophic conquest came with the 1774 election to the French Academy of Jean-Baptiste Suard on a *philosophe* ticket, despite the fact that in 1772 Louix XV refused to validate his election after the intervention of the duc d’Aiguillon and of the duc de Richelieu who pointed out, among other things, that Suard was close to the intellectuals involved in the publishing of the troublesome *Encyclopédie*. Speaking on 4 August 1774 on behalf of the French Academy, Gresset praised the worth of Suard’s historiographical endeavours, but criticized the *philosophes*, whom Gresset called the “jokers of both sexes who surrounded the academy and packed the assembly.”

Gresset contested not just a language, but a *modus operandi* that would lead to staged “public” debates or trials during the French Revolution. If historians such as

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422 Chaussinand-Nogaret, *D’Alembert*, 253-54.
Cochin, Koselleck, Furet, and theologians such as Karl Barth established a link between certain forms of sociability, especially that of the clubs and masonic lodges, and a certain revolutionary culture, we might perhaps have to add to this the French academic culture heavily politicized under *philosophe* control. What Gresset denounced was the “party” of the *philosophes*, the way in which it acted following not their own reason, but party banners. According to Gresset, seeing that he was not about to come with the usual “handgrenades of exalted tone [...] that they are very keen on” ("bombes du ton exaltés [...] dont il raffolent"), the *philosophe* audience panicked when confronted with a different language on the occasion of Gresset's discourse welcoming Suard into the French Academy: “They were obviously astonished, and they thought themselves compromised because I did not speak their language; it was quite amusing, even for me, to watch them trying to to make eye contact, silently questioning one another with an agitated air, sending each other's orders with their eyes in order to decide if what I was saying had to be thought of as good, bad, or of little importance or even nothing.”

Gresset described in this passage not independently minded, Kantian emancipated individuals, but party members facing an inconvenient, different language. According to Gresset, what caused the "easily noticeable agitation" ("fermentation très sensible") of his *philosophe* audience was his decision to question in a familiar manner, in the “simple terms specific to honest/civilized and tasteful people,” the “neologisms” corrupting

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427 “Sans doute ils furent fort étonnes, et se crurent compromis de ne point s'entendre parler leur langue; il fut assez amusant, même pour moi, de les voir se chercher des yeux, s’interroger de loin d’un air agité, et prendre l’ordre dans les regards les uns des autres, pour décider si ce que je disois devoit être trouvé bien ou mal, ou peu de chose ou rien” (*Lettre de Gresset à M. ******, *Oeuvres*, 2: 235-36).
French language. In doing this, Gresset managed to advance his ideas without accepting to play by the *philosophe* rules. Gresset congratulated himself for thus showing the way in which a plain style and clear ideas went hand in hand with real freedom, with refusing to wear anybody's uniform.

Playing, not unlike Rousseau, the role of a “savage,” of a “provincial” who abandoned Paris for his Picard “forests,” Gresset was able to reclaim his right to speak frankly, to a "*franc-parler*" which, Gresset pointed out, had disappeared from the Parisian salons and from the academic world. In fact, after briefly applauding Suard for his otherwise scant literary works, dominated by journalism and by translations, Gresset launched into a twofold defense of plainness. On a practical front he offered a brief eulogy of the “homme utile,” of the “useful man” who, while not enjoying the limelights, keeps doing his job and accomplishes his thankless task. Among this kind of persons dedicated to the common good and destined to a “mute glory,” Gresset placed Suard’s academic predecessor, Jean Ignace de la Ville (1702-1774), an ex-Jesuit diplomat, “lecteur et secrétaire du cabinet du Dauphin,” and briefly bishop *in partibus* of Tricomie (10-14 April 1774, the day of his death). Abbé de la Ville had been close to both René

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429 “N’ayant point d’autre objet que d’offrir des réflexions justes sur un fond vrai, je n’avois certainement pas eu la moindre prétention d’y faire trouver le mot pour rire; cependant les connoisseurs à gauche ont crié partout que j’avois eu ce projet, qu’il etoit fort indécent d’avoir déridé quelquefois l’assistance, et qu’enfin ce n’étoit point là le ton d’un discours académique. A la bonne heure; mais [...] je n’avois jamais eu l’idée de faire ce qu’ils appellent un *discours*, entendu à leur façon et portant leur uniforme” (*Lettre de Gresset à M. ******, Oeuvres*, 2: 236).

430 See Tyrtée Tastet, *Histoire des quarante fauteuils de l’Académie française depuis la fondation jusqu’à
Louis de Voyer de Paulmy d’Argenson, the minister of foreign affairs who assured his election in the French Academy, and to Orléans de la Motte, Gresset’s then recently deceased (on 10 June 1774) patron. According to Gresset, as abbé de Saint Quentin, de La Ville had the great merit of allowing Bishop La Motte nominate the curés of some parishes that depended on that abbey, although located in the bishop of Amien’s diocese. By accepting the guidance of a residing bishop who knew well the local situation, abbé de La Ville acted in a manner completely opposed to the “feudal” nominalism that drove the clerics populating Gresset’s satirical poems such as L’Abbaye, or le Parrain Magnifique.431

De la Ville, an absent abbé and a bishop in partibus, was not otherwise useful to Gresset, who had always approved of the churchmen actually residing in their parish, abbey or diocese. In 1754, with the occasion of his address for d’Alembert’s reception in the French Academy, Gresset upset Louis XV by his eulogy of d’Alembert’s academic predecessor, Jean-Baptiste Surian (1670-1754). Surian, a gifted Oratorian preacher often compared with Jean-Baptiste Massillon, had been bishop of Vence, a poor and remote diocese where Sourian left an indelible memory as one of a generation of bishops such as Jacques Benigne Bossuet, Jules Mascaron, and Massillon, who resided in their dioceses

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431 “Éloigné de la province, ne pouvant connaître par lui-même les sujets dignes d’être placés à la tête de ses paroisses; craignant avec raison que tant de petit protecteurs ennuyeux, qui écrivent sans fin, recommandent au hasard, et trompent sans scrupule, ne vinsent souvent lui arracher des grâces injustes dont sa conscience auroit répondu,” conscient that “l'instruction et les mœurs des peuples tiennent essentiellement au choix que l'on fait des pasteurs du second ordre,” de La Ville handed over to Bishop La Motte all the nominations for his Picard parishes (Lettre de Gresset à M. *****, Oeuvres, 2: 241-42).
and cared for their flock. Well-received by Fréron and an anonymous “avocat au Parlement” who both savaged d’Alembert, and managed to extract a begrudging admiration from Grimm’s *Correspondance littéraire,* Gresset’s discourse attacked prelates for abandoning their diocese for the royal court. Gresset offered as a model the bishop of Vence who never left his diocese in twenty years, unless for taking part to the General Assembly of the French Clergy: “Very different from those agreeable and wordly pontiffs sketched in the past by [Boileau] Despreaux, pontiffs who, considering their duty a bore, their laziness a right, and their natural residence an exile, went on to parade their revolting uselessness among the vices, the luxury and the effeminacy of the capital, or came to crawl at the court, dragging there their ambition without talent, intrigues without a purpose, and airs without credit.”

Gresset’s antinominalist in economic, religious and literary matters made him embrace the physiocratic discourse of the *noblesse patriote,* and the Jansenist-parlementaire idea of a patriot king who would rule with paternal authority for the benefit of his loyal subjects-citizens upholding the ancient liberties. It would also make

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434 "Bien différent de ces pontifes agréables et profanes crayonnés autrefois par Despreaux, et qui regardant leur devoir comme un ennui, l’oisiveté comme un droit, leur résidence naturelle comme un exil, venaient promener leur scandaleuse inutilité parmi les vices, le luxe et la mollesse de la capitale, ou venaient ramper à la cour, et y trainer de l’ambition sans talent, de l’intrigue sans affaires et de l’importance sans crédit” (Gresset, in Cayrol, *Essai,* 1: 316).

435 For the current debate regarding the connection between Jansenism and the patriotic discourse in eighteenth-century France, see the classic Bernard Plongeron, *Théologie et politique au siècle des Lumières (1770-1820)* (Geneva: Droz, 1973), 19-120; and then Dale K. Van Kley, “New Wine in Old Wineskins: Continuity and Rupture in the Pamphlet Debate of the French Prerevolution, 1787-1789,” in *French
him advance decidedly Enlightened ideas, consonant with an eighteenth century reformist Catholicism at work in both the Jesuit and the Jansenist camp, about the social utility of some monastic orders and about the role of the secular clergy in the people's moral advancement. Contrary to Jesuit culture, Gresset would also blast Court bishops, preoccupied with exerting political influence, and would praise residing bishops dedicated to their flock. In intellectual terms, Gresset's antinominalism came down to his condemnation of the *philosophe* culture, of the the alienation produced by a public sphere controlled by a party of philosophes who, according to Gresset, managed to degrade French public life by controlling the public discourse, by skewing the rules of public debate, and by shifting the meaning of French language, by “privatizing” it.

According to Gresset, one of the ways of privatizing the French language was trying to make money by selling dictionaries of the French language, by putting French in private hands instead of leaving it in the public hands of the French Academy, where the king had placed it. Attacking the *Encyclopedie* as a fruit of the philosophe party,

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438 The importance of the Encyclopedic project for the formation of a philosophe "party," was discussed in Robert Shackleton's classic article, “When Did the French 'Philosophes' Become a Party?” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University of Manchester* 60 (1977), 181-198. See, more recently, Richard Yeo, “Encyclopedism and the Enlightenment,” and David Garrioeh, “The Party of the Philosophes,” in *The
Gresset deplored “our age so prolific in endless dictionaries,” the spirit of capitalist enterprise that multiplied the signs with only a tenous link to substantial and enduring realities. Thus, Gresset mockingly proposed a “dictionary of fashions,” a franchise with infinite growth potential, the multiplication of words spurring the multiplication of money in the coffers of the editors always churning out a new edition: words and money would turn out as dizzyingly fast as “heads.”

Gresset’s argument was informed by the work of Johann David Michaelis (1717-1791), born in a Pietist family in Halle and educated by Wolffian professors at the Halle university. As a professor of Semitic languages and an enlightened Bible scholar in Gottingen, Michaelis was influenced by Maupertuis and Condillac and argued in a famous 1759 essay that there was a reciprocal influence between the language and the opinions of a people. Awarded a first prize by the Berlin Academy, Michaelis’ essay was translated into French in 1762. The French edition contained some additional material, in which Michaelis argued that since any language is a specific creation of a specific people in specific circumstance it is therefore impossible to create a universal metaphysical language. “Le célèbre” Michaelis’s realism well-suited Gresset, who went

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439 “Cette entreprise seroit d’autant plus belle, et la spéculation des entrepreneurs lettres d’autant plus sure, que la matière de l’ouvrage se renouvelant sans cesse, se variant, se rajeunissant, on pourrait donner un nouveau volume aux souscrivantes et aux souscriveurs de mois en mois, tant que ce vieux cercle des nouveautés pourra tourner, ainsi que les têtes” (*Lettre de Gresset à M. ******, Oeuvres, 2: 250).

440 Johann David Michaelis, *De l’influence des opinions sur le langage, et du langage sur les opinions* (Bremen, 1762).

one step further and talked not merely about opinions, but about morals and manners, about virtues and vices. Gresset opposed the ancient “age of virtue and of happiness” to his own age only to discover that while in the old days “truth circulated freely and openly” (“la vérité avoit sa franche allure,” *apud* Montaigne), the eighteenth century was dealing in “falsehood” (“fausseté”).

Gresset regretted the passing of the days in which Frenchmen had “a heart” and when the direct link between thought or emotion and expression was strong. This connection between the natural “simplicity” and “loyalty” and language led to the creation of a “manly, natural and frank” (“male, libre, et franc”) discourse that was, maintained the classical republicain Gresset, the sign of a virtuous age. According to Gresset, the creators of language of that golden age of virtuous simplicity were Montaigne, Amyot (the translator of Plutarch), and Sully (the idol of the physiocrats and a fixture of the patriotic discourse). The great writers, the people who knew how to use the language forged by such giants, were Fenélon, Racine and Boileau,
writers who bequeathed to the eighteenth century a truly “noble, brilliant, and pure” language.\textsuperscript{445}

The civic humanist Gresset saw luxury leading to a “weakening” of those ancient virtues and thus to the creation of a new idiom in which the “energetic/spirited expressions” ("termes énergiques") were replaced by “feeble/washed-out equivalents.”\textsuperscript{446} The new vocabulary, Gresset argued, had nothing to do with nature, but only with consumption. The language of the “public sphere” was not rooted in nature, but in the “delirium/frenzy of luxury” ("delires du luxe"). Language had become dependent on the whimsical “variations in taste regarding furniture, clothes, hairstyle, stews, and coaches.”\textsuperscript{447} Uprooted, periodically recycled together with the artificial "reality" that they were naming, made to function in and thus to depend on a frivolous context, words lost their substance, their identity, their meaning. The general consumerist promiscuity made words sound ambiguous and even indecent, especially when uttered by those “dense buffoons who heavily make light of everything,” who abandoned themselves to “pathetic ambiguities so stupidly ingenious,” and who thrived on “the double meaning” of words.\textsuperscript{448} The proliferation of a weak linguistic currency led in its turn to a generalized art "of speaking without having anything to say," to an inflation of "semi-words" ("demi-mots") which made conversation impossible or futile.\textsuperscript{449}

This inflation of signs without meaning, of words without value, concluded Gresset, bankrupted linguistic commerce, or communication, the sociability that they

\textsuperscript{445} Lettre de Gresset à M. *****

\textsuperscript{446} Lettre de Gresset à M. *****

\textsuperscript{447} "Variations des fantaisies dans les meubles, les habits, les coiffures, les ragoûts, les voitures" (\textit{Lettre de Gresset à M. *****}, Oeuvres, 2: 248).

\textsuperscript{448} "Bouffons épais qui entendent grossièrement finesse à tout [...] pitoyables équivoques si bêtement ingénieuses [...] la belle fécondité des termes et leur double signification" (\textit{Lettre de Gresset à M. *****}, Oeuvres, 2: 247-48).

\textsuperscript{449} Lettre de Gresset à M. *****
were suppose to fuel. Since the deregulation of language left it in the hands of private investors such as dictionary makers or trend-setters, since the “gouvernement” and its academic agency lost control over the criteria regulating language, the image that Gresset offered his readers was that of a Hobbesian linguistic-conversational war of all against all. To public opinion and governmental authority, the philosophes pitted society's taste. But society, that is the salon, while less raucous than the public, could be as despotic as the government. And while the government ruled according to public rules that could be also used to appeal against one of its decisions, the salons, or “society,” wanted to decide public matters according to private fashions, whims, and complicities that the public could neither know or care about, nor appeal against.450 Describing the symbolic economy of “society,” Gresset pointed out the way in which lack of ingenuity, substance, and true amiability led to a lack of genuine sociability: “In the age, not very far from us yet, when we were less important, less sublime, conversation was the bond and the charm of society; today it is almost not a pleasure anymore, it's work, a series of masterly strokes, a general assault by spirit for spirit’s sake, epigrammatic or confident it is so; it is a state of war and of pretentions/claims, where everyone anxiously watches the others: we are setting traps of words; and the slashing ironies exchanged among us are so much cheaper if we take care to remain well stocked. We used to understand each other once; today not only do we often not care if we understand somebody else, but we make a point of honour not to understand ourselves anymore.”451


451 "Dans le temps, peu éloigné encore, ou l'on étoit moins important, moins sublime, la conversation étoit le lien et le charme de la société; aujourd'hui ce n'est presque plus un plaisir, c'est un travail, une suite de tours
Gresset maintained that the good, old-fashioned craft of conversation had become a sort of serial production, in which workers very narrowly specialized (mostly in the art of innuendo) put out with increasing speed a flood of words of limited value but immediate appeal. And this relationship between a torn society and an abused, consumer-oriented language was nowhere more clear than in the judicial “plaidoyers” and “memoires” which flooded the public sphere. Instead of the “noble” eloquence of a Cochin, Gilbert or D’Aguesseau, these judicial memoirs dealt in “logogriphes.” What Gresset described and deplored in the new eighteenth-century culture was a sort of consumer oriented word economy that lost meaning from its view. The result was a society that, in Gresset opinion, literally lost its head, a society drunk on words used as copy, a society fragmented by what we would call today “advertising”: “In this whirlwind, half bright and half obscure, which surrounds, shatters and carries us along, the right ideas lose their balance, the spirits become exalted, and, with infatuation filling up the void left by sentiment, the duplicitous language goes astray, loses itself in vague expressions [...] which are nothing but sonorous phrases, as false on the lips as in the hearts.” The result of this inflationary linguistic political economy was a social life of force, a un assaut général d’esprit tel quel, épigrammatique ou croyant l’être; c’est un état de guerre et de prétentions, ou l’on est en garde l’un contre l’autre: on se tend des pièges de mots; et les ridicules donnés et rendus coûtent d’autant moins que chacun est bien en fonds. On s’entendait autrefois; souvent aujourd’hui non seulement on ne fait plus de cas d’entendre les autres, mais on ne se fait pas l’honneur de s’entendre soi-même” (Lettre de Gresset à M. ***** Oeuvres, 2: 251).


453 “Dans ce tourbillon, moitié lumineux et moitié obscur, qui nous enveloppe, nous secoue et nous entraîne, les idées justes perdant leur niveau, les esprits étant exaltés, et l’engouement occupant toutes les places que
hooked on the ceaseless production of words and discourses that did not actually mean anything, the value of which was not in themselves, in the accuracy with which they represented the signified, but in their circulation, or in their market share. Artificial uniformization went hand in hand with spurious distinctions, and the more people dealt in the same vacuous generalizations, the more they felt the urge to stress the importance and the unicity of people and ideas they were acquainted with. Destroyed as meaning, individuality or personality was reinvented as brands, as mass-produced “unicity”: “Being balanced when making a judgment or when assessing a reputation does not count for anything anymore; there is no moderation in thought or in expression [...] and you can hear all the time, Oh! He is unique! Hélas! isn’t he something? But now everything is swarming with unique people.”

Gresset denounced the lurking danger of an age in which nothing would mean anything, “where all the ideas would be arbitrary,” a topsy-turvy world that would collapse under its own “unbearable weightlessness” (Kundera). The semantic and axiologic arbitrariness would lead, in the end, to a subtle, all pervasive despotism, exercised not by or in the name of the government, but as a form of self-censorship in the name of sociability: “If there will ever come to be such an unhappy age, when nothing will be either true or false, good or bad, except as a matter of whimsy and according to the tone set by society, then, since nothing would be judged according to principles, the statement of facts and the judgment of things will be arbitrary [...] This inversion, this transposition of all values, this uncertainty of reputations, this confusion of all ideas..."
which is bound to influence the way we convey those ideas would guarantee that the most clear statements would mean nothing sure for the impartial man, who woud not know what to believe [...] It would not be bad for him if, when going to pay a visit, he could first get from the butler a list with the updates of the day, and the particulars of his lady host.”

Linguistic anomie would lead to social anomie and, in the end, to an authoritarian, arbitrary world, not in an emancipated one. Responsible for this disaster were, in Gresset’s opinion, a certain group of intellectual mercenaries who destroyed everything for the sake of their own profit: “There are, and they move around, a bunch of stunted people, people without principles, without character, and unworthy of the name of their fatherland; a people made up of foul intrigants, of black and dark souls, of gilded insects, of caterpillars and of other species having only their own interest as spirit, duplicity as language, and the thirst for gold as existence.”

The philosophes and their rich, “dolled up” protectors (the “petit peuple pomponne”) were therefore as harmful as the lazy monks and the vain churchmen denounced in Gresset’s satirical poems. Monks wasted their lands, the philosophes destroyed the French language. Both culture and agriculture suffered at the hands of ecclesiastical and intellectual networks who thrived on putting in circulation empty religious or intellectual signs. The proliferation of

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456 “S’il pouvoit arriver ce temps malheureux, alors sans doute, comme il n’y auroit plus ni vrai ni faux, ni bien ni mal, que selon la fantaisie, selon le ton des sociétés, et que rien ne partant plus des principes, tout seroit devenu arbitraire dans l’expose des faits et dans les jugements des choses [...] Ce renversement, cette transposition de tous les titres, cette incertitude des réputations, cette confusion de toutes les idées passant nécessairement dans la manière de les rendre, les expressions les plus claires ne signifieront plus rien de décidé pour l’homme impartial, qui ne sauroit plus que croire [...] Il ne seroit pas mal pour lui que, dans ses différentes visites, il trouvât d’abord chez le suisse le bulletin du jour, et le signalement de la maîtresse de la maison” (Lettre de Gresset à M. *****. Oeuvres, 2: 263-64).

457 “Il existe et circule une foule d’êtres manqués, gens sans principes, sans caractère, et indignes du nom de leur patrie; peuple mélangé de bas intrigants, d’âmes viles et noires, d’insectes dorés, de chenilles et d’espèces n’ayant que l’intérêt pour esprit, la fausseté pour langage, et la soif de l’or pour existence” (Lettre de Gresset à M. *****. Oeuvres, II, 265-66).

458 Lettre de Gresset à M. *****. Oeuvres, 2: 266.
their currency resulted in “withering of reason and in moral decay,” and thus contributed to the social, economic and cultural collapse of France.

The solution to this linguistic anomie would be a reappropriation of reality by way of a combination of classic aesthetics, realist ontology, and Cartesian clarity: “If we consider only the truth of things, we will recover the language appropriate to each and every thing; the soundness of an idea will recover for us the appropriateness of its expression.” The enlightened empirical linguistics of Condillac advanced that language was a “repository of man’s experience.” If this was true, then the anomic language of the kind described by Gresset indicated that both the central and the provincial “society,” that is both the philosophes, together with their Parisian patrons, and the second-hand provincial beau-esprits echoing the latest fads of the capital, shared a faulty relationship with reality. Therefore, Gresset advanced the idea that the recovery should start with the rehabilitation of two concepts designating forgotten or despised

459 “Dépérissement de la raison et à la décadence des mœurs” (Lettre de Gresset à M. *****; Oeuvres, 2: 267).
460 “Ne voyons que la vérité des objets, nous reprendrons le langage de chaque chose; la justesse de l’idée nous rendra la propriété de l’expression” (Lettre de Gresset à M. *****; Oeuvres, 2: 254).
realities. The first was “bonhommie” (“good-naturedness”): “Let us be less haughty and we will be more happy; let us be French, let us be ourselves.”463 The enlightened appeal to patriotism was an appeal to simplicity, to recovering an identity that was not falsifying social and individual reality, faithfully represented by the “truth of the soul” (“vérité de l’âme”): “Let us abandon the ridiculous mania of wearing along the banks of the Seine the uniform of Thames, and let us make sure that our models are not demeaning themselves to being mere copies.”464 Clearing the air and setting some axiological matters straight would help rehabilitate the second key word, that is the enlightened, more scientific version of charity, that is “bienfaisance”. By preventing the "smog of intrigue" (“air nebulieux de l'intrigue”) as well as the "somber vapours of haughty people" (“sombres vapeurs des gens à prétentions”), the enlightened “bienfaisance” was the second remedy against the méchanceté spread by the philosophes. And if the philosophes thrived on ambiguity and on muddling the axiological criteria by disconnecting the signifier from the signified, Gresset saw “bienfaisance” as a supreme reaffirmation of these same criteria under attack, an act of recovery worthy of the new monarch of France, Louis XVI who, Gresset hoped, inaugurated a new reign of “sensibility on the throne.”465 In Gresset’s reading, charity had the virtue of reassembling the monarchical discourse of justice, will and reason, a discourse that the philosophes used for their own advantage by slicing it in three separate discourses to be pitted against each other.

Gresset was well aware of the despotic potential of “society,” that is of sophist, mercenary intellectuals relativising linguistic and ontologic values. Gresset also feared

463 “Soyons moins sublimes, nous serons plus heureux; soyons Français, soyons nous-mêmes” (Lettre de Gresset à M. ***** , Oeuvres, 2: 268).
464 "Abandonnons la ridicule manie de porter sur les bords de la Seine l'uniforme de la Tamise, et que des modèles ne se rabaisssent plus à être que de copistes" (Lettre de Gresset à M. ***** , Oeuvres, 2: 268).
465 Lettre de Gresset à M. ***** , Oeuvres, 2: 269.
the tyrannical consequences of a “public” opinion corrupted, bullied and misled by private interests, by an unscrupulous ruler able to write his own rules unimpeded by the elites (corrupt) or by the people (drunk on propaganda). Therefore, Gresset looked for salvation in the direction of the nation. If people could become a mob, and the philosophes could act as a crowd of narrow minded, sectarian ideologues, the nation was exempt from succumbing to the lures of the fashion because of its historic identity. A nation escaped the present, and so were its values, safeguarded by institutions such as the parlements. Therefore, the king’s “bienfaisance,” and the recovery of his three-pronged discourse would mark him as the king of the nation, as Gresset argued in his *Edouard III*, not as king of the mob or as king of the philosophes.

The importance of the nation and of patriotism for Gresset would suggest the need for nuancing Didier Masseau’s argument that the various enemies of the philosophes were moved by their desire to reaffirm the existence of God and the Christian truth against the theoretic atheism or the practic agnosticism of the philosophes. If he never attacked Christianity, Gresset did not embrace an unenlightened Catholicism either. Gresset’s 1758 public letter disavowing his own dramatic works did not open an apologetic floodgate. Written in the 1760s, Gresset’s last poems, such as *Le Parrain magnifique* or *L’ouvroir des nonnes*, still needled the ecclesiastical life in mildly irreverent manner. Gresset’s Christian faith, while real, manifested itself in Enlightenment guise: as concern for the deserving poor of all three estates (the brave military nobles and the useful clergymen receiving the same attention as the common people), as abhorrence of abuses (ecclesiastical, political or intellectual), and as denunciations of “feudalism.” In political economic terms, Gresset was a *physiocrate* of the first generation, when physiocracy had civic republican substance. In political terms, Gresset supported the monarchy and a patriotic king ruling with the assent of the nation
and of such representative institutions as the parlements. In religious terms, Gresset was an enlightened Catholic willing to see the Church reform its monastic life so as to get rid of abuses and to become a more socially responsible institution, dispensing learning and charity. In cultural terms, Gresset was one of the most daring importers of English influence on the French classical scene, and after 1748 his stress on simplicity and his discourse of plainness still recommended him as an enlightened figure. What Gresset defended then against the philosophes was not merely his Christian faith, but a particular, and enlightened, theologico-political synthesis. This might explain why Gresset chose to write as a cultural critic and never launched into a career as a full-fledged Catholic apologist similar to those enemies of the *philosophes* studied by Masseau.
CHAPTER III:

The Monastic Cell as Salon: Dom Deschamps and the Enlightenment

Public Sphere

Before the time when artists and writers started making their name by “shocking the bourgeois,” radicalism bred anonymity. If the identity of some bold philosophes, such as Morelly or the author of the *Treatise on the Three Impostors*, is still unknown to us, the real identity of many anonymously or pseudoanonymously printed books challenging the established political or religious values of the eighteenth century was unknown to many readers of that age. D’Holbach, Voltaire, Diderot, Hume, like many other famous writers, published under false identities. But they moved at the centre of the Enlightenment’s intellectual world. They might have published anonymously, but they had a “reputation.” And such was their reputation that people attributed to them even works that we now know were not theirs. Dom Deschamps lived in the provinces. He was a Benedictine monk, writing on the fringes of the Enlightenment. He published two anonymous pamphlets in which he fought the Philosophes in order to argue discreetly for a better way of dismantling the theologico-political synthesis of the Old Regime. His obscure writings, for the most part unpublished until a century later, his monastic obligations, his provincial life - all would seem to indicate a radical spirit tinkering in solitude at his metaphysical bomb, far from the maddening public sphere.

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Yet, the letters and documents assembled in Dom Deschamps’ Correspondance allow us to say that Dom Deschamps was not a reclusive philosopher, that at least some of his ecclesiastical superiors were aware of his radical ideas, and while this did not help his ecclesiastical “career” it surely did not result in any “Deschamps affair,” and that his philosophical system, while rejecting many of the philosophes’s ideas and chattiness, was not the product of a man who lived outside his age. Dom Deschamps was more than a link in Marc René de Voyer de Paulmy d’Argenson’s (1722-1782) patronage network. Dom Deschamps was the marquis de Voyer’s friend, mentor, and right-hand. As a member of the marquis de Voyer’s circle of friends and clients, Deschamps came in contact with grand nobles such as the duc de Choiseul, with administrators such as Sénac de Meilhan, with members of the noblesse d’epee, veteran soldier friends of de Voyer such as Beausire de la Chevalerie, Thibault de Longecourt, Berthenot, the ancient musketeer and metaphysician Henri-Camille de Colmont, the Jacobite refugee Michael (the chevalier de) Redmond, Emmanuel-Dieudonné marquis (later count) de Hautefort, the roué Philippe Charles Felix Macquart (baron de Rullecourt), with luminaries of the age such as Voltaire, Jean le Rond d’Alembert, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Jean-Baptiste Robinet, Paul-Henri Thiry baron D’Holbach, Claude Adrien Helvétius, with intellectuals such as the abbé Jean-Jacques Barthélemy, the abbé Claude Yvon, Jean-Louis Carra, or with the marquis’s love conquests such as the young Marie de Paviers.

469 Patrick Clarke de Dromantin, Les réfugiés jacobites dans la France du XVIIIe siècle: l’exode de toute une noblesse “pour cause de religion” (Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2005), 80, 106.
Traveling from his Montreuil-Bellay Benedictine priory, home to only four monks, to de Voyer’s chateau at Ormes, to Paris, where he visited both the Saint Germains-de-Pres abbey, the head of the Maurist Benedictine order, and Mme Géoffrin’s salon, or to some other monasteries such as Noyers, Dom Deschamps remained in contact, personal or mediated by books, letters and a vast networks of friends, with his age. And when he could not make a dash for the “siècle”, he invited the “siècle” in his cell. At Montreuil-Bellay, Dom Deschamps ran his own philosophical school. He invited people, from Rousseau to unknown monks, to come, stay for a while in the monastery, and be “enlightened,” that is drilled in the subtleties of his “Truth.” Deschamps had his own school, with young or gray-haired disciples sitting in a circle around him and absorbing or debating his “system.”

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In fact, by the begining of the 1760s, Deschamps started looking for “converts” to the system he had developed during the 1750s. Deschamps first approached the philosophes, in the 1760s. Deschamps’ “tentatives,” as he called them, did not have much of a result, Deschamps’ ideas being swiftly dismissed by d’Alembert, politely rejected by Voltaire, earnestly fought by Robinet, and managing to raise only the fleeting interest of Helvétius, the momentary curiosity of Rousseau and the enthusiast, but non-comittal, admiration of Diderot. Dissapointed, in the last five years of his life, Deschamps printed two anonymous pamphlets, the legally published Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle (1769) and the illegally issued La voix de la raison contre la raison du siècle (1770), and tried to spread his ideas by personal contact with various “disciples” gathered in his Montreuil-Bellay “school.” Deschamps was, like other Enlightenment figures, a man on a mission, an apostle of a certain kind of “Light” that had to be spread. Disenchanted with the philosophical elites, Deschamps recruited simpler souls, young monks and theologians

470 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 534 (letter 533).
unspoiled by that mainstream Enlightenment that one of his main disciples, Dom Patert, described in a December 1772 reproachful letter to the abbé Yvon as intellectual “prostitution.” But Deschamps’ system was too difficult to be understood by “simple” souls, and too radical in its relentless rational pursuit of an ontological ground to be useful to mainstream intellectuals involved in politically handling a socially constructed reason, or “common sense.” Deschamps was always worried that “simple” disciples might distort his message, or not adequately defend it, and that sophisticated philosophes might steal his ideas. The only philosophe who combined the required “simplicity” with a sharp philosophical acumen, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, rejected Deschamps’ metaphysics as well as Deschamps’ invitation to write an introduction to the Benedictine’s writings. Losing interest in Rousseau, Deschamps subsequently denounced him as being not better than the other philosophes.

In this context, Deschamps’ relation with the marquis de Voyer became crucial. The marquis “recruited” possible “disciples,” initiated the first contacts with the philosophes or with fellow nobles, and then passed them on to Deschamps. Sometimes, de Voyer’s fellow nobles cut short de Voyer’s metaphysical sales pitch, as did the duc de Brancas-Lauraguais who had enough time and energy to travel twenty miles to see some hunting dogs, “that, I was assured, were magnificent,” but who noted, in a short paragraph of a long letter, that if indeed Deschamps was the sage that de Voyer advertised: “The study of a sage should aim not to increase his learning, but to prove its futility, and the absurdity of its propagation.” Beside the idea that spreading these

471 “J’avais toujours conseillé à D.D. de ne pas prostituer sa spéculation à tout venant, et de choisir son monde non parmi les gens enthiches de systèmes et lardes d’axiomes prétendus philosophiques, mais entre les hommes simples, sans prétentions, de bon sens, comme de bonne foi, dont l’âme ne soit préoccupée par aucun préjugé de sciences” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 696 [letter 694]).

472 “L’étude de sage ne doit point être d’étendre le cercle de ses connaissances, mais de s’en démontrer l’inutilité, et le ridicule de les propager” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 600 [letter 605]).
ideas might help bring about the “state of morals,” and to avoid a dangerous revolution made in the name of philosophic “half-lights,” Deschamps tried to gain “converts” in order to prove to the marquis that he was right and eventually to force the marquis into submission. And if he could not win for his system the big names that the marquis channeled to him, Deschamps was always happy to announce to the marquis about the “conversion” of some young monk.

We have thus Deschamps functioning in different circles, connected both by his metaphysics and by his friendship with the marquis de Voyer. Dom Deschamps functioned as a procureur of his priory, where he kept his Benedictine brothers under an iron grip, both metaphysically and practically. Deschamps was also de Voyer’s friend, court philosopher, and secretary, drafting de Voyer’s correspondence, helping him manage his provincial patronage network, and solving administrative matters. Deschamps became close to de Voyer’s wife, Jeanne-Marie-Constance de Voyer d’Argenson (1734-1783), whom he tried to convert to his “system,” along with the marquis and his friends. While not committing himself completely to Deschamps’ philosophy, de Voyer helped him try to convert others and enjoyed watching Deschamps exercise his tyrannical influence over the other intellectuals that formed de Voyer’s circle. Those who suffered the most among these intellectuals would be Colmont and the abbé Yvon, who ended up by detesting Deschamps and by accusing him of stealing the marquis’s affection for them. Both Colmont and Yvon saw their relationship with the marquis distorted by their refusal to acquiesce to Deschamps’ metaphysics and both fought hard to discredit Deschamps in the de Voyer’s eyes.

But de Voyer was not such a devout Deschampsian as Colmont and Yvon believed. De Voyer trusted Deschamps in practical matters, enjoyed his friendship and

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473 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 291, 505, 559, 572, 577, 619, 621, 627.
tangy wit, and embraced, more than Deschamps’ philosophy, Deschamps’ stance. And in this respect Deschamps was eminently part of the Enlightenment, since he managed to produce, if not evidence for the truth, than a competing language, or even what Keith Baker would call a “discourse.” A discourse of “truth,” and of “Tout/le Tout.” It was this language that permeated the correspondence of de Voyer’s circle. It was the password of de Voyer’s circle, in the same way in which “sensibility,” “tolerance,” “reason,” “justice,” or “progress” were the watermarks of the philosophe mainstream Enlightenment discourse. In fact, it would be only the failure of Deschamps’ discourse to insert itself into the mainstream Enlightenment discourse that signalled his defeat. The philosophes did not argue against him, they merely disregarded him because he was talking another “language,” a language which could not be politically instrumental because it did not appear out of the disjointed elements of the royal discourse of “will, justice, and reason,” and which also rejected the scientifically inspired discourse of the well-ordered police state.

But this does not mean that Dom Deschamps was a philosopher isolated from his own age. Indeed the logical complexity of his philosophical system had a counterpart in the grit with which he managed his own affairs. Born on 10 January 1716 in Rennes as a son and grand-son of royal sergeants (*huissier au présidial de Rennes*), Dom Deschamps was, in life as in his writings, a man who knew his chicane. After studies at the Jesuit college in Rennes, he entered the Benedictine Order in 1733. The young Maurist went to

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study in Anjou and Touraine until 1743. After 1743, he dedicated himself to the historical and antiquarian research customary for Maurist Benedictines. Deschamps contributed to thirteen tomes of the multivolume *Collection de Touraine et d'Anjou*, a project that included compiling medieval documents and copying charts out of monastic and seigneurial archives. Deschamps contributed more than 800 pieces, documents going from 443 to 1746, to the *Histoire de Tourraine*, and he also wrote most of the notices in the three volumes of the *Histoire Littéraire de Tourraine*. This historical work helped him gain a wide knowledge of medieval history and feudal laws, a knowledge that would enable him to speak with authority about the evils and depredations of the “state of laws” opposed to the “state of morals.” He also gained entrance to noble families such as those of the Princes de Rohan or of the Ducs de Montbazon, with whom he would remain in contact, indicating thus that he was not only a keen researcher, but also an adroit conversationalist and historian of great families.

In 1747 Dom Deschamps returned to Bretagne where he became, in 1749, *procureur*, that was the father who had in charge of all temporal matters, of the Benedictine monastery in Quimperle. In 1757 he became *procureur* of the Benedictine monastery of Montreuil-Bellay, near Saumur, a Gallican-Jansenist stronghold. At Montreuil-Bellay he entered into contact with the d'Argenson family, whose Ormes castle was just experiencing a revival due to the presence there of comte D'Argenson, the former War Minister exiled from the Court by the intrigues of Mme de Pompadour in February 1757, after Damien's assassination attempt. Exiled by *lettre de cachet* to

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Ormes, the comte d’Argenson spent his time in the countryside renovating his castle and receiving guests such as Paradis de Moncrif, Voltaire and Jean-François Marmontel. Deschamps was probably introduced to the restless comte d’Argenson by the monks of the Noyers abbey, built on the D’Argenson lands. But it would be not the count, but the count’s son, the marquis de Voyer, Marc-René de Voyer d’Argenson (1722-1782), general manager of the King’s stables (‘directeur des Haras’) and then lieutenant general of the King’s armies and governor of Vincennes (‘lieutenant general des armées du Roi et gouverneur de Vincennes’) who would eventually play an important role in Deschamps’ career.

The marquis de Voyer, who made a name for himself at the battle of Fontenoy, inherited a very difficult financial situation from his father. In order to put some order into the financial state of the family, and to recover the heavy financial losses suffered as War Minister by his father during the War of Austrian Succession, the marquis de Voyer had to sell some family lands and to reorganize, improve and make more profitable his remaining estates while trying to work his way up at Court. His relationship with Dom Deschamps worked on two levels. One was the level of intellectual exchange, of the marquis as a disciple of Deschamps. As such, the marquis circulated Deschamps’ unorthodox manuscripts and acted as intermediary between Deschamps and Rousseau, Voltaire, Helvétius, or d’Alembert. Indeed, Voltaire, receiving from the marquis de Voyer Deschamps’ refutation of D’Holbach’s _Système de la nature_, initially thought that the author was the marquis. Accordingly, in October 1770 Voltaire answered to de

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479 Maurepas, Boulant, _Les Ministres et les ministeres_, 91.
480 “Je ne savais pas, quand je vous fis ma cour à Colmar, que vous étiez philosophe; vous l’êtes et de la bonne secte. Je n’approche pas de vous, car je ne sais que douter,” in Deschamps, _Correspondance générale_, 53 (letter 15). Complaining to Voltaire about the lack of financial support for the Royal Stables, the marquis de Voyer already used Deschampsian language and talked about the fact that “les Haras font un point dans le tout.”
Voyer/Deschamps in a noncomittal frivolous way that, while empty of any philosophical value, showcased Voltaire’s talents as a courtier capable of flattering his powerful interlocutors by way of a philosophical *badinage*.\(^{481}\) Voltaire encouraged the marquis de Voyer to continue making his vassals happy and to educate his servants, but declared himself unable to talk about the abstruse metaphysics of Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, or Bonaventure, that is of those philosophers and theologians whose influence he detected in Deschamps’ pages.\(^ {482}\) While advising the marquis to continue cultivating his own garden, Voltaire warned Condorcet and d’Alembert that an important figure at Court (“grand courtisan”) had sent him a refutation of d’Holbach in which the author warned that “the new philosophy will bring a horrible revolution if nobody prevents it from spreading” (“dans laquelle il dit que la nouvelle philosophie amenera une révolution horrible, si on ne la prévient pas”). Voltaire told his companions not to worry because: “All these cries will vanish, and philosophy will endure.”\(^ {483}\) As for de Voyer, he forwarded Voltaire’s answers to Deschamps giving instructions to his secretary to tell Dom Deschamps that he loved him immensely.\(^ {484}\)

This was, without a doubt, a way to sweeten the bitter pill of Voltaire’s coyness about Deschamps’ “system.” Yet, de Voyer fought Dom Deschamps’ metaphysics for a long time, and he resisted enlisting as an avowed Deschampsian even after becoming the Benedictine’s friend and protector. The marquis de Voyer believed for a long time that

\(^{481}\) “Mais que je traite avec vous par lettres des choses ou Aristote, Platon, saint Thomas et saint Bonaventure se sont casse le nez, c’est ce qu’assurément je ne ferai pas,” in Deschamps, *Correspondance générale*, 440 (letter 420), 444 (letter 426).
\(^{482}\) Deschamps, *Correspondance générale*, 450 (letter 432).
\(^{483}\) “Tous ces cris s’évanouiront et la philosophie restera,” in Deschamps, *Correspondance générale*, 53 (letter 419).
\(^{484}\) “Que je l’aime beaucoup” (Deschamps, *Correspondance générale*, 450 [letter 432]).
Deschamps was in fact mentally deranged. But there was something in Deschamps’ philosophical\textit{ rienism} that resonated with the marquis’s own libertine disenchantment. Deschamps was not a nihilist in the agnostic, moral relativist and metaphysically indifferent sense of the term. But Deschamps considered that a truly just society, the “moral stage/state,” could appear only after the total destruction of any established institution, law, and principle. In his opinion, this would not happen through a political revolution, but as a consequence of a metaphysical conversion. Deschamps rejected both reformist meliorism, which in his opinion only perpetuated and developed the initial errors, and political revolution, which he saw as destroying the lies of the existing order in the name of some other lies derived from that same existing order. To a (dis)order of the spirit built on a false social order, Deschamps put forward what he saw as a true social order built upon a true spiritual order. Deschamps saw the destruction of the existing order as a metaphysical awakening, as a result of people finding the truth and then shedding the dry skin of the old society. As such, his implicit rejection of the existing society, accompanied in fact by a sort of conservatism which posited the need to defend the existing order until it would be organically abandoned, was tempting for blasé nobles such as the marquis de Voyer.

De Voyer was the friend of “old” Deschamps, and the protector of the young Alphonse-Donatien marquis de Sade. His ideas exhibited the “aristocratic radicalism” that, through Sade, Pierre-Ambroise-François Choderlos de Laclos, or George Gordon Byron, to Jules-Amédée Barbey d’Aurevilly, Pierre Kropotkin or

\footnote{In November 1771, Yvon reminded de Voyer that: “De votre aveu, vous avez regardé comme fou pendant douze ans celui dont vous préconisez aujourd’hui la sagesse” (Deschamps, \textit{Correspondance générale}, 539 [letter 539]).}

\footnote{Deschamps, \textit{Correspondance générale}, 54-55 (letter 16).}
Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy, puzzled commentators by its radical-conservative synthesis.\textsuperscript{487} Under the influence of Romanticism, the Enlightenment has for a long time been considered a soulless ideology which led to the victory of the machine over nature and which favoured technological progress over organic development. The new historiography of the Enlightenment(s), however, might help alter this idea when arguing that, far from being just a radical opositional movement that challenged the Old Regime organic society of orders in the name of a mechanist ideology, the Enlightenment was the result of the clash, cooperation and competition between different branches of that same theologico-political establishment the Enlightenment was supposed to challenge.\textsuperscript{488} As such, to the extent to which it answered to specific social needs and represented a certain social consensus, the Enlightenment can be read, in Romantic-historicist terms, as an organically-evolutive movement.\textsuperscript{489}

The philosophes saw social “progress” along reformist lines, according to the notion of an immanent “good,” of a good that was perceived either by an inner sense (as in Rousseau’s conscience) or by outer feelings (as in Helvétius or d’Holbach’s sensualist epistemology). Good was that which was natural in man: his desire to experience pleasure, or the fulfilment of certain natural duties (paternal or filial duties, used as a theme by the bourgeois \textit{drame larmoyante}) or impulses (procreation, widely used in the antimonastic literature) that worked as natural laws. Sentiment or sensation, happiness depended on feeling.\textsuperscript{490} “Juger [...] n’est proprement sentir,” wrote Helvétius in \textit{De}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[488] Edelstein, \textit{The Enlightenment}, 89-91.
\item[489] The attempt to credit Romanticism with those characteristics of the Enlightenment -such as sentimentality, the aesthetics of infinity, interest in the exotic and the anthropological temptation -that do not fit with an overly mechanized version of the Enlightenment cannot be supported by empirical evidence.
\item[490] Palmer, \textit{Catholics and Unbelievers}, 133-36.
\end{footnotes}
Either naturalistic or spiritualistic, the Enlightenment was still anthropologically centred. But Deschamps rejected the anthropomorphism that stood at the basis of this morality. Deschamps rejected the fashionable physiological assumptions of Enlightenment ethics. Deschamps’ principles were not the result of anthropological research or of ethnographic empiricism, but of deductive reasoning. To the extent to which the philosophes assumed the natural legitimacy of certain institutions and instincts, there was something inherently conservative in the philosophe tradition. Deschamps rejected anthropomorphism, and this allowed him to be anthropologically radical and socially conservative.

For Deschamps, the unity of measure of man was Truth. For the mainstream philosophe Enlightenment, the unity of measure of truth was man. Truth was socialized during the Enlightenment and was to be perceived by that socialized form of reason known as “common sense.” Deschamps’ “Truth” was transcendent and had to be discovered by a strenuous exercise of individual, abstract reason. The philosophes, on the other hand worshipped “God-society.” For the philosophes, therefore, the meaning of history, if there was one, was already in history, while for Deschamps the meaning of history was outside history and could not express itself in any other way than by putting an end to history. Deschamps acted as a conservative against the philosophes because for him history was just a fallen world, an interval, a preparation for truth. The philosophes were reformists because for them history had a meaning: progress. History was not an interval because the end of history was history, history created itself out of itself. More

than Deschamps’ ontology, the marquis de Voyer absorbed Deschamps’ discourse, vocabulary and radical-conservative tenor. De Voyer did not embrace Deschamps’ system, but used his attack on the mainstream Enlightenment pieties or on traditional Christianity to make place for his own cynicism and aristocratic rejection of any received norms. Deschamps’ metaphysics functioned as a metaphysics of privilege because it posited, unlike the philosophes’, a transcendent outside. Ontology allowed Deschamps and his disciples to deconstruct conceptually the prevailing theologico-political synthesis while temporarily supporting the existing institutional networks.

On this second level, of concrete action, the relationship between Dom Deschamps and the marquis was as important and perhaps even more consistent that their metaphysical relationship. Dom Deschamps combined the function of procureur of the Montreuil-Bellay abbey with his work as a secretary of the marquis, for which he drafted letters, and even secret military plans such as those for an invasion of England (“Projet d’une descente dans la Grande-Bretagne”), which the marquis de Voyer presented to the duc de Choiseul, the War minister, in January 1769. In September 1770, the marquis de Voyer consulted with Deschamps about the acquisition of the property of Châtelleraut, sold at licitation at Châtelet, and about the management of its complicated feudal rights. We also find Dom Deschamps writing for the marquis de Voyer to the Controleur Général, in favor of a certain “sieur Thervay” who needed a respite after failing to pay his dues for the exploitation of the Chaux royal forests, or trying to hunt down a certain “sieur Dupuy” who stole from the chateau d’Ormes, and later managed to escape from the Bastille. So close was Dom Deschamps to the

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494 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 247–258 (letter 225).
495 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 421–423 (letter 403).
496 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 121 (letter 84).
497 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 224 (letter 197), 226 (letter 199).
marquis that, in June 1773, Redmond jokingly reapproached the marquis for taking a new secretary, since he was accustomed with Deschamps' handwriting, which resembled that of the marquis himself. The fact that de Voyer paid Dom Deschamps an annuity of two hundred livres, which he included even in his 1766 will, was something that had to do with a customary patronage relationships. But the concern with which the marquis followed, between January and April 1774, the progress of Deschamps' fatal illness, and the grief he expressed at the death of Dom Deschamps indicated the genuine friendship between the libertine marquis and the Rabelaisian monk. The intensity of Deschamps' own affection for de Voyer, and the measure of their intimacy were formulated by Deschamps with clarity in a letter from March 1767, in which Deschamps declared that only a gay could love the marquis more than he did.

This intimacy might be explained also by the fact that Deschamps acted as a confidant to both the marquis and the marquise de Voyer, who lived separately while maintaining the appearances of a family. The marquise seemed to have loved the marquis de Voyer, putting up with his escapades, with his natural children, and with his military friends. She was an extremely intelligent woman, interested in literature, philosophy, and scientific pursuits, such as chemistry experiments, to “pass the time.”

The marquise’s lack of piety actually shocked Deschamps who, in August 1770, wrote to Thibault de Longecourt a letter describing what might be called the “Gothic” exploits of the marquise in the countryside, at Ormes, where she went to the cemetery and dug out a

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498 “Vous m’avez changé de secrétaire, cher général; j’étais si fort accoutumé à l’écriture de Dom Deschamps, qui ressemble beaucoup à la vôtre” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 767 [letter 772]).

499 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 156 (letter 123).


501 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 871 (letter 896), 892 (letter 920).

502 “Adieu, Monsieur le marquis, je défie un homme, à moins qu’il ne soit b[ougre], d’être plus collé à un autre homme que je le suis à vous” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 168 [letter 137]).

503 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 316 (letter 290), 341 (letter 323).
body in order to indulge in the then fashionable scientific interest with the chemistry of decomposing bodies.\textsuperscript{504} When in Paris, the marquise entertained her Ormes-bound husband with the latest cultural and literary news, sending him the new book or reviews of the latest dramatic productions. Writing from Paris in May 1765, the marquise asked de Voyer why he kept Dom Deschamps around given that the marquis was more interested in hunting than in the Benedictine’s metaphysics.\textsuperscript{505} Jeanne-Marie-Constance de Voyer was, at first, coldly neutral, because the marquis attempted to “convert” her to Deschamps’ system. The marquise, already separated from her husband by more terrestrial reasons, resented this new condition imposed on her by her deer hunting, women chasing, metaphysical truth-seeking husband. A letter from February 1770 indicates that, by rejecting Deschamps’ philosophy, Jeanne-Marie-Constance de Voyer aimed both to reclaim her independence from her husband’s whims, and to reject the new boundaries, metaphysical this time, that the marquis was setting between them.\textsuperscript{506} The marquise rejected not only Deschamps’ metaphysics, but his intimacy with the marquis, the way in which Deschamps influenced the marquis’s discourse, the marquis’s

\textsuperscript{504} “Mme voulut y profaner le séjour des morts et nous forcer a déterrer l’un d’eux, de trois mois de date, pour jouir du spectacle de son cadavre et de l’air dont il prendrait la chose; elle fut la première a mettre la main à cette œuvre sacrilège; mais comme elle ne pouvait y aller que du bout de sa canne, et que nous la menaçames, loin de la seconder, de sonner le tocsin sur elle, l’œuvre ne fut point consumée; le mort en fut quitte pour être perforé de la canne impie du détestable [architect Pascal] Lenot, qui ne craignit point de la porter ensuite à son exécrable nez et d’en savourer l’odeur abominable” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 408 [letter 391]). See John McManners, Death and the Enlightenment. Changing Attitudes to Death among Christians and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 310.

\textsuperscript{505} “Que faites-vous dans vos voyages de Dom Deschamps, même dans votre séjour, car je vous crois plus occupe de vos chasses que de sa métaphysique” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 112 [letter 72]).

\textsuperscript{506} “L’imagination des autres peut aller plus loin que la mienne, sans contredit, mais ma raison est égale à la leur, et jusqu’à ce qu’ils me prouvent les opérations de mon esprit, comme celles de mon corps, je ne les croirai pas; et comme cela n’arrivera jamais, parce que ça ne se peut pas, foin de la métaphysique, foin, foin, Dom Deschamps n’aura pas ma pratique” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 337 [letter 316]).
apostolic endeavours on behalf of Deschamps’ *rienisme*. Deschampsianism was the “orthodoxy” of the marquis’s circle. The way to the marquis’s affection passed through embracing Deschamps’ metaphysics or at least through remaining in good personal terms with the metaphysical monk.\footnote{Deschamps, \emph{Correspondance générale}, 355 (letter 331).} The marquise de Voyer tried to challenge Deschamps’ influence over the marquis by making de Voyer read *Thérèse philosophe* or D’Holbach’s \emph{Système de la nature} (1770), two of the Darntonian “forbidden bestsellers” which she acquired with great difficulties, in Paris, for the marquis at Ormes.\footnote{Deschamps, \emph{Correspondance générale}, 345 (letter 324), 348 (letter 327), 349 (letter 329).}

But it seems that desecrating graves was not the only way in which Jeanne-Marie-Constance de Voyer spent her summer at the Château d’Ormes in 1770. She also got a taste of Deschamps’ conversation and good cheer, two qualities of paramount importance in the isolation of the countryside. On 5 August 1770, the marquise wrote to the marquis de Voyer that her friends, the architects Wailly and Lenot, had left for Paris and that she was alone with Deschamps, whose conversation she greatly enjoyed.\footnote{“S’il s’est accommodé de moi, je me suis fort accommodée de lui; de la lecture, et une conversation qui ne passe pas mes forces m’ont fait passer le temps et jouir avec plaisir de la partie de son esprit qui peut être à ma portée” (Deschamps, \emph{Correspondance générale}, 410 [letter 392]).} Still skeptical about Deschamps’ metaphysics,\footnote{Deschamps, \emph{Correspondance générale}, 473 (letter 456).} the marquise de Voyer came to appreciate the monk’s brilliant conversation and gallant regards for her, so that she and Deschamps became friends. Once returned to Paris, in the spring of 1771, the marquise even sent Deschamps her portrait.\footnote{Deschamps, \emph{Correspondance générale}, 472 (letter 455).} For his part, Deschamps sent toys to the marquis and the marquise de Voyer’s children in the same spring of 1771, and the marquise appreciated
his consideration.\textsuperscript{512} In September 1771, shortly before the marquise would give birth to a son, Marc René Marie Voyer d’Argenson (1771-1842), Deschamps, like a conscientious father confessor, was prompting the marquis de Voyer to put to good use his sexual appetite, reinvigorated by way of mineral waters.\textsuperscript{513} Deschamps would repeat the confessorial request in December 1771, asking the marquis and the marquise to produce a second male child.\textsuperscript{514} The marquise, possibly because of his attempts to bring together the two estranged spouses, was quite taken with Dom Deschamps, so that by November 1772 she started looking for his company.\textsuperscript{515} Deschamps’ usual \textit{marivaudage} having as object his affection for the marquise\textsuperscript{516} found a confirmation on his deathbed, when among the precious few things that he left behind him was a gift from the marquise: a snuff-box which he asked Dom Brunet to return to the marquise.\textsuperscript{517}

That Deschamps managed to gain the love of both the marquise and the marquis de Voyer was due not only to his temperament, but also to his metaphysics. Deschamps was not a stern moralist. He did not try to “reform” anything or anybody unless they embraced his metaphysics. Reform was not possible, according to Deschamps. What was possible was a “conversion,” a discovery of the “metaphysical truth” that would bring

\textsuperscript{512} “A propos de Dom Deschamps, il a envoyé des joujoux à mes enfants, qui, comme de raison, d’après la conscience aussi, et le sentiment de cet âge, ont fait penser à lui. On lui en est bien obligé, et moi encore plus” (Deschamps, \textit{Correspondance générale}, 478 [letter 466]).

\textsuperscript{513} “Tout beau, Monsieur le marquis, bride en main; c’est \textit{in vaso uxorio} qu’il faut que vous portiez les prémices du bon effet des eaux. Vous trouverez ce vase en état à votre retour à Paris, et ce ne sera ni trop tôt ni trop tard pour vous d’opérer. Je vous souhaite tout coup blanc d’ici à ce moment-la” (Deschamps, \textit{Correspondance générale}, 505 [letter 504]).

\textsuperscript{514} “Un second enfant mâle, s’il vous plaît, de ma part, à Mme la marquise, et faculté à vous, à ce nécessaires” (Deschamps, \textit{Correspondance générale}, 553 [letter 553]).

\textsuperscript{515} “Est-ce que Dom Deschamps restera longtemps à son voir-caché. Je voudrais bien cependant le retrouver aux Chênes. Ah! Ah! C’est-il joli?” (Deschamps, \textit{Correspondance générale}, 687 [letter 685]).

\textsuperscript{516} Deschamps, \textit{Correspondance générale}, 201 [letter 178].

\textsuperscript{517} “Il a mis entre mes mains,” wrote Dom Brunet, the prior of Montreuil, “la tabatière dont Madame la marquise l’avait honoré, pour lui être remise” (Deschamps, \textit{Correspondance générale}, 868 [letter 893]).
about a progression from the “state of laws” to the “state of morals;” but this was a collective affair. Lacking this conversion, any tinkering with the established social order was harmful because the established social order was an organic order: it was the best way of living in error. His quasi-Augustinian reluctance to optimistically try to “reform” things made Deschamps, otherwise egalitarian in metaphysics, behave as the sternest upholder of the Old Regime social and economic order, as he made clear in a New Year 1766 letter to the marquis and the marquise de Voyer. Deschamps decried the “wretched state of affairs” (“f[ouutues] moeurs”) that made the courrier lose his previous letter to his noble protectors. But Deschamps wrote that, without these “moeurs,” these ways of getting along, their life such as it was would be impossible, and that he was sad that his “metaphysics” made it impossible for him to kneel and simply pray for the happiness he wished the de Voyers in the coming year.518 From his metaphysical standpoint, Deschamps could write in good conscience such “patriotic” letters as the one he sent to the marquis on 19 September 1771 to congratulate him for the birth of his son. The patriotic and anti-“despotic” language imbued Deschamps’ handling of familial matters in the fashion analyzed by Sarah Maza in her by now classic opus on *Private Lives, Public Affairs* in the last decades of Old Regime France.519

518 “Il n’y aurait ni seings ni contreseings, et ces inconvénients n’arriveraient pas : mais, d’un autre coté, il n’y aurait point de M. le marquis ni de Mme la marquise de Voyer, seigneur et dame des Ormes, et je trouve fort bon pour moi qu’il y en ait, car je me trouve fort bien de leur existence, et si bien que j’en veux à ma métaphysique de ce qu’elle s’oppose à ce que je m’agenouille pour eux à ce premier de l’an et tous les jours de l’année. Mais, pour ne pas m’agenouiller, je n’en vote pas moins, et je finis par enraguer bel et bien de ne pouvoir effectuer par moi-même ce que je leur désire” (Deschamps, *Correspondance générale*, 122 [letter 85]).

519 “Grâce à vous, Monsieur le marquis, et plus encore à Madame, s’il est vrai que la femelle domine dans la fabrication d’un mâle, elle ne tombera donc pas en quenouille cette maison de Voyer, si constamment royaliste et si précieuse au trône; cette maison qui a toujours fait la force de nos rois, sans jamais contribuer à les mettre dans le cas de l’employer toute entière, de connaître par la jusqu’ou elle peut aller, et de devenir despotes […] L’idée qu’il existe un petit Voyer-Mailly me fait un plaisir indicible, et rien ne pouvait ni ne
It was from this position, of metaphysical radicalism combined with, in fact, a Christian-Augustinian view of human sinfulness, that Deschamps was able to gain influence over the marquis de Voyer. Thus, we find Deschamps baby-sitting the marquis de Voyer's natural children, accompanying but not helping the marquise on her country churchyard desecrating trips, or joking rakishly with the marquis about a certain “petite Camuson.” Deschamps’ inclination for all kinds of meriments made some people doubt his metaphysical acumen, as can is evident in a 1771 letter sent by Mme Marie-Philippine de Belabre to Frederic Augustus Hervey, bishop of Derry, Ireland. Mme de Belabre noted that Deschamps’ rubicund looks indicated his probable lack of interest in any pursuit that was “purely intellectual and devoid of sensations,” and that since the marquis de Voyer was not at Ormes “the so called metaphysician” Deschamps was probably sorely missing the marquis’ wine. In fact, it was precisely Deschamps’ metaphysics that made him enjoy his “sinfulness” with a somehow clear conscience, while upholding the sacred institution of marriage.

The marquis de Voyer and his circle grasped Deschamps’ metaphysics and translated it into a libertine discourse. The marquis de Voyer used Deschampsian philosophy trying to soften up the resistance of “la petite” Marie de Paviers. Initiated in 1763, the correspondence between the marquis de Voyer and Marie de Paviers arrived by 1768 at the point where the marquis occupied the higher-ground trying to “liberate” the

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520 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 160-61 (letter 129).
521 “Je souhaite cependant pouvoir porter un jour sur elle ma mesure philosophique, comme Gueheneuc y a porte la sienne” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 611 [letter 617]).
522 “Son gros bénédictin se passera cette été et de ses Ormes [...] et de son bon vin. Je me suis trouvée très glorieuse d’avoir porte le même jugement que vous de ce soi-disant métaphysicien. La physique lui est certainement beaucoup plus analogue qu’une science si purement intellectuelle et vide de toutes sensations” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 482 [letter 471]).
young woman by talking to her about the metaphysical truth and about the unconventional morality of Deschamps’ “state of morals.”

Marie de Paviers answered from Rousseauist positions, rejecting Deschamps’ metaphysical dogmatism for the peace of a private truth and of a traditional morality that allowed her to dismiss Deschamps’ morals as an example of “brutality” (“brutalité”). Although by 1771, Marie de Paviers started to like Dom Deschamps’ conversation, she did not lack in debating skills or in metaphysical acumen. Thus, “la petite” Marie de Paviers managed to reject the marquis de Voyer’s assaults on her virtue by coming up with a very original objection to Deschamps’ philosophy. Thus, she pointed out that Deschamps talked dogmatically about a subject that needed to be tackled by way of “probabilities” and of the infinitesimal calculus, that is by way of the “metaphysics of science.” But since not all young females could defend their virtue by appealing to Leibnizian calculus, the marquis de Voyer’s friends counted on Deschamps’ Rabelaisian philosophy to conquer them. Writing to the marquis de Voyer from Munich in May 1770, Hautefort announced his intentions to besiege a local Ormes adolescent beauty in the name of Deschamps’ both “physical” and “moral truth.” Deschamps’ own prowess at composing gallant verses was attested to even by such a virtuoso of light verse as François-Auguste Paradis de Moncrif (1687-

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523 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, letters 135, 143, 144, 182, 734.
525 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 529 (letter 526).
526 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 540-41 (letter 540), 559-562 (letter 562).
527 “L’adolescente sera à son point, à mon arrivée aux Ormes. Si vous m’en croyez, nous jouerons son pucelage aux dés; à moins que vous ne l’ayez pris d’avance, ce que je vous conseille fort de faire, s’il presse. Je me flatte que les sermons de Dom Deschamps, et votre vit, auront attaqué, vaincu, perforé d’outre en outre la sagesse de la Liégeoise. Un con qui ne fout pas est partout un sot meuble; mais ailleurs ce n’est qu’un rebelle à la vérité physique, et aux Ormes c’est un rebelle à la vérité morale; partant, il doit être puni du supplice des rebelles au Japon, fendu en deux. Je condamne Deschamps à chercher la vérité dans ce puits-là” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 370 [letter 353]). See also 398 (letter 381), for Hautefort’s “Gothic” take on nuns.
1770), a member of the French Academy, secretary of the comte d’Argenson, and enemy of the philosophes. In 1762, Paradis de Moncrif wrote to Deschamps to congratulate him on the verses that he had dedicated to the Count and the comtesse d’Argenson: "Nobody could eulogize in a more tactful and delicate manner," wrote Paradis, who addressed Deschamps as “mon cher confrère,” thus giving a testimony if not for the real literary merits of Deschamps, then at least for the fact that such a skilled courtier and man of letters as Paradis felt that Deschamps was kept in high regards in the Count d’Argeson’s society. A confirmation comes from the fact that around the same time, 1762, Pierre Jelyotte (1713-1797), an opera singer who was giving singing lessons to Madame de Pompadour, wrote to Deschamps asking him to send more of his verses because he wanted to be his “commissionnaire à Paris.” These letters did not lead anywhere, but they at least serve to attest that Deschamps was central to d’Argeson’s circles and their Epicurean Enlightenment, and that he was not lacking in the social skills behooving a “man of letters” in the Age of Enlightenment.

Beyond his central role in the marquis de Voyer’s circle, Deschamps functioned as procureur of his Montreuil-Bellay priory. With its annual revenues of five thousand livres, Montreuil-Bellay was, by the standards of eighteenth-century provincial abbeys, a modest affair. However, with a significant landed property and exempted from paying local taxes, the priory was playing an important role in the city of Montreuil, with a population of eighteen hundred people. Since 1750, the priory of Montreuil-Bellay had only four monks. In Deschamps’ times, these four monks were himself, Dom Brunet, the prior, Dom le Hoult, and another one. Deschamps ruled with an iron grip over his brothers, whom the bishop of Poitiers described to the marquis de Poitiers in 1769 as

528 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 78 (letter 33).
529 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 80 (letter 34).
530 Methais, "Dom Deschamps: Métaphysique et révolution," 185.
merely “three imbeciles [...] whom [...] Dom Deschamps manipulates at will.” 531 As 
defender of the temporal well-being of his Maurist Benedictine brothers, Deschamps was 
ruthless and did not hesitate to ask for the marquis de Voyer’s support in defending the 
rights of the priory. 532 Deschamps stood up for his priory against anyone who lacked 
respect for the monks. 533 In February 1760, Deschamps complained to the marquis about 
a certain René Courtin, merchant, who had a farm on the lands of the priory and who 
refused to pay his “taille” and insulted the monks by saying that he did not want to pay 
anything for “that wretched farm rented to me by those damn miserly monks” (“une 
bougre de ferme que je tiens de ces foutus gueux de moines”). Deschamps wrote to the 
marquis asking him to reprimand Courtin for insulting the monks whose “vassal” he was 
and to impose on him a public act of contrition and a fine for the benefit of the poor of 
the city. 534 Deschamps also intervened with the marquis in favour of his prior’s military 
brother, 535 or forwarded to de Voyer a letter to count Louis de Saint-Florentin, Minister 
of the Royal Household, in favor of a young man imprisoned for blasphemy. 536 In all 
these dealings Deschamps tried to intervene for poor families, 537 for unhappy soldiers or 
fathers, but he rejected sternly anyone who stole or who led a dissipated life that 
menaced to ruin a family. Thus, from February to April 1773, Deschamps kept asking the

531 “Trois imbéciles [...] dont [...] Dom Deschamps fait tout ce qu’il veut” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 298 [letter 269]).
532 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 49-52 (letters 12, 13, 14).
534 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 55-56 (letter 17).
535 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 90-91.
536 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 181-182 (letter 155). For the contradictory involvement of Louis de Saint-Florentin in the marquis de Sade’s many stints in the Old Regime prisons, see Laurence L. Bongie, Sade: A Biographical Essay (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 100-130. Bongie argues that Saint-Florentin used the lettres de cachet against Sade in order to keep him out of the hands of the Parlement. Voltaire’s L’Ingenu (1767) depicted Saint-Florentin as the horrid “Saint-Pouange,” the corrupt overlord of the Bastille.
537 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 530-31 (letter 529).
marquis de Voyer to help the distressed patriarch of the Beausire family, relatives of the Fermier general M. de Fontenelle, obtain a “lettre de cachet” against his rakish son (“fils mauvais sujet”) who left home for Paris, where he tried to con different relatives and acquaintances, such as two abbés. The abbés, Sestrier and Ponchelin, did not fall for the tricks of young Beausire.  

Far from trying to subvert the established order, Deschamps was prompted by his metaphysics to uphold it until a general conversion to the metaphysical truth would signal the dawn of the “state/stage of morals.” Until that moment, Deschamps managed humanly and efficiently an extensive patronage network that, as Deschampos wrote to the marquis de Voyer in 1771, sometimes overwhelmed him.

Beside these current affairs, two were the great affairs that preoccupied Dom Deschamps. The first one was related to a traditional conflict between the regular and secular clergy for the control of the parish church of Montreuil. Originally, the church had been served by regular clergy, and from 1590 by the Benedictines of Montreuil-Bellay. In 1722, at the end of a long trial, the secular clergy took control of the parish church. With the advent of Dom Deschamps as “procureur” of Montreuil, things took a new turn, with the gritty Deschamps initiating an open and even violent conflict with the curé Thomasson in 1767. Using the influence of the marquis de Voyer, who was in excellent terms with the bishop of Poitiers, Martial-Louis de Beaupoil de Sainte-Aulaire (1719-1798), and supported by the bourgeois of Montreuil, Deschamps secured the cure of Montreuil for his Benedictines. But the Bishop of Poitiers considered Deschamps a

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538 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 735-752 (letters 728, 731, 733, 736, 738, 743, 748, 749).
539 “Il y a des quarts d’heures ou je voudrais que vous m’eussiez envoyé faire [oultre], pour pouvoir dire aux demandeurs qu’il n’y a plus rien a faire” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 559 [letter 561]).
540 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 188 (letter 161).
dangerous element because of his metaphysical speculations and because of his ascendancy over the other three monks of the Saint Pierre priory of Montreuil. Therefore, Beaupoil de Sainte-Aulaire sent his own man to Montreuil, a certain Dom Cailhava, to serve as curé of Montreuil. Despite Deschamps’ pleas and the pressure put by the marquis de Voyer on the bishop of Poitiers, Beaupoil de Sainte-Aulaire would not take back Dom Cailhava. In the end, after making it clear to the bishop in November-December 1769 that the monks of Montreuil-Bellay as well as the bourgeois of that city would not recognize the authority of Dom Cailhava, facing mutiny, the bishop of Poitiers solved the situation by reinstating Deschamps’ man, a certain Thomasson. The whole episode proved two things. First, that Deschamps was not obscurely spinning his metaphysical web in a forgotten corner of the countryside, but that, as the Bishop of Poitiers made it clear, he had quite a reputation as an unorthodox metaphysician. Second, that Deschamps was a skilfull church politician, who could defend the interests of his priory even on a large canvass.

The second affair in which Deschamps was involved was precisely a confrontation with national policies that, informed by both the Reform Catholicism of certain Benedictine monks and the mainstream Enlightenment ideas of certain anticlerical ministers such as Choiseul or of some bishops such as Lomenie de Brienne, were threatening Deschamps’ monastic way of life. In 1765, a group of twenty-eight monks from the headquarters of the Maurist-Benedictine Order, Saint-Germain-des-Près, asked Louis XV to apoint a comission of enquiry into the disorders of the Benedictine Order. The Maurist monks also proposed a plan of reforms that included the return to the older Benedictine attire, a return to free elections for the general chapter, abandoning the

542 Deschamps, *Correspondance générale*, 297-98 (letter 269).
543 Deschamps, *Correspondance générale*, 303-308 (letters 277, 278, 280).
exact “countour” for the tonsure, a reform of Benedictine seminars, and a relaxation of monastic routines for the benefit of study. The petition, couched in a language denouncing “despotism,” was rejected by the majority of Benedictines who saw it as an attempt to transform the Benedictine order into a literary society, and saluted by the philosophes as a “progrès de la raison en France.” The public uproar over the “affaire des mitigations” made the twenty-eight monks recant, but in 1766 the “chapitre extraordinaire” adopted some of their proposals and in the same year Louis XV created a “Commission des Réguliers” chaired by Étienne-Charles de Loménie de Brienne, archbishop of Toulouse. The aim of this commission was to preside over the reformation of the monastic orders so that they became “encore plus utiles à l’État.” The commission asked for the dissolution of any monastic establishment that had less than nine monks. As Pierre Methais justly observed, this measure came into direct contradiction with Deschamps’ “refus du siècle,” with his mistrust of reforms and with his lack of interest in the moral and legal values of an age that did not recognize his metaphysical “Truth.” The Montreuil priory, with its only four monks, was on the first draft of the “mergers” list. The “siècle,” in its religious significance, was about to come over Dom Deschamps. Between 1766-1769, Dom Deschamps undertook a vigorous epistolary campaign to save his four-monk priory. He appealed to the marquis de Voyer, who was

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related to Brienne, to save his monastery from being one of the 458 monasteries that eventually dissapeared.\textsuperscript{550} Deschamps also travelled to Paris, first in 1767, to present his “Mémoire pour les Religieux Bénédictines de Montreuil-Bellay,” and then in 1769, sent by his Montreuil brothers to solve the question of the preservation of their priory.\textsuperscript{551} In 1769 Deschamps also met the censor of his \textit{Lettres sur l'esprit du siècle}, the book ready to appear in June 1769.\textsuperscript{552} \textit{Lettres sur l'esprit du siècle} was part of his campaign to save the Montreuil priory. Deschamps hoped to prove in and by this book that monks were useful to the state, forming a “militia of the Throne.”\textsuperscript{553}

During his visit to Paris, in 1767, Deschamps made direct contact with the salons of the Enlightenment only to be startled, like Hume or Gibbons, by the frivolous “atheism” of Parisian salons. His book went precisely against this “tone,” or “discourse,” which he decried in a letter from August 1767, taking aim at the anti-Christian jokes made by Mme Géoffrin’s guests, among them d’Alembert.\textsuperscript{554} This letter can be interpreted as an indication of Deschamps’ bitter discovery of his Parisian marginality, so different from his provincial ascendancy over his Benedictine brothers and over the marquis de Voyer’s circle. In Paris, Deschamps was reduced to the status of a silent spectator, whereas in the provinces he played the master. But read in the context of Deschamps’ whole work and relationships with the philosophes, this letter might

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{550} Deschamps, \textit{Correspondance générale}, 144-45 (letter 109), 276-77 (letter 248).
\item \textsuperscript{551} Deschamps, \textit{Correspondance générale}, 266 (letter 238).
\item \textsuperscript{552} Deschamps, \textit{Correspondance générale}, 266 (letter 238), 265 (letter 237).
\item \textsuperscript{553} Deschamps, \textit{Correspondance générale}, 264 (letter 234).
\item \textsuperscript{554} “J’allai dîner chez Mme Geoffrin, où il y avait force étrangers, et ou d’Alembert se trouva. J’y fus auditeur et rien plus. Il y fut question du panégyrique de la veille, prononcé par l’abbé Bassinet, devant l’Académie française. On convint que c’était le sermon le moins sermon et le moins chrétien possible. Il n’y eut pas jusqu’au texte et à l’\textit{Ave Maria} qui [ne] furent sacrifiés au bel esprit et à la philosophie. Il y fut question aussi de la mort tout fraîche du sieur Bocage. Quelqu’un dit qu’il était mieux la veille, et encore mieux maintenant, dit d’Alembert. C’était à moi a le dire, et non pas à lui; car qu’en sait-il?” (Deschamps, \textit{Correspondance générale}, 176 [letter 147]).
\end{itemize}
indicate Deschamps’ resolution to play the humble, silent monk in order to understand Parisian society. He had not gone starry-eyed to Paris, waiting to be well received, well reviewed, and well dined. And he did not, in the absence of this ravishing reception, write resentfully back home about how nobody listened to him. Deschamps went to Paris after he had already taken the measure of d’Alembert, whom the marquis de Voyer had contacted on Deschamps’ behalf in September 1766, and who in November-December 1766 had already rejected Deschamps’ system, confirming Deschamps’ impression that D’Alembert was intellectually shallow.

While perfectly capable of improvising a decent poem, purring at madame la marquise’s lonely ear, or wooing provincial girls, Deschamps was not an abbé de salon. Jesus Christ did not have any importance in his “system,” and praying to God went against Deschamps’ attempts to completely deanthropomorphize Christianity, but he was dedicated to maintaining the status quo. Thus, a few hours before dying in the early morning of 19 April 1774, Deschamps asked for confession and received the last rites from the hands of Dom Brunet, the prior of Montreuil. In a century during which the last rites were extremely politicized by the Jesuit-Jansenist controversy and in which the deathbed scene of famous philosophers such as Hume, Voltaire or D’Alembert was intensely scrutinized and even manipulated so as to appear anti- or pro-Christian, the radical Dom Deschamps died as a good Catholic, absolved of his sins and leaving after him just some books, his manuscripts and the snuff-box given to him by Mme la

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555 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 148-149 (letters 115, 116).
556 “Le fond de d’Alembert ne vaut pas votre [de Voyer’s] superficie” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 143 [letter 108]).
557 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 866 (letter 890).
marquise de Voyer. He functioned perfectly inside the Old Regime institutional framework. His writing sought to break down the conceptual paradigm of the Old Regime, but his life was dedicated to preserving the institutional paradigm of the Old Regime, a paradigm that he contrively defended in his writings and that he inhabited with maximum efficiency. He did not fawn, but he knew how to use favor. His relationship with the world stood under the sign of two principles: to live according to his station, doing his duty as a procureur of his priory, as a protector of the poor, or as the marquis de Voyer’s right hand, and to find disciples, converts to his “system,” even if this meant bullying people into submission.

Deschamps’ correspondence with the philosophes was an attempt to make proselytes, not conversation. Deschamps was not immune to the cult of great men, and as a result in 1770 he went, “by curiosity, to see the house where the famous Descartes was born” (“par curiosité voir la maison natale du fameux Descartes”). Descartes was a philosopher whose dualism Deschamps championed in his own way against Spinozist monism. But Deschamps did not approach his more famous contemporaries in awe. He wrote to them in order to convert them. He, the unknown metaphysician, did not want to learn from them, to become one of them, or to make conversation with them. Deschamps wrote first to Rousseau because the Benedictine believed the Genevan to be the closest philosophe to him. Deschamps hoped to find in Rousseau his first famous disciple, one whose endorsement could bring him a flock of other famous converts. Deschamps contacted Rousseau hoping to obtain advice on the publication of his works and an introduction for them. Rousseau rejected entirely


Deschamps’ advances: he refused to embrace the system, and he made it very clear that he would not sign any introduction to Deschamps’ works. What is more, while writing to Deschamps that he was not a philosopher, he was preparing *Emile* and the *Contrat Social* for publication. When Deschamps, in May 1762, wrote him to ask about these books, Rousseau answered humbly that indeed the lack of money had forced him to hand to the publishers those two manuscripts, “a collection of musings on Education” (“un recueil de rêveries sur *L’Éducation*”), and “a little treatise on the Social Contract” (“un petit traité du *Contrat social*”). Rousseau avowed being ashamed of those books and not wanting them to fall under Deschamps’ eyes, since they were just the products of a “good-natured man” (“bonhomme”), not of a real philosopher.\(^{562}\)

Deschamps was doubly upset by this news, mainly because these books made it very clear that Rousseau would not become Deschamps’ disciple. Furthermore, Deschamps, who circulated his works in manuscript, always worried that someone might plagiarize him, so he probably wanted to find out if Rousseau did not borrow Deschampsian ideas for his treatises. Thirdly, the marquise de Voyer raved about *Emile* in a 28 May 1762 letter to her husband. Rousseau gave voice and philosophical consistency to his readers’ feeling, it confirmed their intuitions, their inner stirrings.\(^{563}\) It would be precisely this kind of writing that Deschamps would not be able or interested to replicate. Rousseau did not convince, he persuaded. Deschamps strived to convince. And he failed to persuade. Therefore it was so much more upsetting for him to hear from the marquise de Voyer, and then from the marquis himself, how much they were enraptured

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\(^{562}\) Deschamps, *Correspondance générale*, 80-81 (letter 35).

\(^{563}\) “Ce Rousseau me tournera la tête, son esprit a, dans tous les genres, saisi mes sentiments, et à chaque page je dis toujours: *C’est cela que je sentais*. Il développe toutes mes sensations” (Deschamps, *Correspondance générale*, 81 [letter 36]).
about Rousseau’s writings. The marquise appreciated that she could read Rousseau more with her “soul” (“âme”) than with her “mind” (“esprit”). Deschamps was therefore rhetorically uninspired to insist on the rational, logical aspect of his works. If Rousseau could attack the philosophes, he could do it only because he found a way of casting the philosophes as a cold, scientific sect. Rousseau found a rhetorical device as well as a standing ground (the conscience) that allowed him to persuade his readers to discard philosophie. Rousseau flattered his readers. Deschamps accused the philosophes of being only half-enlightened, not logical enough. He was unable to understand that the philosophes’ “science” functioned as a myth, as a discourse against which one could pit only an equally persuasive “discourse.” Yet, Deschamps proposed to do away with all discourses. We might say that he talked about essence in a time when everybody was interested in existence, both the materialists who talked about “pleasure,” and the antimaterialists such as Rousseau who talked about “conscience.”

Facing the rhetorical success of Rousseau, Deschamps retorted with the success of having “converted” a young theologian with a "beautiful mind, and a sound mind" ("belle âme, tête bien faite, grand penseur et bon chrétien"). This “great thinker, and good Christian” was convinced, against his will and to his own astonishment, by Deschamps’ arguments. According to Deschamps, this new unknown disciple estimated that there must have been “at least one hundred thousand people in France” whom Deschamps could lead through the same process to Enlightenment. The young disciple saw his “conversion” as a metanoia, and explained it by talking about a “descent of the

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564 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 83 (letter 38).
565 “Et M. Helvétius n’est pas de même, et c’est alors que je sens que je ne suis qu’une bête” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 83 [letter 38]).
566 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 86-89 (letters 42, 43, 44).
Holly Ghost” (“descente du Saint-Esprit”). So Deschamps looked for a conversion, for a reversal, for a complete transformation of his disciple, similar to the one experienced under the influence of the Holy Ghost. The marquise de Voyer read Rousseau and experienced a sort of “awakening”: she felt Rousseau’s writings giving her strength, deepening her own understanding of the world and of herself, and developing her “senses.” Deschamps did not seek to confirm his disciples in their ideas, but to make them completely abandon them. It was indeed a religious conversion, a new life springing out of the “dark/obscure night” of a metaphysics of "All" and "Nothing" spun out of elements of negative theology. In the end, even Rousseau fell short of Deschamps’ requirements. Failing to “convert” Rousseau, Deschamps tried to persuade Rousseau to write at least an introduction to his own works. When even this failed because Rousseau, already on the run on account of Emile and the Contrat Social, refused to get involved in Deschamps’ publishing plans, Deschamps abandoned him.

In a century that valued conversation, Deschamps wanted to convince people. And, as Rousseau’s best-sellers made it clear, people wanted to be persuaded, not argued into acquiescence, or convinced. Persuasion depended upon sharing a common language. Deschamps could not hope to persuade, since he refused to incorporate any measure of received ideas into his works. Instead of reforming the institutions playing on variations of “common sense ideas,” such as the philosophes did, Deschamps wanted to prompt the apparition of a new man who would then build a new society, not of a new society that would create a new man. In this, Deschamps rejected the more social determinist philosophes, and appealed to the more individual, Christian-rationalist idea

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567 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 82 (letter 37).
568 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 90 (letter 45).
569 Yinghong Cheng, Creating the "New Man": From Enlightenment Ideals to Socialist Realities (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2009), 8-47.
of freedom: reason could find its way out of any superstitious nurture. If the education emphasized by the philosophes could take place, on the scale and in the direction intended by them, only in a new society,\textsuperscript{570} the “conversion” sought by Deschamps could happen in the entrails of a fallen world. Deschamps, while inhabiting old institutions, did not make conversation with his century. He wanted to convert it by convincing it. And he was always looking for supporters, not for equals.

The first to come under Deschamps’ spell were the marquis de Voyer’s military friends. Chevalier de Redmond, lieutenant-general in the Montcalm regiment, who had served under the orders of the marquis de Voyer, a member of the maréchal de Richelieu’s circle,\textsuperscript{571} was very keen on Dom Deschamps. Redmond read Deschamps in Rabelaisian terms, as a rakish monk, a “protométaphysicien” whose memory he associated with those of happy mornings in the library of the Château d’Ormes.\textsuperscript{572} Another admirer was the “lieutenant général des armées” Jean Baptiste Félix Hubert de Vintimille (1720-1777), the count Du Luc whose wife counted as one of Luis XV’s mistresses before she died in childbirth.\textsuperscript{573} This grandnephew of Charles-Gaspard-Guillaume de Vintimille du Luc, archbishop of Paris,\textsuperscript{574} wrote in 1765 to the marquis de Voyer that he thought certain couplets of Deschamps worthy of Anacreon himself (“une chanson dont Anacréon se serait fait honneur”).\textsuperscript{575} In March 1766, we find Du Luc touting Dom Deschamps’ metaphysics, which he associated with the good life (“la bise, la


\textsuperscript{571} Deschamps, \textit{Correspondance générale}, 163 (letter 132, n. 3).

\textsuperscript{572} Deschamps, \textit{Correspondance générale}, 235 (letter 213). See also 184-85, and 258 (letter 258).

\textsuperscript{573} François-Vincent Toussaint, Paul Fould, \textit{Anecdotes curieuses de la cour de France sous le règne de Louis XV} (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1908), 81-82.

\textsuperscript{574} Deschamps, \textit{Correspondance générale}, 84 (letter 49, n. 4).

\textsuperscript{575} Deschamps, \textit{Correspondance générale}, 99 (letter 58).
This Epicurean alliance of life in the countryside, among friends, and philosophical pursuits, worked in Deschamps’ favour. Trying to save this Epicurean nest, Du Luc would actually appeal in December 1766 to “two very important persons,” to help Deschamps and the marquis de Voyer save the priory of Montreuil-Bellay from being dissolved by the Commission des Réguliers.

Du Luc would actually be one of the few people who, far from being repelled by Dom Deschamps’ lack of Rousseauian sentimentality, accepted Deschamps’ philosophy due to the metaphysician’s manners. In a 15 June 1766 letter, Du Luc stressed that Deschamps’ good-humour, perfect command of the French language, and silent, self-effacing toiling on his metaphysics, helped him understand and embrace his metaphysics. Du Luc was ready to embrace metaphysics as lived truth, as an existential engagement. As a true disciple of Deschamps, Du Luc liked Rousseau also, although not for his sentimentality, but for his idiosyncrasies, for his “crankiness.”

Commenting on Hume’s letter to d’Holbach in which Hume expressed his outrage with

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576 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 125 (letter, 88).
577 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 152 (letters 118-119). It seems that that the two important officials were Jean-François Joly de Fleury, member of the Commission des Reguliers, and Louis Thiroux de Crosne. Thiroux de Crosne was a pro-Calas master of requests (“maître des requêtes”) at the Parlement de Paris, and was on his way to becoming, in 1767, intendant of the “généralité de Normandie” in Rouen. He would be the last lieutenant général de police of Paris (1785-89), and died executed during the Terror, on 28 April 1794. See Georges Carrot’s entry on Thiroux de Crosne in Michel Auboin, Arnaud Teyssier, Jean Tulard, eds, Histoire et dictionnaire de la police, du Moyen-Age à nos jours (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2005), 882-883.
578 “Je pardonne et croirai d’autant plus volontiers au transcendant de Dom Deschamps que, 1, son vrai est parfaitement à ma portée; ce galant et aimable homme s’est montré à moi dans la société comme il serait fort a désirer, pour la sûreté et l’agrément, d’y rencontrer ceux avec lesquels on a [a vivre] ou [avec lesquels] l’on veut vivre [...] 3, Dom Deschamps a su deviner, créer, et se taire, il a eu aussi la bonne foi et s’est donner la peine de s’instruire; et un homme aussi instruit (et ils sont plus que rares à ce période) et qui parle bien sa langue est un homme d’une ressource bien précieuse et bien vraie, car il sait causer, instruire et intéresser” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 131 [letter 94]).
Rousseau’s rejection of a royal pension that Hume had obtained for him, Du Luc wrote to the marquis de Voyer that he sided with Rousseau. The Genevan was “mad in his own, unique way,” while Hume was only a “big fool,” so full of himself that he believed Rousseau would be inspired by regard for him to renounce his own brilliant self-centeredness.\textsuperscript{579} Du Luc appreciated that Deschamps’ and Rousseau’ dissatisfaction with the mainstream Enlightenment, with the conversation in the salons, with what the philosophes were peddling among the cultured classes in Paris. Writing from Paris to the marquis de Voyer, Du Luc found Deschamps’ conversation to be superior to that of the Parisian intellectuals.\textsuperscript{580} Abraham-Frédéric viscount de Hautefort (1748-1794), colonel of the Flanders regiment until 1770 and a friend of both De Luc and de Voyers, wrote about Deschamps as being the “Corneille of metaphysics” (“le Corneille de la métaphysique”), that is a metaphysician in the grand tradition, who lived virtuously in a “small part of the whole that he so felicitously intuited” (“petite partie du tout, qu’il a si heureusement deviné”). Hautefort acknowledged that although “simple” and “sublime,” Deschamps’ ideas might not convince everybody: “It is possible not to surrender to his truth, but one cannot help being won over by his heart, mind, and goals.” Indeed, Hautefort acknowledged the influence of Dom Deschamps on his own life: “As for myself, he knows

\textsuperscript{579} “Il est dans l’ordre que J.-J. refuse une pension, avec autant de vanité que M. un tel, ou Mme une telle, met d’avidité et d’activité a s’en procurer une […] On pourrait plus aisément dire M. Hume une grande bête, s’il a pu se figurer que par égard pour lui, Hume, J.-J. renoncerait d’être un fou, quand son délire d’amour-propre le lui rend brillamment, et sophistiquement, vertueusement, humesquement indispensable. Car J.-J. fait litière de génie, d’esprit, de sagesse et même de vertus, pour être fou à sa façon, seule et unique” (Deschamps, \textit{Correspondance générale}, 133 [letter 96]).

\textsuperscript{580} “Plus relevée qu’elle ne l’est même d’ordinaire entre ceux qui font métier et marchandise d’esprit, et d’instruction” (Deschamps, \textit{Correspondance générale}, 229-230 [letter 204]). See also 218 (letter 191).
the influence he had on my metaphysical existence, and the fond regard which he elicited from my moral existence.”

We have here, in Du Luc’s or Hautefort’s pages, one of the most poignant descriptions of the aristocratic radicalism, of the idiosyncratic nature of what might be called “radical Enlightenment,” or even better an Epicurean Enlightenment, an opposition to the mainstream Enlightenment that did not spring only from Spinoza or Spinozist literature, but from miscellaneous philosophic, medical or religious traditions and temperaments. If, as Margaret Jacob convincingly argued, radical ideas found an eager public in the military Free-masonic lodges, then Deschamps’ supporters among the marquis de Voyer’s military friends is not hard to explain. This was not an urban, middle-class, mixed gender, salon bound, scientifically driven, reformist Enlightenment. Instead, it was a rural, noble, military, castle bound, libertine, male bonding, ontologically driven radical Enlightenment concerned not with reforming society, not with creating a new consensus, but with either finding the truth that could tear down the whole society as it was, or with living in an esoteric reality. It was an existentialist Enlightenment, for whom even the philosophes were somehow tamely “bourgeois.” It was, in a way, a throwback to the Libertine tradition, but it had the metaphysical sophistication that the Libertine tradition did not always exhibit.

581 “Il est possible qu’on ne se rende pas à sa vérité, on sera toujours au moins le prosélyte de son cœur, de son esprit, et de ses intentions. Quant à moi, il sait l’effet qu’il a produit sur mon existence métaphysique, et l’estime tendre qu’il a inspirée à mon existence morale” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 227 [letter 200]).
582 See, for another non-Spinozist radical Enlightenment, Kathleen Anne Wellman, La Mettrie: Medicine, Philosophy, and Enlightenment (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 213-245.
584 For the traditional, rationalist understanding of the Libertines, see René Pintard, Le libertinage érudit dans la première moitié du dix-septième siècle (Geneva, Slatkine, 1983). For a more occult reading of that
Dom Deschamps’ popularity among the members of this *coterie* was such that his expressions contaminated their daily conversations and epistolary exchanges. Thus, Hautefort could write to de Voyer that he had complete confidence in: “Your metaphysics, your morals, and your friendship, three things that I keep in very high regard.”

Like other members of the de Voyer coterie, Colmont de Vaugrenas used a Deschampsian jargon in his current letters, playing gallantly on such expressions as “tout,” “le tout,” “partie,” “rien.” Deschamps’ metaphysics influenced the vernacular of this circle, so that when the marquise attempted to close the emotional distance that separated her from the marquis, she used Deschamps’ expressions. “Tout” and “le tout” appeared in her declarations of love for the marquis. “Metaphysics,” “morals,” and “tout” appeared frequently as clichés in the letters exchanged by the marquis and his friends. And if the marquise de Voyer tried to regain the marquis’s affection by using an amorous jargon inspired by Deschamps, the marquis de Voyer, in pages worthy of Choderlos de Laclos – another soldier -, appealed to Deschamps’ system in order to get rid of Marie de Paviers’ moral objections and seduce her.

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585 “En attendant, je me recommande à votre metaphysique, à votre morale, et par-dessus tout à votre amitié, trois chose dont je fais grand cas” (Deschamps, *Correspondance générale*, 219 [letter 192]).

586 “Je serais bien aise de savoir que dans les moments où il [Deschamps, M.P. n.] n’est pas dans le général il eut une fois pensé à moi, très petit particulier. qui ne suis ni tout ni rien, mais quelques chose qui ne l’a point oublié” (Deschamps, *Correspondance générale*, 104 [letter 63]). See also 116 (letter 75). Or, in November 1766 Colmont wrote to de Voyer that: “Vous êtes mon tout, le tout du tout, que vous savez qui absorbe le tout et ses parties” (Deschamps, *Correspondance générale*, 147 [letter 113]).
But, as indicated Marie de Pavière’s and Rousseau’s refusal to embrace Deschamps’ system, his metaphysics could not become part of a wider conversation. Neither Deschamps, nor the marquis de Voyer could transform Deschamps’ metaphysics into ideological “chips” to be played at the conversational roulette of the Parisian salons. The dependence of the Enlightenment on the public sphere, on conversation, was an indication of the mainstream philosophes’ capacity to utter not so much the essential as the obvious, to furnish soundbites, fashionable expressions, and commonplaces. And Deschamps, instead of taking aim at the Old Regime institutions, targeted the Enlightenment discourse as a harmful outgrowth of the Old Regime theologico-political armature. Since the difficulty of Spinoza’s works did not impede the growth of a vast body of eighteenth-century “Spinozist” litterature having oftentimes only a tenuous connection with Spinoza, it might be advanced that it was not the difficulty of Deschamps’ metaphysics, but its unfashionable language and premises that kept it outside the mainstream. Whereas Spinoza was a “scientific” philosopher, using “geometry” to “prove” his ethics, Deschamps lambasted science and embraced unabashedly a sort of Platonism that prompted d’Alembert to label him as a “Scotist,” that is a skilled manipulator of scholastic farrago.587 This accusation came from other members of the de Voyer circle such as the abbé Yvon,588 l’abbé des Bois de Rochefort,589 and Henri Camille de Colmont de Vaugrenas, all of whom dismissed Deschamps from mainstream Enlightenment positions.

587 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 147 (letter 114).
589 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 890 (letter 919).
The metaphysical debate was complicated by patronage and sentimental issues. A former musketeer and captain in a cavalry regiment, Colmont saw Deschamps as a competitor for the affection of the marquis. Colmont, who had left the army in 1762, began by liking Deschamps. In 1763 he wrote to the marquis de Voyer that: “The person who is most worthy of your kindness and your friendship is your philosopher.” By the end of 1765 though, Colmont and Deschamps fell out. In February 1765, Colmont wrote to the marquis that he feared he would lose de Voyer’s favour due to Deschamps’ adroit toadying. It also seems that a young lawyer named René-Pierre Tourneporte, who came from a family protected by the marquis and who would eventually make a career as a judge, hurt Colmont somehow, and that Deschamps took a part in bullying Colmont. Colmont retorted by protesting his affection for Deschamps while trying to demean Deschamps’ system in the eyes of the marquis. For example, Colmont pointed out in an April 1765 letter to the marquis de Voyer that circulating some of Deschamps’ writings among his Parisian friends brought only ridicule on the anonymous philosopher, unanimously declared “mad.” Still in Paris, in May 1765 Colmont condescendingly announced that a manuscript Deschamps had sent to Helvétius failed to impress its recipient. Colmont was not above using any pretext to discredit

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590 “Vous [...] n’aimez point la musique, [...] trouvez mon sentiment femelle, et ma métaphysique moins sage que celle de Dom Deschamps” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 186 [letter 159]).
591 “L’homme le plus digne de votre bienveillance et de votre amitié est votre philosophe” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 95 [letter 51]).
592 “Flagonneries et libertés monacales du bon et du plus grand métaphysicien de l’univers” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 103 [letter 63]).
593 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 103 (letter 63).
594 “Ce que j’en ai voir ici, à des gens éclairés et surs, leur a paru les Petites-Maisons ouvertes. On en a comparé l’auteur inconnu au fol du port de Pirée. Dissuader ce fol eut été un mauvais service a lui rendre” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 109 [letter 68]).
595 “Je crois que c’est une honnête défaite, car il fallait bien peu de temps pour en parler” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 117 [letter 77]).
Deschamps. Thus, in January 1766, when Deschamps wrote a New Year’s letter to the marquis de Voyer in which he cursed (“Peste soit de nos f[oules] moeurs”) the courrier who lost his first letter, the marquis joked about this with Colmont. Colmont answered sycophantically, pointing out Deschamps’ lack of delicacy and his own high regards for the marquis and the marquise de Voyer.\footnote{“Vrais, illustres, tendres et précieux amis, M. et Mme la marquise de Voyer. C’est à vous deux que ma lettre s’adresse. Vous n’y verrez point d’f, comme dans celle de R. père Dom Deschamps, mais l’expression des tendres sentiments que la reconnaissance, les charmes et le respect peuvent exciter dans le cœur le plus sensible” (Correspondance générale, 124 [letter 86]).} Deschamps, with clumsy ingenuity, again used the “f” pretending that “il ne veut dire que foin.”\footnote{Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 128 (letter 91).} Colmont also tried to detach the marquis de Voyer from Deschamps’ metaphysical confinement by luring him with the cynegetic adventures of the outdoor life, which these veterans had in common. The dogs running after the hunted animals were “much more real than Dom Deschamps’ system.”\footnote{“Je vous plains de n’avoir plus de chiens, car il fait un temps superbe, et cela est bien plus réel que le système de Dom Deschamps, et que les douces et creuses rêveries métaphysiques que font au coin de leur feu, l’hiver, les esprits paresseux” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 104 [letter 63]).} But since Deschamps was actually part of de Voyer’s life-at-the-castle setting, which combined hunting with metaphysical conversation and libertine forays into the countryside, this line of attack did not work very well.

What made everything even more maddening for an exasperated Colmont was that some of the marquis de Voyer’s answers to his letters were penned by none other than Dom Deschamps, who countered Colmont’s needle-work with all his saucy Rabelaisian boisterousness. Indeed, what was Colmont supposed to think when he received letters in which the marquis de Voyer, speaking with Deschamps’ baritonal sense of humour, ridiculed Colmont in scatological fashion, and even made derisive
allusions to the “f” incident. Deschamps thumbed his nose at Colmont, reminding him that he, Deschamps, enjoyed the metaphysical and personal trust of the marquis de Voyer, and that Deschampsian metaphysics (the search for the ultimate causes and reasons) and libertinism went hand in hand better than Colmont’s proper empiricism and hypocritical propriety.

Moving to London in 1768, Colmont decided to cast his “court intrigue” as a philosophical conflict pitting the then fashionable English empirical philosophy versus Deschamps’ French metaphysical dogmatism. Writing in May 1768 from London, a city which he called “the capital of Cyclops” (“la capitale des Cyclopes”) due to its smog, Colmont noted that the English people’s “stupor” (“stupeur de l’esprit”), their lack “of intellectual stimulus and of communication” (“de stimulant et de communication”) could be easily attributable to the excessive humidity as well as to the extensive use of coal “which has to darken the imagination like it darkens the windows.” But, once he

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599 “Votre charnier souterrain a exhalé sur vous des vapeurs bien antimétaphysiques; mais ne vous frottez pas a les lui reporter; care je le vois d’ici, fort de sa logique, qui n’est qu’à lui seul, vous demander pourquoi l’on doit abandonner le comment et le pourquoi, après l’avoir cherché.” Deschamps/"De Voyer" believed that in abandoning this metaphysical search, Colmont would have shown weakness, he would resemble: “Renard de la fable, qui méprisait les raisins mûrs auxquels il ne pouvait atteindre. Ne faites-vous point ce personnage […]? On serait porté à le croire, sur votre foïn, foïn, tiré mot pour mot du Renard. Mais foïn de ce personnage, foïn, foïn. Voilà ce que vous dirait Dom Deschamps” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 190 [letter 163]).


learned some English, Colmont was able to take delight in English politics, especially in the Wilkes affair, raging in May 1768, and in observing from a “philosophic” point of view English society and culture. Noting that his voyage to London gave Dom Deschamps’ metaphysics the time to erode unhampered de Voyer’s scepticism, Colmont wrote that pragmatic England was the country where Dom Deschamps’ metaphysical enthusiasm would stand the least chance to succeed. Colmont, as he mentioned in a December 1768 letter, disregarded Deschamps’ futile metaphysical word games for the real world of the “public sphere” that he could engage in in England, where liberty bred engagement with the world at large. After casting Deschamps’ metaphysics as an inbred spiritual result of political confinement, of lack of liberty, Colmont appealed to the marquis de Voyer in the name of a more mainstream form of Enlightenment, developing along deist lines, with accent on sciences, on Toland’s materialist philosophy, or on the work of the English Catholic priest and scientist John Tuberville Needham (1713-1781). Colmont met Needham in Bruxelles in 1770 and recommended him to de Voyer as an adversary of Voltaire, and - despite what Voltaire said - “not a Jesuit.” Colmont also rightly pointed out that Needham rejected Holbach’s

602 “Rien ne me plait ici que la nouveauté des objets philosophiques que je rencontre” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 220-21 [letter 193]).
603 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 233 (letter 209).
604 “Dom Deschamps réussirait le moins certainement.” The reason was that Dom Deschamps was living in an imaginary world: “Son ouvrage est son Tout, ainsi que le Tout du Tout est son ouvrage. Tant qu’il vivra, il ne sortira pas de la” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 240 [letter 220]).
605 “Mais il y a deux mois, bientôt trois, que j’ai abandonné le sublime de la spéculation, affin de passer, à votre intention, dans le terrestre de la pratique; et pour cela je me suis mis a diriger des ouvriers anglais, pour la construction d’une salle de café dans la maison ou je suis loge depuis mon arrivée à Londres” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 241 [letter 220]).
606 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 522 (letter 518).
Système de la nature, which actually used Needham’s “fermentation” or spontaneous generation theories to mount a materialist case.\(^{607}\)

Entrenched in the “common-sensical” English culture, Colmont complained in an August 1769 letter to the marquis de Voyer that working on a refutation of Deschamps caused him a nervous breakdown (“un entier désordre de nerfs”).\(^{608}\) In November 1769, Colmont wrote that he in fact ruined his nerves because Deschamps himself was mad: “He is mad, although perfectly logical.” Colmont treated Deschamps’ metaphysics as a systematic development of a Scholastic error (“Scotism”) which consisted in the “physicization” of abstract notions - such as those that had produced, believed Colmont, the belief in the dogma of Trinity and in the Immaculate Conception -, and that led to the Deschampsian error of “metaphysicizing,” or abstracting the physical things.\(^{609}\) Colmont believed that, since it was French grammar that allowed Deschamps to play with the definite article in order to construct his own version of the ontological argument, Deschamps’ demise might come by way of the English language, which did not allow such sophisms. “The refutation of dom deschampisme was a grammatical affair,” wrote Colmont, mirroring Deschamps’ own claim that his metaphysics was a grammatical system aiming to purify language.\(^{610}\) In truly Lockean fashion,\(^{611}\) Colmont highlighted the importance of precision for any philosophical discussion, of studying the impact of syntax and grammar on the various shades of meaning of any given word, and promised

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\(^{608}\) Deschamps, *Correspondance générale*, 274 (letter 245).

\(^{609}\) “Il est fou, quoique parfaitement conséquent” (Deschamps, *Correspondance générale*, 295 (letter 265).


to refute Dom Deschamps in an “Essai sur l’origine des mots, d’après la valeur possible de chaque mot,” in which he would reduce the complexity and the various meanings and nuances of every word to “simple ideas.” Colmont saw his grammatical understanding of Deschamps confirmed by a reading of the *Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle* sent to him by de Voyer, whom he promised an *Antiesprit du siècle*. Even though he wrote that in Rousseau the soul dictated to the mind, and in Voltaire the mind dictated to the soul, so that Rousseau was a “philosophe femme” while Voltaire was “une femme philosophe,” a wit incapable of serious reasoning, Colmont declared that he sided with the “party of sensibility” ("le parti de la sensibilité"). So Colmont was in fact another Rousseauist disappointed by Deschamps’ system. Colmont stressed that it was not his egotism or any enmity toward Deschamps, but his reason only (“raison toute pure”) that fed his impatience with Deschamps metaphysics and that allowed him to sift through Deschamps’ “amphigouri” in order to debunk it.

In May 1769, the marquis de Voyer wrote from London to Deschamps that, indeed, Londonian society was completely impervious to any kind of metaphysics, and that he found himself philosophically isolated and ill at ease among the “English puppets.” The marquis de Voyer’s eagerness to meet Deschamps again in August at Ormes underlined the sense of alienation that de Voyer had experienced in London. In fact, we sense in this letter de Voyer’s subtle rejection of the commercial Enlightenment,

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612 “La réfutation de dom deschampisme était une affaire de grammaire” (Deschamps, *Correspondance générale*, 146-47 [letter 112]).
616 “Il s’en faut bien, cher père, que ce soit ici le théâtre de la métaphysique; depuis près d’un demi-siècle les marionnettes anglaises ont abandonné ce jeu et l’ont relégué dans notre patrie, pour meubler leurs fêtes et leurs magasins d’effets plus réels. Colmont lui-même y a renoncé. Et je suis, quand par hasard j’en balbutie, la voix criant dans le désert” (Deschamps, *Correspondance générale*, 264 [letter 235]).
of that hustling and bustling political economy and down to earth empiricism that transformed the English into “puppets,” devoid of any substance. If Renato Galliani argued convincingly that Rousseau’s arguments against luxury were related to the “idéologie nobiliaire,” de Voyer’s clinging to Deschampsian metaphysics, with its essential anti-empirical, anti-commercial character, and elitist difficulty, could be seen in exactly the same light. The high road of metaphysics allowed de Voyer, who had to fight all his life to preserve his estates against financial ruin, to make a grand stand against all philosophical and economic upstarts. If Colmont came to resent Deschamps’ metaphysics as the intellectually obscure product of political despotism, de Voyer despised the utilitarian Enlightenment as a conduit of luxury, and thus of despotism.

This might explain de Voyer’s negative response to Colmont’s refutation of Deschamps’ *Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle*. In a long June 1770 letter, Colmont assaulted Deschamps from mainstream enlightenment positions, attacking the religious orders for their “fanaticism,” denouncing the “imposture” of “revelation” and embracing a reasonable “théisme.” Colmont revived Bayle’s classic theory by writing that, contrary to Deschamps’ opinion, atheism and anarchy “are not inseparable. A people of atheists would be more capable of governing themselves than a people of priests, monks, and

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Deeply resenting Deschamps’ anonymous call to a united action of Church and State against the philosophes, Colmont argued that the monarchy was able to function even without the support of the clergy, that England flourished without the monks as “the militia of the throne,” that the “tyranical” Catholic countries were poorer than tolerant Protestant England, and that, finally: “Philosophy is right to hunt down, and to want to exterminate, beginning at least with the bearded and non-bearded excrements,” any and all religious impostors and superstitions. Colmont’s letter offended the marquis de Voyer, and was followed, on 24 June 1770, by another one in which Colmont tried to appease the marquis de Voyer by reminding him that his attack on Deschamps came in the midst of an “open war” between himself and the Benedictine, a declaration he would reiterate once back in Paris, in 1772. Still in Bruxelles, collaborating so closely with Needham and with Henri Fabre (or Fabry) de Montault, comte d’Autrey, that Redmond considered them “a new Church that you

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620 “Ne sont point inséparables. Un peuple d’athées serait plus aise a gouverner qu’un peuple de prêtres, de religieux, de zélés papistes” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 384 [letter 365]).
621 “La philosophie a raison de poursuivre, et de vouloir exterminer, en commençant au moins par les excréments barbus et non barbus...” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 382 [letter 365]).
622 “Je vous ai donc offensé; en quel endroit, quand et comment? A l’endroit de votre nouveau métaphysicien? Rivalité mise à part, ne sommes-nous pas lui et moi en état de guerre ouverte, ne sommes-nous pas ennemis, antagonistes par essence, métaphysiquement parlant; comme êtres en société, physiquement parlant” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 391-92 [letter 373]).
623 “Nous [Colmont, and Deschamps, n. M.P.] somme d’une robe et d’une métaphysique a ne jamais compter ensemble” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 639 [letter 651]).
624 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 490 (letter 481).
625 In L’Antiquité justifiée (Amsterdam, 1766), count d’Autrey wrote a Christian answer to Nicole-Antoine Boulanger’s L’Antiquité dévoilée par ses usages, 3 vols (Amsterdam, 1765). D’Autrey exulted that the “incroyants” researches finished by corroborating Bible stories such as that of the Great Flood, confirmed by Boulanger’s inquiries. See John R. Hampton, Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger et la science de son temps (Geneva: Droz, 1955), 141-42; Maria Susana Seguin, “Radicalité scientifique et athéïsme. La cas de Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger,” in Secrétan, Dagron, Bove, eds, Qu’est-ce que les Lumières ”radicales”?, 197-209.
Colmont wrote in June 1771 to the marquis de Voyer to announce his impending return to France. Colmont let de Voyer know that he would not stay at Ormes, but rather at Argenson, where he hoped the abbé Yvon would eventually become the curé.

Colmont made it very clear that he preferred Yvon, a man he deemed “simple,” “well-ordered” (“réglé”), and “more trustworthy than the cenobite [Dom Deschamps]” (“de meilleure foi encore que le cénobite”). Dom Deschamps was, on the contrary, a devious man who led the marquis by a combination of flattery and sophisms, and who under the false pretence of “enlightening” de Voyer merely accustomed him with the company of men of the cloth. We see, in this letter, the seed of what would become an alliance between Colmont and Yvon against Dom Deschamps, and against the influence of Dom Deschamps’ ideas on de Voyer. In June 1774, soon after Deschamps’ death, Colmont wrote to Yvon that he did everything possible to induce the marquis de Voyer to switch his philosophical allegiance from Deschamps to the abbé Yvon. But even though his efforts were to no avail (“I could not make him [de Voyer] change his religion”), Colmont enjoyed hastily “congratulating” Yvon on the subject of Deschamps’ death. The demise of the monk was indeed good news for the embattled Yvon, who at one point tried to forge an alliance with Robinet, another one of Deschamps’ “victims.” Yvon wrote

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626 Deschamps, *Correspondance générale*, 495 (letter 489).
627 This view is embraced also by Frank A. Kafker and Serena L. Kafker, in *The Encyclopedists as Individuals: A Biographical Dictionary of the Authors of the Encyclopédie* (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1988), 405. Kafker writes that even Dom Deschamps was charmed by Yvon’s bonhomie. This, as I am arguing here, was not the case.
628 Deschamps “vous a, dit-on, illuminé, après avoir trouvé le moyen de vous faire goûter, jusqu’à un certain point, la louange et le froc” (Deschamps, *Correspondance générale*, 491 [letter 481]).
629 “Je n’ai pu le faire changer de religion [...] Encore, pour me confesser à vous jusqu’au bout, je vous dirai que si je n’avais été poussé par le plaisir de vous complimenter sur la mort du moine (que je n’ai apprise que ce matin) peut-être aurais-je aggravé ma faute par quelque délais de plus.” (Deschamps, *Correspondance générale*, 887 [letter 916]).
in January 1773 to warn Robinet against Deschamps' future metaphysical assault on him. After “tyranically forcing” Robinet to “submit” to his “le Tout,” that is to admit its existence, Deschamps was ready to launch a new charge to compel Robinet to also surrender to his “Tout/Rien.”

Yvon, like Robinet and Colmont, fought Deschamps’ ideas with little succes and much strain. The effort made an exhausted Yvon to complain to de Voyer in October 1773 that Deschamps’ metaphysics was a a polycephalic Hydra. Yvon had hoped to find a refuge and quietly work toward his rehabilitation under the wing of the marquis de Voyer. But Dom Deschamps’ incessant metaphysical jousting kept tearing away Yvon's peace of mind. In order to win the support of the marquis, Yvon had either to embrace or defeat Deschamps’ metaphysics. The Enlightened Catholic philosopher Yvon could not get himself to accept Deschamps’ metaphysical system, which he considered “Scotist,” that is it presupposed the real existence of concepts existing only in the logical order, like mathematical concepts. One of these concepts was Deschamps’ “Tout/Rien.” Robinet also tried to fight both Deschamps’ metaphysics, which he labeled “rienisme,” and Deschamps’ “moral state” as the end of history. Robinet criticized Deschamps from the positions of a “three stage” progressive theory of history, that stressed the importance of arts, letters and education, for the moral advancement of humanity. If Deschamps considered private property the “original sin,” and thought that only the morals based on

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630 “Après avoir été amené tyranniquement, si l’on peut ainsi parler, jusqu’a vous soumettre au Tout de D.D.” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 714 [letter 707]).

631 “Un hydre dont on ne saurait couper une tête qu’il n’en renaisse une autre” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 792 [letter 800]).

632 See Kafker, The Encyclopedists as Individuals, 403-406, Rétat, Le “Dictionnaire” de Bayle, 404-408.

633 Palmer, Catholics and Unbelievers, 119.

the metaphysical principle of the unity of “All” (“le Tout”) would help restore humanity to the true dignity of perfect equality, Robinet considered that social and economic inequalities are the way in which society contributes to preserving the universal balance between good and bad: “The equality between good and evil is maintained in society by the inequality of conditions.” Robinet’s Leibnizian optimism, his Shaftesburyan regard for sympathy and sociability together with his progressive philosophy of history were adverse to Deschamps’ Augustinian pessimism regarding historical teleology, the nature of society, and the value of private property. Yvon saw in Deschamps’ “rienisme” something reprehensible, a false doctrine starting with the supposed existence of “nothing” in order to arrive at a “moral state/stage” devoid of arts, letters, or “civilization” that was another barren “nothing.” Deschamps explained in vain that his “Rien” existed not as non-existence but as existence of the non-sensible, and that his “moral state” would not need arts, letters and sciences because it would have solved the problem of the “inequality,” of that “original sin” that made necessary all these developments. The confrontation between Deschamps and Yvon was cast by Yvon as the confrontation between the entire world and a madman: “Each of us has his philosophy: mine is that of the whole world, yours, which claims to offer the first principles and to completely defeat human ignorance, of nobody. I have all the philosophers on my side, against you.”

636 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 791 (letter 800).
Deschamps did not need to be reminded of the fact that Yvon’s ideas resembled those of the mainstream Enlightenment: this was precisely what kept him so determined to, metaphysically speaking, hunt down Yvon. Through Yvon, Deschamps argued with the whole Enlightenment, and hoped, by shining light on the “Truth,” to destroy the reason to be of the whole lot of “scribblers” who justified their existence by arguing about things “more” or “less” true. Yvon feared something occult, supremely sectarian and un-enlightened in Deschamps’ system. Deschamps’ reason was not a “commercial” reason, it was not inflected by the current discourse, it did not use the current stock references. As such, it was an “occult” reason, whose contextual isolation sprang from its radicalism. For Deschamps, Yvon was guilty instead of prostituting reason, of being one of the “half-lights” who made a living out of using the concept of “reason” more than the faculty of reason. Deschamps saw Yvon as a mercenary of reason, as a sophist, an

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638 “Oui, madame, et on peut assez juger de la plupart des autres par lui. La philosophie n’est guère pour eux qu’un métier pour vivre, ou pour se faire un nom; et c’est se méprendre que de les croire philosophes, sur leurs écrits. Il m’est démontré, depuis que je vis ici avec le bon abbé, que la vérité n’est pas un objet de recherche, de curiosité et d’intérêt pour lui que pour votre cocher, qu’où il paraissait uniquement occupé d’elle. Il jette et toujours jette sur le papier les idées qu’il a reçues par les livres, et il les digère à sa façon, sans jamais qu’il lui soit venu dans l’esprit de penser par lui-même ou d’imaginer qu’on puisse penser mieux que lui. Je le prendrais à toutes les heures du jour en défaut sur sa spéculazione, comme il m’arrive si souvent de le faire sous vos yeux; je le confondrais du soir au matin par mon raisonnement, que tout blanchirait contre sa logique à la diable et sa faculté purement livresque. Il est de l’essence de tous les écrivassiers de sa sorte de se roidir contre une spéculazione qui détruit leur existence en réduisant leur écrivasserie à zéro” (“Colloque entre Mme la marquise de Voyer, M. l’abbé Yvon et Dom Deschamps,” in Deschamps, Oeuvres philosophiques, 2: 492).

639 “Ce n’était point une doctrine qu’on put soumettre aux lumières de la raison, qu’il fallait révéler de loin comme une chose mystérieuse et sacrée. Après m’être assuré de ce fait, j’ai cessé dès lors de regarder D.D. comme un philosophe. Je ne l’ai plus envisagé que comme le grand prêtre d’une nouvelle religion dont il est en même temps l’instituteur. Ceux qui ont la foi la plus robuste sont aussi ceux qui entendent mieux le maître” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 791 [letter 800]).

embodiment of all that was wrong with the philosophe Enlightenment. Indeed, Yvon sought de Voyer's patronage in order to rebuild his reputation. Deschamps wanted to "convert" Yvon. If in the beginning Yvon courted Deschamps, copied his manuscripts for circulation,641 and tried not to antagonize him, soon their relationship soured. De Voyer's favor came as a prize for jousting with Deschamps, and Yvon was not up to this task. What Deschamps saw as a dogged pursuit of the metaphysical "Truth," Yvon considered merely another instance of cultural politics, as a game in which he had to embrace or reject a certain dominant discourse, dominant in the marquis de Voyer's circle, in order to arrive at some benefice. And the benefice in question was to be obtained with the aid of the marquis de Voyer and by writing a Christian apologetic work.642 Unfortunately for Yvon, his confrontation with Deschamps brought to the fore the worst in both of them. Yvon, while Deschamps harrased him with much gusto, was preoccupied solely with advancing his way in the world. If Deschamps looked like a bully, Yvon gave the impression of an unprincipled leecher and this all but annihilated his chances of replacing Dom Deschamps in the marquis de Voyer's circle or household.

Dom Deschamps' death only served to prove how strong his friendship with de Voyer had been. Immediately after his death, all of Deschamps' real or imaginary friends wrote to de Voyer asking for his continuing "bienveillance," meaning protection, in the memory of Dom Deschamps.643 But slowly, over the next year, all the smouldering resentments started to flare back, and people such as Thibault de Longecourt started openly complaining to de Voyer that Deschamps had "appealed to all kind of flatteries"

641 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 552, 555, 575, 688, 754-55, 757.
642 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 555, 708, 748, 877-78.
643 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 870 (letter 895).
to please the marquis de Voyer, and then used his influence to discredit anyone seeking de Voyer's patronage.\footnote{Deschamps, *Correspondance générale*, 942 (letter 975).}

After Deschamp’s death in 1774, de Voyer carried on his legacy. The marquis de Voyer started as a not totally convinced disciple of Deschamps, and as an intrigued spectator of Deschamps’ metaphysical pursuits, but he gradually came to embrace Deschamps’ system, and to become the main “pusher” of Deschampsianism in the Parisian salons. De Voyer did not stop at circulating Deschamps’ manuscripts, he also wrote apologies and “missionary” abstracts of Deschamps’ philosophy. This last activity proves de Voyer’s high standing in the Deschampsian “sect,” since Deschamps usually discouraged his “disciples” from trying to defend his system. Even Dom Patert’s attempts at producing pro-Deschampsian propaganda irritated Dom Deschamps. But if Deschamps put down Dom Patert, he was pleased with de Voyer’s understanding of his system. And it was not just a matter of being obsequious with the de Voyer. The marquis had a sure grasp of Deschamps’ metaphysics and therefore he was not liable to compromise the “truth,” as Deschamps feared his other, less able, disciples might do. De Voyer continued his proselytising activity even after Deschamps’ death.

Thus, in November-December 1775 de Voyer tried to recruit the Scottish antiquarian John Callander, apparently one of de Voyer’s Freemasonic contacts.\footnote{Deschamps, *Correspondance générale*, 950-964 (letters 985, 988, 991, 992, 993, 994, 996). For the Freemasonic connection, see Puisais, “Dans l’ombre des Voyants,” 93.} De Voyer hailed this new disciple to Dom Patert, who on 12 November 1775 wrote back to the marquis voicing his doubts that “your Englishman” would accept to divest himself of the empiricism drilled into him since childhood in order to be able to grasp Deschamps’
metaphysics. Dom Patert advanced that, if he was philosophically sturdy enough, Callander might get the “existence relative” and “positive,” that is “le Tout,” but that he would fail to grasp the “Tout/Rien” (“la négative, où tous ont fait naufrage”). Stressing the incompatibility between the British empirical philosophy, so admired by the mainstream French philosophes, and Deschamps’ work, Dom Patert pointed out one of the reasons for Deschamps’ failure to become more influential. Indeed, on 3 December 1775, Callander wrote to de Voyer to let him know that, despite his best intentions, he could not bring himself to embrace Deschamps’ system. But Callander’s rejection had only partially to do with empiricism. Deschamps’ “dogmatic, superior, and condescendent tone” revolted and scandalized Callander. Intolerance was not the sign of a man who found the truth, wrote Callander in full accord with the sentimental epistemology and polite debates of the mainstream Enlightenment, inimical to any “enthusiasm” and “fanaticism.” Whereas knowing the truth made one more “kind,” “moderate,” and “tolerant,” Deschamps’ intolerance reminded Callander of Catholic theologians. If there was any resemblance (“quelque affinité, quelque consanguinité”) between Catholic theology and Deschamps’ metaphysics, if by any chance Deschamps’ disciples believed themselves to be the recipients of a special revelation that would set

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646 “Votre Anglais aura-t-il le courage d’effacer de son cerveau tout ce qui lui a coûté tant de peines à y graver depuis son enfance? Sans ce préalable, vous le savez, point d’accès au sanctuaire de la vérité métaphysique” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 951 [letter 985]).

647 “Notre maître y a toujours échoué, nous en avons longtemps cherché la raison; dans le désespoir de ne la point trouver, vous preniez le parti d’en rire, moi d’en gémir, et le maître, indigné, se contentait de plaindre la pauvre humanité, qui lui faisait pitié” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 951 [letter 985]).

648 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 954 (letter 985).

649 “Traiter de tête faible, sans vigueur et sans nerf, de tête mal arrangée, d’homme rongé de préjugés, tous ceux qui ne sont pas du même sentiment que lui, est, ce me semble, bien indigne, et doit être bien éloigné d’une personne qui cherche vraiment la vérité. Qu’il croie l’avoir trouvée, s’il veut. Il n’en devrait être que plus doux, plus modéré, plus tolérant. jamais ce ton intolérant ne peut être celui de la vérité; laquelle, loin d’être tranchante et farouche, est humble, modeste, endurante” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 954 [letter 988]).
them in priestly fashion apart from normal people, then Callander believed Deschamps’
system ought to be “thrown into the flames.”

De Voyer could not convert Callander any more than he could get rid of Marie de
Pavier’s moral scruples on the basis of Deschamps’ metaphysics. Neither the sense, nor
the sensibility of the Enlightenment were able to accommodate Deschamps’ metaphysical
pursuits. Deschamps believed that only the truth could improve morals. Sentiments were
useless as guides to the truth because they depended on religious and moral notions
based upon an anthropomorphic concept of God or of good and bad. Deschamps’
dogmatic truth was not even akin to Spinoza’s, Hobbes’, or D’Alembert’s, all of whom
related truth to mathematics, geometry or science, giving thus to their dogmas a veneer
of scientific, that is of empirical, accountability. Discarding mathematics, Epicurean
materialism, and the sentimental pieties of the Enlightenment, Deschamps chose to
remain on purely ontological ground in an age when all ontology was phenomenology,
when philosophy was to be not the search for truth, but its symptom, its benign outward
manifestation, its sociable expression. Callander did not reject Deschamps’ philosophy
because he could prove that it was false, but because its dogmatic tone indicated that
Deschamps was not wise: it was a rejection in existential, not in a purely logical, key. To
Callander, Deschamps’ truth seemed merely a truth of correspondence, not a moral
truth. However, it is revealing for the, perhaps unintended, Becker-ite, theological
intricacies of the Enlightenment, that even though Callander, like all deists, did not
consider the “Truth” in Christian terms - that is not just as an idea, but as a divine person

650 “D’ailleurs, est-ce qu’il y aurait quelque ressemblance entre la marche de ce système et celle de la foi
catholique? Est-ce qu’il y aurait quelque affinité, quelque consanguinité, à cet égard, entre eux? Et ses
adhérents se croieraient-ils, comme les prêtres, des personnes privilégiées, des personnes favorisées des
lumières extraordinaires d’en haut? Si cela était, il fallait le jeter au feu. Le monde a déjà assez souffert d’un
système intolérant pour qu’il en refuse l’entrée à un autre. Cette idée seule suffirait à m’indisposer contre lui”
(Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 955 [1981]).
whose liturgical “communicants” or mystical “followers” become better - he still asked
Deschamps not merely to represent the truth, but to live it. Deschamps’ state/stage of
morals was his answer to this call, but it was a social, not an individual way of living the
enlightenment.

However, Callander’s letter received an answer from Dom Pattert, writing from
de Voyer’s residence, and further correspondence between Dom Patert and de Voyer
indicates that even his closest disciples were bitter about Deschamps’ philosophic
haughtiness towards his disciples and adversaries. In a 14 December 1775 letter written
by Dom Patert for de Voyer, the marquis answered Callander that, indeed, he had always
resented at Dom Deschamps: “The dogmatic, harsh, pendatic, impolite, and
contemptuous tone.”651 Although he reproached Dom Deschamps his “morgue
philosophique,”652 de Voyer could not convince Deschamps to abandon it. Yet, de Voyer
was not detered by Deschamps’ tone. According to de Voyer, Deschamps’ sourness had
to do not with his quest for the truth, but with his encounter with an age that was too
“false” to be able soundly to judge Deschamps’ claims. Deschamps’ system was not a fruit
of his anger or frustrations, and was not designed to perpetuate his anger, or to cement
his superiority. In this it was different from the theology of the Church, which did not
free the people as Deschamps’ metaphysics did.653 Deschamps’ impatience with anyone
who did not “get” his ideas was thus read by de Voyer as a sign of the times. If
Deschamps was angry, it was because his system was not understood. And his system
was not understood and adopted because it could not penetrate a marketplace saturated

651 “Le ton dogmatique, dur, pédant, incivil et dedaigneux” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 958
[letter 991]).
652 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 959 [letter 991]).
653 “Ce que vous avez déjà vu de la vérité morale aurait du vous désabuser entièrement de l’affinité que vous
soupçonnez entre le système et les religions quelconques, qu’il met toutes à bas” (Deschamps,
Correspondance générale, 959 [letter 991]).
with false ideas, of both old-theological and new-philosophical vintage. Deschamps’ old-fashioned metaphysical craftsmanship could not compete against the shoddy, eye-catching, fashionable products of Parisian intellectual sweatshops. Two short notes added by Patert for de Voyer on this letter confirmed that Dom Patert too had suffered because of Dom Descahmps’ imperious nature (“ton insupportable de D.D.”). Dom Patert believed that the only documents that could have made Deschamps’ system clearer to Callander were Deschamps’ epistolary exchanges with Yvon and Robinet, but he feared that these documents might have an adverse effect on Callander due to their tone. Patert concluded with a dispirited tautology, noting that only Deschamps could have defended his own system, but he was dead, and even alive he could not have done much good due to his “tyranny,” and “revolting despotism” (“tyrannie,” “despotisme repoussant”). Dom Patert concluded that he did not see much of a future for Dom Deschamps’ system since the master was dead without leaving after him a numerous and good enough “school” to disseminate and illustrate the “Truth.” Too rarefied and unflattering for the common minds, Deschamps’ system could not survive its “creator,”

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654 “Il était d’ailleurs aigri par la contradiction, son ouvrage, présenté aux plus grandes génies de la nation, n’avait rencontré que de l’indifférence, on n’y voyait que du scotisme [...] ressuscité, aucun philosophe n’y avait mordu; aucun n’avait même da igné s’en occuper avec l’attention qu’il exige. Ce mortifiant accueil fait à la vérité qu’il était convaincu d’avoir découverte, le désolait; joignez à cela les intérêts de l’amour-propre, qui brûlait de jouir des honneurs et de la gloire d’un travail médité, combiné, et digéré pendant plus de trente ans, le désir immense de voir une révolution dans les esprits et les mœurs de son siècle, et vous sentirez combien de si hautes espérances trompees ont du répandre d’amertumes sur les dernières années d’un homme qui avait d’énormes prétentions; et c’est malheureusement dans ces tristes et derniers jours qu’il a mis la dernière main à son ouvrage” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 958-59 [letter 991]).

655 “Que dirait le très pacifique Mr. Callander, s’il avait sous les yeux la correspondance avec MM. Yvon et Robinet, ou D.D. s’échappe à chaque instant de la manière la plus incivile et la plus piquante, s’il voyait les mercuriales très vives que j’ai reçues moi-même, quoique son ami, et qui m’ont interdit de lui jamais parler ni écrire sur son ouvrage? Il faut que je soulage un jour mon cœur là-dessus avec vous, que je vous fasse une confession générale sur toutes les tracasseries qui m’on été faites par l’auteur, au sujet de sa métaphysique” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 960 [letter 992]).
could not speak for itself, it was “too cold, too savage, and too negative a beauty,” and it rewarded its followers only with “difficulties, humiliations and obscurities.”  

After an April 1776 meager attempt to “convert” the duc de Chaulnes, Deschamps’ system dissapeared from de Voyer’s correspondence. Deschamps’ abstract “Truth” was overshadowed by the more appealing, because sentimental, verities of the eighteenth-century. Deschamps’ metaphysics lacked any power of circulation. Without any sentimental undertones, Deschamps’ system was not embraced by as many people as it should have been in order to confirm its universal, “objective” status. In an eighteenth century in which there were mostly scientifical truths and sentimental certitudes, Deschamps attacked the first and neglected the second for the sake of metaphysics. In an eighteenth century that was ready to embrace any “scientific” utopia as long as it was couched in terms that were sentimental, and utilitarian enough (and sentimentalism did not preclude utilitarianism, on the contrary), Deschamps presented his readers with a severe construction capped by an “état des mœurs” that lacked any refinement, even those of liberty, and that scandalized conventional morality by reviving some of the most problematic features of Platonic utopianism such as the community of women. In an eighteenth century when determinism was used to justify the free satisfaction of what were seen as “natural sexual” instincts, Dom Deschamps came with a system that transformed the freedom allowed by determinism, that freedom that disregarded...

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656 “Il y a grande apparence que le système, privé de son créateur et de son apôtre, manquera son effet et sa fortune. Il y a pourtant des parties bien vues, et supérieurement traitées, mai si l’ensemble est de dure digestion, et ne peut se passer de la tête qui l’a combiné. C’est un inconvénient qui me parait absolument sans remède” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 961 [letter 993]).

657 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 962 (letter 994). According to Dom Patert, the duke of Chaulnes started by reading what Bernard Delhaume identified as Le Mot de l’égnime métaphysique et morale, applique à la théologie et à la philosophie du temps.
religious commandments, into a steely determinism crowning a problematic liberation from anthropomorphism.
CHAPTER IV:
Dom Deschamps, Enemy of the Philosophes, or the Enlightenment as Ontological Temptation

In the summer of 1769, an anonymous book named *Lettres sur l'esprit du siècle*, infuriated Denis Diderot so much that he decided to write a letter to his old friend Antoine Gualbert Gabriel de Sartine, the lieutenant of police and *directeur de librairie*, asking him to find, whip and imprison the book’s author, eventually in a lunatic asylum. Diderot’s angry letter was never sent to Sartine and was never published during Diderot’s life. It remained among his manuscripts because, after writing it, Diderot discovered that the author of the antiphilosophical *Lettres sur l'esprit du siècle* was Dom Léger-Marie Deschamps, a Benedictine monk he had just met that same summer and whose manuscript works and private conversations fascinated him. Their meeting was prompted by Dom Deschamps’ eagerness to convert the leading intellectual figures of the day to his own system developed as *La vérité ou le vrai système*, his then unpublished masterwork (it was to remain so until 1993). From 1761 until his death in 1774, Dom Deschamps contacted, in chronological order, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1761-62), Claude Adrien Helvétius (1764), Jean le Rond d’Alembert (1766-67), Denis Diderot (1769), Voltaire (1770), the abbé (Claude) Yvon and the philosopher Jean-Baptiste Robinet (1771-74). The intermediary of all these philosophical transactions was the

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659 Robinet was himself another hard to classify figure who baffled the more conventional *philosophes*, enraged the Catholic church, died as a penitent Catholic in the 1820s, and was later recognized as a Hegelian precursor.
marquis Marc-René de Voyer d’Argenson (1722-1782), son of Louis XV’s War minister, himself a hero of the 1745 battle of Fontenoy, governor of Poitou, and a liberal grand seigneur. The marquis de Voyer was not only Dom Deschamps’ protector, but a highly cultivated and intelligent disciple as well who explained and defended Dom Deschamps’ system. The story of their relationship as well as that of the way in which Deschamps tried to convert the leading lights of the French Enlightenment to his own system will be part of the next chapter.

The 1769 meeting between Diderot and Dom Deschamps might be one of the most interesting episodes of the French Enlightenment. The two philosophers met three times in July 1769, and then again twice between 13 August and 14 September 1769. They both left accounts of those meetings in their correspondence. In July, Deschamps, who was looking to convert Diderot, felt unfulfilled because Diderot did all the talking, thus precluding any attempt from the part of the otherwise proud and dignified Benedictine to expatiate on the subject of his own theories. Reduced to listening, Deschamps noted archly the logical inconsistencies in Diderot’s verbal dialectical outpourings.

Thus, on 13 August 1769, Deschamps wrote to d’Argenson that Diderot believed himself to be bad half “by nature” and only half because of the society. By claiming to be bad by nature, Diderot was, according to Deschamps, implicitly affirming the existence of an evil principle: “To believe this is to believe in the existence of Satan in hell.” Deschamps considered Diderot a not very subtle metaphysician. On the contrary, he smacked so much of popular prejudices that Deschamps had difficulties

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662 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 267.
663 “Croire cela, c’est croire au grand diable d’enfer” (Diderot, Correspondance, 9: 106).
seeing why everybody accused Diderot of being an atheist. Nobody who believed in the Devil could be considered an atheist, hence Diderot’s fear of the police was unfounded: “I don't know why he fears the police in this respect.”

On 23 August 1769 Deschamps announced to the marquis de Voyer that he was going to dine again the next day with the “very witty and extremely loquacious Diderot” (“le très spirituel et très bavard Diderot”). Their meeting seems to have been so fruitful that it led to another two, in September. At the end of these, Deschamps wrote triumphantly to de Voyer that he was sure he had converted Diderot to his own system, since the Parisian addressed him as “master.” To confirm his break with the philosophe past for a new allegiance, Diderot assured Deschamps that d’Alembert was unable to grasp his principles. Indeed, Diderot believed that d’Alembert was too much a mathematician to be a good metaphysician: he did not have the “nose” to discover in nature those “fleeting” things “that we can sense but are not able to calculate” (“qui se sentent et qui ne se calulent point”). And Deschamps’ philosophy was, Diderot argued, one of the most “violent and original” he had ever encountered. Deschamps explained to Diderot the intentions behind his Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle (1769), the larger framework into which his attack on the philosophes had to be read, and Diderot recognized that, far from being a step toward Catholicism, as he believed when he wrote the angry letter to Sartine, Deschamps’ ideas went far beyond any then current

664 “Je ne vois pas pourquoi il craint la police à ce titre” (Diderot, Correspondance, 9: 106).
666 “J’ai passé deux jours entiers avec le philosophe Diderot, l’un à Paris, l’autre à Versailles, et nous nous sommes quittés contents l’un de l’autre. Il m’appelait d’abord homme de bien, et il a fini par m’appeler son maître. Il n’avait, comme bien d’autres, que des conséquences, mais il a actuellement des principes. D’Alembert, selon lui, est incapable de les saisir” (Diderot, Correspondance, 9: 142).
667 Diderot, Correspondance, 9: 245.
philosophical temerity.669 Diderot was not simply amused by Deschamps, but philosophically stirred also, as he wrote to Mme de Maux.670 As Emmanuel Chubilleau noted, it was shortly after these meetings that Diderot started writing his metaphysical masterpiece, the Rêve de d'Alembert, published only long after the death of its author, in 1830.671

Both Deschamps and Diderot manifested their dissatisfaction with d'Alembert's metaphysics. Diderot specifically explained away d'Alembert's metaphysics by his geometry, noting that a good geometrician could not be a good metaphysician. This went against the eighteenth century belief, inherited from the seventeenth century natural philosophers, that mathematics was the best way to attain or demonstrate the truth. While Diderot was a keen mathematician, Deschamps did not leave any trace of his interest in mathematics. Diderot was also more interested in science than Deschamps, but he still maintained that metaphysics could be done only in an old fashioned, discursive way that he discovered with relish while witnessing Deschamps exhibit his Thomist dialectic and girth with formidable ease.672 Deschamps' old fashioned presence

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669 “Ce qui m'amusa beaucoup ce furent les efforts de notre apôtre du matérialisme pour trouver dans l'ordre éternel de la nature une sanction aux lois. Mais ce qui vous amusera bien davantage, c'est la bonne hommie avec laquelle cet apôtre prétendait que son système, qui attaquoit tout ce qu'il y a au monde de plus révéré, eût innocent et ne l'exposoit à aucune suite désagréable; tandis qu'il n'y avoit pas une phrase qui ne lui valut un fagot” (Diderot, Correspondance, 9: 127-28).


672 “Mon gros bénédictin [Deschamps] a tout à fait l'air et le ton d'un vieux philosophe, et je ne vis pas une ligne à effacer de tout son ouvrage qui est rempli d'idées neuves et d'assertions hardies” (Diderot, Correspondance, 9: 245).
and method went hand in hand with radically new ideas. What Diderot sensed perhaps here, and what lurked in Deschamps’ pages, was the ontological temptation, shunned by most of the eighteenth century French philosophes. The discussion between the two philosophers puts us in the presence of echoes and developments of the strange interplay between mathematics, metaphysics, and science that started with the Cartesian epistemological revolution in the seventeenth century.

If, as Richard Popkin has argued, Counter-Reformation Catholic apologetics found in skepticism a way to show the frailty of human judgment and the need for the traditional magisterium of the Church,\textsuperscript{673} Descartes tried to rehabilitate reason by showing that reason could attain “clear and distinct” ideas and that this sharpness of focus was a way to overcome any epistemological weakness in the process of proving the existence of God.\textsuperscript{674} But Descartes, a brilliant mathematician, did not dress his metaphysical system in mathematical garb, using instead many of the older scholastic categories and discursive techniques.\textsuperscript{675} In fact, as Leo Strauss argued, Descartes, Pascal and Leibniz, all brilliant mathematicians, were too aware of the weakness of mathematics to build their metaphysics on it. It took a somewhat more modest mathematician, Baruch Spinoza, to erect a whole system according to mathematical methods.\textsuperscript{676} But Spinoza did not have any patience with skepticism (either of the fideist – as in Pascal or Bayle - or the freethinking sort). Spinoza transformed mathematics into the instrument of a new dogmatism. This impatience with skepticism was shared by

Deschamps who, in the context of a philosophic culture dominated by scientific empiricism, took the traditional discursive metaphysical turn toward what he perceived to be "the truth" ("la vérité"). This shared ontological temptation (in mathematical terms, like Spinoza’s, or in scholastic terms, like Deschamps’) united the two spirits, and constitutes one of the missing aspects of Israel’s massive tome on Spinozism, the radical enlightenment and the coming of modernity.\textsuperscript{677} Trying to build a modern Spinoza, Israel gave us a political Spinoza, a secular tolerant Spinoza. In fact, “modernity” was propelled, in the nineteenth century, by a philosophical system, Hegel’s, cast very much in scholastic, discursive-dialectic terms, and not in mathematical ones. As a philosophical language, mathematics would reappear only around the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, as a tool of the neoskeptical (if not Calvinist-fideist in Wittgenstein’s case) analytic approach to philosophy (Bertrand Russell and his Cambridge followers). Spinoza’s modernity was thus that of the \textit{Theologico-Political Treatise}, and it was a political modernity. In the \textit{Ethics} we have the ontological Spinoza, the atheism of which could be considered “modern,” although its dogmatism was cast in a mathematical mold that was decidedly old-fashioned in the same way in which Deschamps’ impatience with epistemological questions was.

Diderot’s encounter with Deschamps thus resulted in the return of the ontological question, haunting an empirical, scientific, and politico-economically oriented mainstream Enlightenment.\textsuperscript{678} Reading Deschamps is thus also a way to test the limits of the Enlightenment and to make an inquiry into its various shades. The mainstream Enlightenment of the philosophes sought to decouple the moral from the


metaphysical in order to reformulate ethical problems in politico-economic terms that made virtue a function of progress, and progress a duty of an active government as legislator. In contrast, Deschamps like the Spinoza of the Ethics strove to maintain the communication between metaphysics and morals, between ontology and politics. While their “God” was not a personal God, it was at least rigorously defined in metaphysical terms: it was not a deist shadow, a presence allowed for by skeptical fatigue. In an age when even the Catholic Church tried to defend its stance in moral and moralistic terms, Deschamps fought along ontological lines. Therefore, while his system could be construed as atheist, it might also be seen as exuding a scholastic flavor. Deschamps’ ontology had millenarian overtones, aiming as it did to propel humanity into an utopian final stage of history, and was at odds with the largely moralistic, timidly progressive ideas of his correspondents.

Deschamps clashed with the philosophes on both the exoteric and the esoteric level of his writings. Taken at their face value, his two published books, Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle (1769) and La voix de la Raison contre la raison du temps (1770), infuriated Diderot, worried Voltaire, and were praised by Fréron, the arch-enemy of the philosophes. Both books meant to disparage the philosophes from a radical heterodox, not from an orthodox, point of view. Yet, Deschamps couched them in a language designed to make them appear as extremely powerful attacks on the enemies of the Church. Understanding Deschamps’ rhetorical strategies means first unwrapping Deschamps’ system. Only such an operation would allow us to understand the real import of Deschamps’ polemical writings against the philosophes.

Despite the ontological tenor of his work, Deschamps shared the philosophes’ preoccupation with the philosophy of history. Indeed, his first published book proposed

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nothing less than a new philosophy of history. In order to achieve his goal, Deschamps first had to defend the possibility of metaphysical knowledge, and the existence of God as “universal,” “metaphysical being.” To talk, as the philosophes did, against the existence of God as “universal moral being” in whose likeness humankind was created was to talk “against faith,” but to deny the existence of God as a “metaphysical universal being” and thus as the ground of all moral knowledge was “against reason,” an “absurdity.”

According to Deschamps, the atheist philosophes were guilty of trying to build a moral system without a foundation, “une morale arbitraire.” Instead, Deschamps tried to develop a system of morals based on a metaphysical principle. He made it clear that it was *Le Tout* not *Tout* that was the source of morals. “Le Tout” was the totality of existing beings and things, the Whole, while “Tout” was Being itself, infinite, and thus the Only one. In twentieth century existentialist terms, *Le Tout* would be called “existence,” while *Tout* would be the *Being/Essence* which is the source of existence. Morality had to do with the Whole/One, with existing “in relationship” (“par rapport”) with other things and beings. *Tout* instead was “the existence in itself, by itself,” “unique,” and therefore without any relationship with anything else, even with the Whole whose negation the “*Tout*” was. Morals therefore could not be based on the “*Tout*,” or developed in relationship to it, since “*Tout*” transcended any determination of relationship.

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680 “Dire qu’il n’y a point de Dieu, c’est-à-dire qu’il n’y a point d’être universel moral, d’être suprême à l’image duquel nous soyons faits comme être moraux, c’est parler contre la foi. Mais si on entendait aussi par la qu’il n’y a point d’être universel, d’être métaphysique, on parlerait contre la raison, on dirait une absurdité” (Dom Deschamps, “Le mot de l’énigme métaphysique et morale,” in *Oeuvres philosophiques*, 1: 215).


682 “C’est *du tout* qui est la vérité métaphysique, qui est l’objet du premier rapport, que découle la vérité morale, sur laquelle je ne laisserai rien à désirer. *Tout* ou l’être unique ne donne aucune conséquence par la raison qu’il est la négation *du tout* qui est le principe” (Deschamps, “Le mot de l’énigme métaphysique et morale,” *Oeuvres philosophiques*, 1: 91).

683 “L’existence en soi, l’existence par elle-même, c’est-à-dire l’existence considérée comme ne faisant qu’un seul et même être qu’on ne distingue plus alors des êtres, comme étant *unique*, et conséquemment, sans
Deschamps argued that Moses was right to write in the *Genesis* that God created the world out of nothing, because nothing was *Rien* or *Tout*, the non-creator God, Being in itself. Therefore, for Deschamps, the things of this world were in a sense, as the Bible said, “pure nothing,” since Being was Nothingness, that is a negation of existence as we know or experience it, of the totality of existing things constituting the Whole.684 Beside being a reassertion of Cartesian dualism against Spinozist materialist monism, Deschamps’ system was radically anti-anthropomorphic. According to Deschamps, one of the main errors of the philosophes and theologians was to combine the infinite or unique being, *Rien/Tout*, with the perfect or finite being, which is *le Tout*, the sum of all positivities or perfections.685

By splitting *Rien/Tout* and *le Tout* Deschamps restored a radical transcendence, something that could not be assimilated in any way to positive existence, to human or indeed any other being. As Jean Wahl wrote, commenting on Deschamps' negative theology: “We have to go beyond everything in order to arrive to god.”686 *Tout/Rien* is thus, as Bernard Delhaume wrote, “sterile with respect to the phenomenal” world, it “does not influence what happens in the universe,” but in *Tout/Rien* “the world transcends itself in the eternity of its essential truth.”687 That is to say that, in

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684 “Dieu non-createur, que l’être par soi est le *Rien*, le néant même; et qu’en disant que les êtres sensibles sortent du néant, il ne voulait dire autre chose sinon qu’ils sortent de cet être [...] Quel peut être le néant, ou le chaos, dont les êtres sortent, si ce n’est *Tout*, l’être unique, ou Dieu, dont on convient qu’ils sortent? [...] C’est par un cri de la vérité que nous disons des choses de ce monde qu’elles sont un pur néant” (Deschamps, “Le mot de l’énigme métaphysique et morale,” *Oeuvres philosophiques*, 1: 90-91).


687 “Stérile à l’égard du phénoménal, il n’affecte pas ce qui se produit dans l’univers, bien que l’univers se résolve en lui; le *Rien* n’instaure pas un procès dialectique de type hégélien [...] mais pourtant il y a un
Deschamps' system, this radical alterity does not directly dictate the moral system, but influences the ontological conception upon which the moral system is postulated by instituting a definitive barrier against any monist immanentist temptation. By splitting unicity (Tout/Rien/Being) from unity (le Tout/the Whole), Deschamps defined le Tout only in terms of unity, not of infinity, and thus prepared the way for a moral system dominated by the idea of unity, not of infinite variations. The purpose of metaphysics was then to establish correctly the characteristics of that being from which came the moral consequences. By positing as the source of morals a finite substance, the unity of le Tout, Deschamps’ morals would be not, like Spinoza’s or Diderot’s, one of the infinite modifications of infinite forms of being, but one stressing the unity or the tendency towards unity that he saw as the only natural law, or what he called “natural metaphysical law,” that is the desire of any human being to “become one with his fellow men,” the universal tendency “towards the center.” This law of ontological gravitation was, for Deschamps, the only innate law, and it was also the basis of his egalitarian utopia, which consisted in achieving that state of “perfection of the Whole (du Tout)” in which every part of the Whole was entirely integrated in the Whole, became the Whole. Deschamps’ moral system was teleological in the same way as were Pascalian theocentric

689 “Il est de loi naturelle métaphysique pour l’homme social de tendre à la loi naturelle morale, que nous appelons improprement Loi naturelle tout court, c’est-à-dire de tendre à ne faire qu’une avec ses semblables. Il est également de loi naturelle métaphysique pour lui d’aimer son principe qui est le tout: j’entends d’y tendre sans cesse.” The natural law was defined by Deschamps as “ce dont il est contre nature qu’on puisse s’écarter,” a certain “tendance au centre et qui est universelle […] C’est à la perfection du Tout, c’est à être Le Tout que tout tend dans Le Tout, ou ce qui va au même, c’est à jouir de tout le possible, a le faire aboutir à eux, a le concentrer dans eux, que tendent foncièrement tous les êtes distributivement pris, et c’est ce qu’on a voulu dire toutes les fois qu’on a parlé de notre tendance à Dieu.” (Deschamps, “Le mot de l’enigme,” Oeuvres philosophiques, 1: 246).
morals, centered on the love of God. Morals were not concerned with the preservation of being in endless variations, but with a centripetal fugue, an ontological law of gravity which postulated that all beings fell towards their center, a “metaphysical élan of the individuals surpassing themselves towards being” (“élan métaphysique des individus qui se dépassent vers l’être”), as Robinet wrote.

According to Deschamps, there were three stages of humanity: the savage stage, the stage of laws, and the stage of morals (“moeurs”). The savage state was not Rousseau’s Golden Age, but more akin to Hobbes’s brutish version. Deschamps distinguished two stages inside this state: the savage state and the social savage state. He also developed an evolutionary theory situating human history is on a continuum with animal evolution. The first men were, according to Deschamps, resembling orangutans and lacking any language although not some basic skills. In that state, human beings lived individually. It was the development of a language and the physical inequalities that led to a certain union, but it was still an ephemeral kind of union, a conjunctural gathering that did not imply any social dimension such as laws, religion or any notion of right or wrong.

The social savage state was the cradle of the state of laws (“l’état de loi”) that appeared with the first chieftain and once the permanent communities required dividing properties along the lines of “mine” and “yours.” If the savage state was one of “disunity without unity,” the state of laws was one of “disunity in unity.” The state of morals was, according to Deschamps, one of complete unity, that is one without written laws or

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690 For an analysis of the moral and epistemological consequences of this universal movement toward the center see Blaise Pascal, Pensées, edited and translated by Roger Ariew (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2005), 31.
691 Robinet, Dom Deschamps, 180.
693 Robinet, Dom Deschamps, 97.
694 Robinet, Dom Deschamps, 101.
a “social contract.” Laws perpetuated the disunity inside unity, creating the “estates” inside the state. In fact, according to Deschamps, the state of laws only perpetuated the physical inequalities of the savage state by transforming them into rights of property. Once humanity refused to advance towards unity, it had to consecrate the laws that maintained its orderly dis-unity. The Church became “the first militia of the throne”: “Heaven is the mask beneath which the Church serves the prince.” 695 The right of property was, for Deschamps, as for Rousseau, the Original Sin,696 the consecration by law and by religion of a property regime sprung from the physical inequalities specific to the savage state.697 Property rights were the source of all vices, and from it followed the desire to lord it over both land and people, over women, children and the whole society.698 Deschamps maintained that the “vice” of property, together with all its consequences and embodiments – armies, family, laws, Church, or the arts – had to be abolished.699 By abolishing the “vice” of property and the laws that protected it, all the other vices, that sprung from it and that in the end were only a creation of laws instituted in the first place to protect this original vice, would disappear. Against Locke, Deschamps wrote that work was insufficient ground to appropriate anything because private property was against nature or “reason” (“contre toute raison”).700

The metaphysical grounding of Deschamps’ moral and political thinking was evident when he discussed the third stage of humanity: the state of morals (“état de

695 “Le ciel est le masque sous lequel l’Église sert le prince” (Robinet, Dom Deschamps, 110).
696 Deschamps, Oeuvres philosophiques, 2: 535-538.
698 This was an old Augustinian theme. Augustine talked about laws as a way to replace that justice that could be actually attained only by the love of God. Laws were thus related to the Original Sin because they took into consideration “one’s due” and thus consecrating an order of human being detached from God’s order. See Robert Dodaro, Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Augustine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 68-70.
699 Deschamps, Oeuvres philosophiques, 1: 265-325.
700 Robinet, Dom Deschamps, 113.
mœurs”). If the first two states were historical, the third one was metaphysical: it did not exist and it could be known only by way of metaphysical consequence. If the first two states were against reason, the final state of humanity was the embodiment of reason, of “unity without disunity/discord” (“état d’union sans désunion”). That last stage would not be a simple return to the first stage, to a primordial innocence. A return to the first state would be impossible because the last state was a consequence of the truth ("la vérité"). The truth was unknown to the savage men, but once the truth would be known there would be no going back. The primeval disunion guaranteed by the ignorance of the truth was to be replaced by an absolute unity following from the understanding of truth. This scheme sounded like Rousseau’s attempt to find an escape from the “slavery” into which society and the artificial desires fostered by it had hurled the proud, and independent solitary savage men. But whereas Rousseau found a political solution - a civic religion - to the social problem of inequality, Deschamps rejected both the moralism or sentimentalism inherent in the creation of a civic religion, and any system of checks and balances, and stuck to his ontological perspective. Deschamps' moral principle had its origin in the metaphysical principle, and this was the main point of divergence between the Benedictine and the philosophes, since morals were not a matter of expediency, sociability, or convention, but part of the truth. The possibility of metaphysics proved the possibility of attaining a moral truth because if there was a metaphysical truth there was a moral truth as well. Deschamps decried atheism because atheism did not leave space for any universal principle. If fighting against the

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701 Robinet, Dom Deschamps, 114.
703 Deschamps, Oeuvres philosophiques, 2: 555-557.
particular churches and theologies was a good thing because it made way for the truth, that fight, according to Deschamps, had better be fought responsibly.\textsuperscript{704}

While still in a state/stage of laws, the positive law, said Deschamps, was supported not by real notions of justice, but by the Church. The Church itself was an institution safeguarding the image of a God built after our own image for the purpose of protecting the \textit{status quo}. Destroying the Church meant destroying the laws, the social peace. As long as the world was still in the state of laws, no dominion could be established without the support of the Church. And the Church could be dispensed with only after people found God. According to Deschamps, society and the Church such as they were then would eventually have to be destroyed, but only when something else could replace them. This superior stage of evolution was the state of morals, emerging as a consequence of people finding the truth. Until that moment, the enlightened despots and the philosopher-kings had to claim that their power came from God, and that they could accomplish nothing without the Church, since destroying the Church meant destroying their “domination.”\textsuperscript{705} The Church was the last approximation of the truth to be sacrificed on the road to the state/stage of morals. When people would find and receive the truth, the whole world would be changed, not by revolutionary upheavals based on shoddy principles, and thus destined to have murderous consequences, but by common consensus. The world would just shed its old skin as a result of a true enlightenment. Yet, Deschamps was no “enthusiast,” and far from being couched in

\textsuperscript{704} Deschamps, \textit{Oeuvres philosophiques}, 1: 207-214.

\textsuperscript{705} “Je voudrais voir sur le trône la philosophie qui ne veut point de religion. S’il lui était possible de l’anéantir et qu’elle réduisit cette possibilité à l’acte, elle sentirait bientôt la nécessité de la rétablir, et c’est alors qu’elle connaîtrait, par sa propre expérience, qu’une souveraineté qui ne porte pas sur la religion porte sur le sable. Voilà pourquoi il n’est point de souveraineté qui n’ait et ne doive avoir pour principe que toute puissance vient de Dieu. On ne peut détruire la religion qu’en détruisant toute domination, qu’en passant de l’état de lois à l’état de mœurs” (Deschamps, “Le mot de l’énigme,” in \textit{Oeuvres philosophiques}, 1: 212-213).
comfortable pietist sentimental discourses about an “inner light,” his enlightenment required serious intellectual engagement and conceptual discipline.

It is perhaps telling then that the first philosophe Dom Deschamps chose to contact was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in 1761. It would be three years later, in 1764, that Dom Deschamps chose to contact Helvétius. In 1767 he wrote to D’Alembert, in 1769 to Diderot, and in 1770 to Voltaire. The most philosophically cogent epistolary exchange was that with Rousseau. The least satisfactory, those with D’Alembert and Voltaire. With the exception of Diderot, we thus see a regression in Dom Deschamps’ success in approaching the philosophes. This regression also tells us that Deschamps chose to approach the philosophes according to what he believed to be their degree of affinity to his own ideas. Dom Deschamps was not looking to engage in an intellectual exchange, he was looking to recruit converts. And the fact that he chose to start with Rousseau, and that only a decade later wrote to Voltaire, tells us something about the way in which we have to read Dom Deschamps’ system.

Indeed, Dom Deschamps had in common with Rousseau a civic-republicanism of Platonic extraction. As David Lay Williams has recently argued, Rousseau’s thinking could be better understood as a sort of Platonic Enlightenment. Williams made the case for Rousseau’s epistemological, ontological and political Platonism and showed how Rousseau rejected the materialism, the political positivism, and the utilitarianism of the philosophes based on a certain idea of justice that was ontologically grounded. In this respect, Rousseau opposed both Hobbes and Locke, since he did not support Hobbes’s might makes right politics, or Locke’s “determinate set of rules,” but rather “appealed to an abstract idea of justice.” This idea of justice was upheld by certain “eternal truths” such as the existence of God, the reality of our free will, and the immateriality of the soul.

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706 Williams, *Rousseau’s Platonic Enlightenment*, 94.
“The eternal laws of nature and order do exist,” proclaimed Rousseau,\textsuperscript{707} for whom justice was not just a matter of convention, of social contract, but a return to these eternal principles. The instrument of this return was the “general will,” which was not just the will of the majority, the factional will of all, but the will of the people when “compelled without violence” by truth, by the above mentioned principles.\textsuperscript{708} Even if still having to do with volition, the “generality” of the will consisted mainly in the truth and goodness of its object as well as in the selflessness of its exercise. For Rousseau, a just society was an expression of the general will. To this extent, Rousseau’s arguments against the arts and the sciences of his day were attempts to make people aware of the distractions that might lead them astray from the realization of the general will. Rousseau called the philosophes “sophists,” and he denounced them as intellectuals who chained the people to an unjust system perceived as a Platonic “cave.” The arts and the letters were to be condemned only insofar as they were multiplying the “shadows” on the wall.\textsuperscript{709}

It is easy to see why Dom Deschamps found Rousseau’s writing congenial. They both shared the conviction that there were certain eternal truths. They both shared the idea that true justice could not be a "conventional" justice since it could be arrived at only by judging everything according to those eternal truths, that is discovering those truths in any situation, making their presence felt in any instance. They both attacked the philosophes as intellectuals who dealt in “half-lights” (as Deschamps called them), or “opinions,” in the Platonic sense of mere received ideas, current popular prejudices (as Rousseau said when talking about the “sophist” philosophes). Deschamps, like


\textsuperscript{709} Williams, \textit{Rousseau’s Platonic Enlightenment}, 129–182.
Rousseau, used the chains metaphor when talking about the civilized men as “galley slaves in chains” who need each other and live in fear of the "stick" ready to fall on their backs.\textsuperscript{710} Both Deschamps and Rousseau cautioned against the alienating development of the sciences, the arts, and the letters as intellectual factories churning out empty signs. Moreover, they both believed that truth could serve as the basis for a just society if only people would know and will that truth. But for all that they have in common, the major distinction between Rousseau and Deschamps was an epistemological distinction. For Rousseau, one could gain access to the truth only through his conscience, by his feelings. For Dom Deschamps, access to truth was primarily through reason.

This epistemological difference meant that Rousseau had to take into account human passions when dealing with political matters, and this also led him to his historicism and political organicism.\textsuperscript{711} Deschamps’ dogmatic ontology allowed him to disregard passions, and indeed his writing is largely devoid of the heated debates about “passions” and “self-interest” that made much of the eighteenth-century economic and political discourse.\textsuperscript{712} Rousseau’s truth was something lived by people. Dom Deschamps’ truth was something that lived in people. Deschamps’ clash with Rousseau would be one between a dogmatic rationalist and an intuitionist realist. The difference in the way in which Deschamps and Rousseau perceived the “whole” resulted in different political philosophies. Indeed, Rousseau would frame his discourse in a neo-Augustinian way. For Rousseau, both the perception of the truth and its loss would be a matter of sentiment: of “pity” (“pitié”), “self-love” (“amour de soi”), and “wickedness” (“méchanceté”). The

\textsuperscript{710} “Des galériens enchaînes qui se nécessitent les uns et les autres a faire une route pénible, et qui y sont nécessités tout à la fois par le bâton toujours levé sur eux” (Deschamps, Oeuvres philosophiques, 1: 287).
mainsprings of Rousseau’s system were mainly psychological and moral. And if man went from the “natural” state and from self-preservation to the social state in which self-love played the main role, this situation could be remedied not by getting rid of the passions but by educating those passions through a civic religion. Rousseau believed that civic religion could foster patriotic sentiments, and emotional bonds that would prevent people from acting only according to a self-love misled by a reason corrupted in its turn by a science and by arts that functioned not as commitments to truth, but at best as entertainment and at worst as abettors of oppression.713 But his accent on what Williams called “the epistemological framework of sentiment” prompted Rousseau toward a different “whole” than Deschamps.714

Indeed, for Deschamps, society, religion and laws were mere travesties of the real religion and of the real truth. But it was reason, not emotions or conscience, that allowed access to truth. Mere facts and experiences did not have any bearing on the discovery of truth. Since the sensible world did not play for Deschamps the same role it played for Rousseau, Deschamps’ “whole” would be not the local, national “whole” of Rousseau. For Rousseau, a nation was the embodiment of a Platonic idea: the nation was universal and a “whole” in an archetypal way. Rousseau’s political freedom came through an accomplishment of specificity.715 And in this sense any “moi” was a center,716 and the happiness sought by Rousseau was not that of the whole, but that of the individuals.


714 Williams, Rousseau’s Platonic Enlightenment, 73-5.


Deschamps’ whole meant the disappearance of any specificity, the obliteration of any differences that might stay in the way of the whole. Indeed, Rousseau advocated the fulfillment of each nation's specific potential. Therefore, Rousseau became one of the great disparagers of Peter the Great, noting in his *Contrat social* that, without actually succeeding in Westernizing the Russians, Peter the Great made Russians less Russian and thus less natural, spoiling their genuine character with a smear of culture and compromising their chance to know and to master themselves for the sake of learning to master some foreign identity imposed on them.\(^7\)\(^1\)\(^7\) Deschamps on the other hand stressed that in his post-historical state/stage of morals differences would be transcended by an essential unity making all the existing institutions, laws, and hierarchies superfluous:

“We will know no cult, subordination, war, politics, jurisprudence, finance, extortion, trade, fraud, bankruptcy, no games of any sort, nor theft, murder, moral evil, or penal laws.”\(^7\)\(^1\)\(^8\) As such, Deschamps could do without the anthropological moorings of his age. Deschamps’ universal communism was a particular development of Christian universality and it confirmed Rousseau’s apprehension regarding Christian universalism, which he deemed unsuitable as a civil religion, and even contrary to the interests of the state. As a result, Rousseau regarded Christianity as a private religion, and supplemented it with a patriotic civil religion for political use.\(^7\)\(^1\)\(^9\) But this led Rousseau to a sort of cultural despair, because his state had to be built, had to be manufactured. To a certain extent, Rousseau’s state was an “invention” - not an arbitrary one, his Platonism precluded that - but an invention of the means that could most properly express the

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\(^7\)\(^1\)\(^8\) “On ne connaîtrait ni culte, ni subordination, ni guerre, ni politique, ni jurisprudence, ni finance, ni malôtre, ni commerce, ni fraude, ni banqueroute, ni jeu d’aucune espèce, ni vol, ni meurtre, ni mal moral, ni lois pénales” (Deschamps, *Oeuvres philosophiques*, 1: 304).

specific “idea” of a nation. Rousseau’s nation was a theologico-political solution to a
certain perversion of character caused by self-love, by the petty egotism of the sophist
intellectual elites, and the petty egoism of the people. Since man could not return to the
natural state, and since his reason did not allow him to retreat from the social self-love to
the natural self-preservation, Rousseau tried to find ways in which man could
manufacture a society that would help foster the right sort of self-love. It was in many
ways a sort of Plato sifted through Montesquieu, a historically determined
representation of what was ontologically true. But Rousseau had to work with the same
materials that brought the undoing of man. On the other hand, Deschamps was more
optimistic because for him religion merely darkened the truth. The truth was not lost, it
was not destroyed by history. Indeed, truth was the end of history, and as such it was the
direction of history. The revelation of truth would bring about the change in morals that
Rousseau tried to foster for the sake of apprehending the truth.

For Rousseau as for Deschamps, a society of atheists was, contrary to what other
Enlightenment thinkers believed, impossible. Yet, Rousseau feared in Deschamps
what Deschamps feared in the philosophes’ writings: that he might spread atheism and
that his writings might have incalculable moral consequences. As such, Rousseau
opposed to Deschamps’ dogmatism a very refined skepticism. Deschamps stressed the
“simplicity” of his own message as a reason to embrace it. The truth, Deschamps’ truth
was so evident that nobody had any excuse for not apprehending and accepting it. In
fact, Deschamps’ first — anonymous - letter to Rousseau, in April 1761, is just that: an

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720 Ryan Patrick Hanley, “Enlightened Nation Building: The ‘Science of the Legislator’ in Adam Smith and
723 Ezequiel de Olaso, “The Two Scepticisms of the Savoyard Vicar,” in *Sceptical Mode in Modern
Philosophy; Essays in Honor of Richard H. Popkin*, eds. R. A. Watson and J. E. Force (Dordrecht: Kluwer,
announcement that the truth that “accounts for everything” could be found out in a few hours of reading a manuscript. Deschamps, anonymously, was proclaiming it to Rousseau full of confidence that, once he would have this manuscript under his eyes, the Genevan would concur that the principles developed there are the basis of Rousseau’s own system of morals as presented in the First and Second Discourses. To this systematic simplicity that was in fact designed to work as a rhetoric tool for proselytizing, Rousseau answered stressing his own personal simplicity, that of a man who was not a “philosophe” and who had only the “simplicity of his faith/belief” (“la simplicité de sa foi”) as a resource against life's miseries. Rousseau rejected Deschamps’ “generalizations” because, he said, “our senses show us only individuals” and making abstraction of individual realities in order to talk about general categories that exist only on the level of abstract reasoning would be similar to “propelling the boat that we are sitting in without touching anything outside of it” (“pousser le bateau dans lequel on est, sans rien toucher au dehors”). Deschamps’ “analytical” method was fit for geometry, but it would lead to absurdities in morals, warned Rousseau, to “rêveries.”

Deschamps protested that Rousseau had seen only a part of the whole system. But Deschamps chose to read Rousseau's avowed “uneasiness” as a good sign. Deschamps wanted to prove to Rousseau that, confronted with Deschamps’ logic, Rousseau’s “system” showed its weaknesses, its lack of a solid ground for its ethics. The only way to gain that solid ground was to accept Deschamps’ metaphysical truth. Answering with Savoyard Vicar overtones, Rousseau made clear that the truth he was searching for was moral, not metaphysical. Moreover, it had existential moorings: “I love

725 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 65 (letter 24).
726 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 65 (letter 24).
727 Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 66-67 (letter 25).
the truth because I hate lies; I cannot be inconsistent on this subject unless I act in bad faith.”728 Rousseau’s truth could not be detached from his way of living, and his way of living, rather than his way of arguing, was the best epistemological check. If Deschamps argued that we could not live in truth without first knowing the truth, Rousseau argued that the best way of knowing the truth was to live the truth.729

Deschamps approached Rousseau hoping to find in him an ally against the philosophes, but he found only a limited range ally. Deschamps criticized the philosophes for trying to reform society without knowing the truth. Rousseau criticized the philosophes for not living the truth, for not living according to their own conscience, for falsifying the criteria and thus their own and others’ existence. Deschamps’ metaphysical ignorance was Rousseau’s existential alienation. Cut off from themselves by arts and sciences that corrupted them, men were alienated from the truth that stood witness to their own consciences.730 Both Deschamps and Rousseau saw the link between a sort of ontological truth and morals, but Rousseau’s morals meant living according to the truth witnessed by one’s own conscience, while Deschamps’ morals meant living according to the truth that would be first discursively discovered before producing a sort of ontological metanoia. As such, Rousseau’s scepticism regarding metaphysics found its solution not in the magisterium of the church, but in the magisterium of our own conscience and in the catholicity of the general will. It was in vain that Deschamps tried to argue that only “the precise knowledge of the metaphysical truth could lead us to the precise knowledge of the moral truth.”731 Rousseau resisted what amounted to a new

728 “J’aime la vérité, parce que je hais le mensonge; je ne puis être inconséquent la-dessus que quand je serai de mauvaise foi” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 67 [lettre 26]).
729 “A parler sincèrement, je suis bien plus persuade que convaincu; je crois, mais je ne sais pas; je ne sais pas meme si la science qui me manque me sera bonne ou mauvaise” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 68 [lettre 26]).
730 For Deschamps writing against arts and letters, see his Oeuvres philosophiques, 1: 310.
731 “La connaissance exacte de la vérité métaphysique peut seule donner la connaissance exacte de la vérité
foundation of morals because this new foundation would be the result of a radical de-anthropomorphization. Deschamps was convinced instead that in order to rebuild morals, in order to arrive at the “sound metaphysics” (“saine métaphysique”) that was “the true religion, the only true and solid ratification of morals,” people have to purge religion, law, and morals of their hidden anthropomorphism. The conflict between Deschamps and Rousseau was that between a philosophy of totality and personalism. Deschamps argued that the human measure was false and needed to be discarded: true morality had to do not with physical separation and psychological specificities, but with metaphysical union. Rousseau wanted the fulfillment of the human person. For Rousseau, both the mainstream Enlightenment and Deschamps’ “true” enlightenment were forms of alienation: alienation in the world of “opinions,” of luxury and vices, as in the philosophes’ version, or metaphysical alienation, as in Deschamps’ case. For Rousseau both the philosophes and Deschamps were guilty of abolishing the person, of dissipating it into a world of objects or of evaporating it in the world of abstractions. In the end, Rousseau’s metaphysics was one in which existed, as he said, only individuals, and the unity of these individuals was existential, a unity in conscience. For Deschamps, the individuals were just species of a rational category: they were not existentially apprehended through conscience, but logically determined as identical parts of the same ontological whole.

This idea brought Deschamps into conflict with d’Alembert also, who rejected Deschamps’ philosophy as an abuse of metaphysical terms, noting that the operations of Deschamps’ reason had no bearing on the existence, the non-existence, or the nature of

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732 “La vraie religion, la seule vraie et solide sanction des moeurs” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 69 [letter 27]).
the things themselves. D’Alembert was a radical Lockean who claimed that all our ideas came from senses, while Locke allowed for some ideas that came from reflection. Steeped in radical empiricism, d’Alembert rejected Deschamps’ radical metaphysics. While not a spiritualist, Deschamps invested himself in a dualism that rejected Spinozist monism and claimed that rational knowledge was of a superior order to empirical knowledge. D’Alembert argued that we can apprehend and define only what we see, not the thing in itself: knowledge would thus be strictly phenomenal, not ontological, granting access to existence, not to “essences.” For Deschamps there was no such disjunction between what we can conceptually appropriate and reality. Reason and discursive reasoning had access to reality, at least when the object of knowledge was not “le Rien,” that is “Tout.” Due to this difference, d’Alembert did not allow that “infinity” was a legitimate metaphysical concern. And Infinity was essential for Deschamps, whose “Tout/le Rien” was unique because it was infinite. The infinity of “Tout/le Rien” determined his unicity and thus his radical separation from “le Tout,” from unity. D’Alembert did consider neither the metaphysical nor the geometrical infinity as real, but as mere delusions of a weak reason recoiling upon itself. D’Alembert’s rejection of

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734 “Il me semble en général que le sophisme de l’auteur consiste a donner les opérations de son esprit pour raison de ce qui existe par soi, et de ce qui n’existe pas par soi. Or, toutes les opérations de l’esprit ne concluent rien ni pour ni contre l’existence des choses” (Deschamps, Correspondance générale, 149 [letter 116]; see also 147-148 [letters 114-115]).


736 Veronique Le Ru wrote that, for D’Alembert, “les définitions expliquent la nature de l’objet tel que nous le concevons, mais non tel qu’il est” (Veronique Le Ru, Jean Le Rond d’Alembert philosophe [Paris: Vrin, 1994], 68).

737 For a good discussion of the question of “infinity” in the seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophical and mathematical thought, see Dale Jacquette, David Hume’s Critique of Infinity (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

738 “L’infini métaphysique et l’infini géométrique, aussi chimériques l’un que l’autre, quand on voudra leur accorder une existence réelle,” in Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, Essai sur les Éléments de philosophie (Paris,
infinity was based on his mathematical criticism of Leibniz’s differential calculus that was based on the notion of “vanishing numbers/quantities.” For d’Alembert, the infinity was just the limit of the finite, just a finite quantity whose limits we do not grasp. D’Alembert preferred Newton’s fluxions and protested against the metaphysical abuse of the geometrical infinity. But for Deschamps, who did not recognize any particular metaphysical relevance to mathematics, the notion of infinity was destined to prove his point that metaphysics was superior to natural sciences because it gave access to a superior plane of reality that could not be grasped in either empirical or mathematical terms. This conception of infinity influenced the way in which d’Alembert understood the question of the existence of God and of his attributes. According to d’Alembert, we could not grasp an infinite being with an infinite number of infinite good qualities simply because the infinity is just the limit of our knowledge. The only things that we know are the things that we know empirically, and these are the natural or human things, this-worldly things that fall under the scope of our senses. But these would leave us with only a limited conception of God, since our limited qualities, however added and multiplied, would give us just another finite quality. Starting with finite beings with finite qualities, we could not arrive at the notion of an infinite being with infinite qualities that

Fayard, 1986 [1759]), 353-354. See also Le Ru, Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, 121.


740 Le Ru, Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, 120–21.

741 See in the next chapter how Deschamps’ rejection of “differential calculus” cost de Voyer, Deschamps’ patron, the conquest of Marie de Paviers.

742 “Toutes les puissances et les facultés des êtres réunies entre elles ne produiraient jamais qu’une puissance finie et non pas une puissance infiniment grande [...] De plus, si nous jugeons de la perfection divine par l’idée que nous avons de celle des hommes (c’est-à-dire par le seul moyen que nos lumières nous fournissent de concevoir ce qu’est perfection), comment cet être si parfait souffre-t-il ou produit-il tout le mal physique et moral de cet univers?” (Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, Oeuvres et correspondances inédites de d’Alembert, ed., Charles Henry [Paris: Perrin, 1887], 22-3).
would be the cause of all other beings. In this, d’Alembert was following John Locke, whose French translation of his Essay argued the same thing.\textsuperscript{743}

The difference between d’Alembert and Deschamps stemmed from a different understanding of the scope of metaphysics. For Deschamps, metaphysics was still the attempt to discover, prove and describe the existence of some ultimate essence or ground of being. For d’Alembert, the role of metaphysics was purely epistemological, and the only legitimate object of metaphysics was the study of the generation of ideas.\textsuperscript{744} Faithful to scientific empiricism and to mathematics, D’Alembert refused to speculate on the nature of soul, the existence of God, the nature of matter, or the relationship between spirit and matter, between soul and body. According to Le Ru, d’Alembert’s metaphysics was mainly a “method for the systematic organization of principles and knowledge.”\textsuperscript{745} It was precisely this reduction of metaphysics to epistemology that Deschamps would attack in his Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle.

*Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle* served as a rebuke to the atheism of the philosophes, while *La voix de la raison contre la raison du temps* was intended to disclose more of Deschamps’ own ideas to the public. If in both of them he pretended to defend the church from the point of view of an orthodox theologian, the first was more successful in

\textsuperscript{743}A la vérité nous ne pouvons qu’être persuades que Dieu, cet Être suprême de qui et par qui sont toutes choses, est inconcevablement infini: cependant lorsque nous appliquons, dans notre entendement, dont les vues sont si faibles et si bornées, notre idée de l’infini à ce premier Être, nous le faisons principalement par rapport à sa durée et à son ubiquité, et plus figurement, à mon avis, par rapport à sa puissance, à sa sagesse, à sa bonté et à ses autres attributs, qui sont effectivement inépuisables et incompréhensibles” (John Locke, *Essai philosophique concernant l’entendement humain*, trans. Pierre Coste, 2 vols. [The Hague: Pierre Husson, 1714], 1: 238-39).

\textsuperscript{744}Le génération de nos idées appartient à la métaphysique; c’est un de ses objets principaux, et peut-être devrait-elle s’y borner; presque toutes les autres questions qu’elles se propose sont insolubles ou frivoles; elles sont l’aliment des esprits téméraires ou des esprits faux; et il ne faut pas être étonné si tant de questions subtiles, toujours agitées et jamais résolues, ont fait mépriser par les bons esprits cette science vide et contentieuse qu’on appelle communément métaphysique” (D’Alembert, *Essai sur les Elements de philosophie*, 39).

\textsuperscript{745}Le Ru, *Jean Le Rond d’Alembert*, 129.
this sense, and is far more important for Deschamps’ relationship with the philosophes than the second. Deschamps’ writing between the lines in his *Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle*, a masterpiece of “esoteric writing,”\textsuperscript{746} tricked the censors into approving it\textsuperscript{747} and fooled the philosophes into attacking it. The work was applauded by Fréron and by *Mercure de France* and infuriated Diderot, who saw in it a reactionary attack on the philosophes. If the philosophes managed, in Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* for example, to write against Christianity from the position of an enlightened Christianity, Deschamps managed to write against both the philosophes and Christianity taking the stance of a seemingly conservative, monkish, theologian. Deschamps’ pamphlet is thus important not only for its author’s ideas, but as an indication of the extent to which the official theological discourse of the eighteenth century, having abandoned “thoroughgoing Christological and Pneumatological” issues,\textsuperscript{748} allowed for double-edged competitors and potential revolutionary meanings.

Right from the first page of the introduction, the anonymous author of the pamphlet, Dom Deschamps, announced that he would spin out his own system, “consistent” with the defense of both the state and “religion,” necessary to each other, against the pernicious philosophes’ “system” which “destroys without establishing” anything.\textsuperscript{749} Deschamps thus pointed out that the philosophes, despite their protestations against the “esprit de système,” actually had a system. The philosophes had a common disregard for reality as well as a common aim: that of destroying the


\textsuperscript{749} “Le système Philosophique actuel est inconséquent, & [...] il détruit sans établir; on établit contre lui un système conséquent, tant par rapport à la Religion, que par rapport au Gouvernement, & que l’on croit nécessaire au soutien de l’un & de l’autre,” in Deschamps, *Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle* (Londres [false place], 1769), 3.
established order. What was more important, the anonymous author\textsuperscript{750} did not propose just to reaffirm the traditional values of religion as a pillar of good government. The official theologians still hoped to defend religion by showing that it was the support of the Throne.\textsuperscript{751} But by tying religion with the Throne, the official theologians had ended by making Christianity a mere ideological support of the Throne, one that could be substituted by Physiocracy and its natural theology. And in fact the philosophes were engaged in the elaboration of a new “natural” philosophy and morality that would replace orthodox Christianity as ideological underpinnings of the social and political order. But the anonymous Deschamps wrote to defend not merely the instrumental value of religion, as did the official theologians, but the truth of religion itself. Instead of making Christianity’s status depend upon its value as a pillar of the Throne, Deschamps reaffirmed the dependence of the Throne, of any political order, on the religious Truth. The “Truth” of Deschamps’ religion was not the “Truth” of orthodox Catholicism, but this was something that could be hardly discerned from this pamphlet, as indicated by the angry reaction of Diderot and by the enthusiastic reaction of the antiphilosophe Fréron. And it was this ontological and epistemological hardcore realism that alerted Diderot, who could not see that Deschamps’ intention was not to chip away at the system and thus risk having the roof coming down upon his head, but to change all the coordinates at once. Deschamps system was a machinery designed to upgrade society to an

\textsuperscript{750} I will call him that way because the anonymity of Deschamps in this case was not dictated only by prudence, but it was somehow related to the fact that he was not truly himself in this pamphlet, whose discourse recoils and hints without indicating or disclosing Deschamps’ true system or identity. His anonymity was thus not just a matter of convenience, but of renouncing his own, true identity for the sake of a battle whose tactics did not allow him to be himself. It was as if Deschamps did not try to assume another identity, he just suspended his own, which was strongly related to his Truth.

egalitarian Heaven. In order to make his way between the philosophes and the official Catholic theologians, the anonymous Deschamps used to his advantage the received rules of eighteenth-century apologetics that always started with proving the existence of a natural religion and then moved to the necessity of revelation and to the truth of the Christian revelation. It was thus an apologetics that did not start with history, but with philosophy. As a historical religion, Christianity was somehow added to the original theism. The natural religion and the necessity of a revelation were arrived at by way of reason. The truth of Christianity was a matter of historical research. This historical search for the validity of the Revelation resulted merely in a reaffirmation of Christian “mysteries” such as the dogma of the Holy Trinity. But then, in an age of natural theology and natural law, such dogmas were seen as "adiaphora," as contingent to a virtuous life and thus to salvation.

Deschamps could therefore fight the philosophes on a battleground of his choice that would permit him to metaphysically pound on the philosophes while avoiding the need to look into the historical truth of the Christian revelation. And he did this by claiming to defend the “Religion-genre” or Theism. Deschamps’ subtle argument was that the philosophes were actually attacking Christianity, a “Religion-espèce,” in order to wipe out religion from the "hearts of the Christians" (“toute Religion dans le coeur des Chrétiens”). Deschamps proposed to defend not Christianity, but the “Religion-genre,” because by buttressing up what the philosophes were actually trying to destroy when attacking Christianity he managed to defend Christianity. Arguing within the limits of theism, Deschamps did not actually present Christianity as the pinnacle of theism, but as a “religion espèce,” as a particular religion among others. He defended Christianity not in itself and on its own merits, but for the sake of the “religion genre.” The anonymous

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Deschamps warned that the "system" of the philosophes was responsible for the "reigning spirit of independence" ("l'esprit d'indépendance qui régne") that would inevitably lead to "a most unfortunate revolution in Religion and Government" ("à la révolution la plus fâcheuse dans la Religion & dans le Gouvernement").

The philosophes' subversive nihilism was masked by their style. Accused by his opponents and even by his friends or disciples of being too imperious in his formulations, Deschamps was conscious of the need to fight not only the substance of the mainstream Enlightenment, but also its style, which sophistically manufactured consent. Deschamps therefore kept denouncing salon conversations and the "artificiality" of the philosophe writings. In the introduction to his Lettres sur l'esprit du siècle, Deschamps exhorted his readers to pay attention to what he said, not to his style, and he presented himself as an author whose very lack of style was a sign of his sincerity. Devoid of "Art," that is of artifice, Deschamps was a bearer of truth, whereas the "false philosophie" was all stylistic fireworks. Unfortunately for Deschamps, he did not write beautifully enough to claim successfully that he wrote without art. His "sincerity" was not as artfully crafted as that of Rousseau, and his prose presented the eighteenth century readers with contentious claims in the name of obscure metaphysical truths laid in a craggy, arborescent prose. Working on the thin line between the theologico-political establishment of the Old Regime and the new establishment – by now academically and ministerially entrenched – of the mainstream philosophes, Deschamps could not help appearing hard-hitting and cagey at the same time. His style was shaped not only by his metaphysical stance, but also by the need to cover the radicalism of his ideas while fighting the philosophes allegedly in the name of the Church. In the end, Deschamps’

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754 Deschamps, Lettres sur l'esprit du siècle, 6.

755 “Car l’Art d’écrire lui manque, & peut-être, parce qu’il est un Art. S’il ne manque pas à notre fausse Philosophie, c’est qu’il est fait pour elle, qui ne seroit rien sans lui” (Deschamps, Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle, 6).
philosophy was rejected because of its intonations, unsuitable to a century that happily lent its ear mostly to the tone of scientific reason, to the craftily sentimental and sincere appeals to the public opinion,\textsuperscript{756} or to the ironic and flippant dogmatism of Voltaire and his school. Rejecting all these styles and opting for a no-nonsense (or a lot of nonsense, according to his opponents) ontological approach that discarded scientific rationality, that is empiricism, that did not properly use the rhetoric of “sincerity” and Rousseauian sentimentality, and that was not satisfied with dogmatic scepticism, Deschamps situated himself outside mainstream Enlightenment and could not make any decisive inroads in it.

The four \textit{Lettres sur l'esprit du siècle} started with an apology of the monastic life such as it was in the middle of the eighteenth century. Deschamps’ whole argument revolved around the idea that no reform would be possible without a return to the first principles. If the philosophes attempted merely to improve things, and not to restore the world according to the first principles, it would be callous and dangerous to ask from the monks to be better than the age they were living in. Deschamps position could be seen as counter-revolutionary only because of its maximalism. He defended the church by attacking the philosophes who, by their merely reformist activity, did not allow the whole social structure to be restored. Deschamps argued that the philosophes wanted to change the social order without grasping the first principles of that order. And those principles indicated that there was no difference between the secular and the spiritual. The church was part of the social order, and was to be regenerated only by regenerating the whole social order through a rediscovery of the first principles, of the ontological truth, of the

truth about “God.” Any attempt to reform only the church, by reforming the monastic life, for example, a topic that was hotly debated in Diderot’s La Religieuse, was actually an attempt to destroy the church. Taking at its face value the claim of the Church that monks were separated from “this world,” the philosophes attempted to operate in the sphere of the Church as if it was self-contained. By arguing that it was actually socially contained, and that its reform could not be conceived separately from that of the whole society, Deschamps managed to reclaim the de facto autonomy of the monks against what he perceived to be a secular assault.\(^757\) In accordance with his dislike of monism and with the “Tout” and “le Tout” that were the pillars of his ontology, Deschamps wrote about “all kind of reasons, even political” that supported the existence of two kinds of clergy: secular and regular (“toutes les raisons, même Politiques, qui demandent plutôt deux Clergés qu’un seul”\(^758\)).

According to Deschamps, the spirit of the philosophes was “less philosophical than destructive” (“moins Philosophique que destructeur”).\(^759\) Just for the sake of being fashionable,\(^760\) the philosophes attacked monastic life and argued for the dissolution of the monasteries. Deschamps argued that to do this would mean in fact to ruin the foundations of the whole social structure. In order to prevent such “great upheavals” (“grands bouleversements”),\(^761\) Deschamps stressed the importance of the alliance

\(^757\) “Les Religieux réputés hors du siècle, sont nécessairement dans le siècle, & ils ne peuvent pas y être qu’ils n’en contractent les mœurs jusqu’à un certain point, ainsi que le Clergé Séculier. Il faudroit, pour pouvoirs rappeler à leur institution primitive, monter le siècle effréné dans lequel ils ont le malheur d’être aujourd’hui, au ton du siècle de leur institution; or, la chose étant impossible, c’est porter aux Ordres Religieux le dernier coup de la destruction, que de s’opiniâtrer, soit par zèle, soit par politique, à vouloir qu’ils reviennent au point de leur principe. la Sagesse, toujours éloignée de détruire, consiste à se prêter aux temps & aux circonstances, & a prendre toujours le milieu relatif à l’état actuel des choses” (Deschamps, Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle, 8).

\(^758\) Deschamps, Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle, 8.

\(^759\) Deschamps, Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle, 8.

\(^760\) Deschamps, Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle, 11.

\(^761\) Deschamps, Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle, 8.
between Throne and Altar, between the King and the Pope, pointing out that: “The Catholic religion, Rome, and our secular and regular clergy are of the essence for the Catholic monarchies of Europe.” Deschamps made a stab at the then prevailing Anglomania by stressing with Bossuet that, after abandoning Catholicism, England entered into a period of civil-religious wars out of which it emerged only with the price of a constitutionalism based on the ruins of faith and of a growing number of Atheists. The object of his Lettres, wrote Deschamps, was to “silence” (“faire taire”) atheists, those “frivolous and superficial minds” (“têtes frivoles & superficielles”). To any unprevented eye, Deschamps’ lines lacked any originality in an age when even the most conservative Catholic apologists defended “la religion” based mainly on its social utility.

But Deschamps’ criticism of these efforts of improvement by way of “upheavals” and constitutional efforts that would reform or annihilate certain patches of the establishment or of the social fabric were actually based on his metaphysics. According to his ontology, “Le Tout,” the world in its totality, was the kingdom of “plus” and “moins,” of “more” and “less.” Without discovering both “Le Tout” and “Tout,” without getting to the metaphysical truth that would allow the world to make the final step from “the state/stage of laws” (“l’état des lois”) to the “state/stage of morals” (“l’état des moeurs”), everything remained under the determination of this relativity. So that when he defended the status-quo of his day by rhetorically asking “what constitution of a

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763 Deschamps, Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle, 10.
764 Deschamps, Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle, 10.
civilized state does not have its good and its bad parts,”766 Deschamps did not mean to say that the civilized, “well-ordered police state” (“état policé”) or the “état des lois” was the last word of history in terms of justice. While sounding like a not very original defender of the powers in place, Deschamps was actually hinting at the relativism of the eighteenth-century Christian kingdoms, still living under the sign of “more” or “less” than in the real “état des moeurs,” like Christian states, according to him, should. Without a real knowledge of Deschamps’ ontological truth about “le Tout” and “Tout/Rien,” any reform was bound to be misguided and to cause more harm than good because it would be vitiated by the same “original sin” that caused the moral and social decay in the first place.767

Deschamps did not appeal to the rhetoric of the nation and of national unity that by 1774 was well in place in the Parlementarian rhetoric against “ministerial despotism” and that would play such an important role during France’s revolutionary decades when, alloyed with the millenarian Christianity of influential clergymen such as abbé Grégoire and Adrien Lamourette, would evolve into a theologico-political synthesis with regenerative overtones not unlike those of Deschamps himself.768 Deschamps’ nimble criticism of the corporate identity of Old Regime France had an original flavor because it was informed not by the “ancient constitution” literature or by natural law treatises, but by his own ontology. Deschamps saw in the composite nature of Old Regime France not a sociological problem, but a metaphysical one. France was an ontologically deficient society the moral decay and social injustice of which betrayed a fraught relationship with

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766 “Quelle constitution dans l’État policé n’a pas essentiellement son bon et son mauvais coté?” (Deschamps, *Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle*, 11).

767 “Cet État, ou il n’y a qu’un vice d’origine qui ait pût nous amener, est éloigné de l’État social simple, ou l’on pourroit dire les hommes heureux, par comparaison à tous les différens États que comporte l’État policé” (Deschamps, *Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle*, 11).

“God/Tout/Rien,” that is with “Being,” that no amount of social meliorism could solve. As long as France was unable to behold the ontological truth that would allow its citizens to apprehend their essential unity and to ascend to the level of the “état des moeurs,” it was condemned to make the best of its moral and ontological fissures that resulted in injustices.

Deschamps claimed to fight what he called the “pure Theism” (“leur Théisme pur”) of the philosophes. He argued that, dispensing with a God “who punishes and rewards” (“qui punit & qui recompense”), the philosophes subverted the pillars of all civil laws and pushed people in the direction of Atheism, a “system” proper to animals only, according to Deschamps. It was, however, a very unorthodox way of defending Catholicism, since Deschamps claimed that “Theism” was indeed the religion of the first human beings, who were not as corrupt as the eighteenth-century people, and who therefore could afford to be “theists.” Without touching the subject of the “truth” of the Christian religion, or the importance of revelation, Deschamps launched himself into a very elaborate paragraph that said precisely what he claimed he did not mean to say: that is that Christianity was the religious expression of an alienated, fragmented, and excessive world, while the primordial “Theism” was the religion of a pure, innocent world, devoid of moral and social corruption as well as of economic and political inequality, and populated only by hunters, farmers, and shepherds. The “simple religion” of human beings in their innocent state was bound to foster a “simple” morality. Deschamps was actually saying that the “natural religion” sought by the

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772 “Il faudroit, pour qu’il fut possible d’établir le Théisme en question, que l’impossibilité n’existât pas, comme elle existe en effet, de démontrer par lui, que toutes nos Religions sont fausses & a rejeter; de ramener nos mœurs aux mœurs primitives; de dénaturer l’homme actuel pour le rendre tel qu’il étoit dans le principe; de retrancher de l’inégalité morale & de la propriété, (ce vices qui existent par le vice d’origine) tout
philosophes was not possible without a total change in the religious, social and political structure. He did not argue that their "theism" was false. He merely suggested that the philosophes wanted to propose a change in religion without an accompanying renovation of the whole theologico-political structure. That, Deschamps darkly hinted, was dangerous because a change in religion toward "theism" without a reform of the property structure, of manners, of morals, and of political structure would lead to unbridled atheism and savagery. The truth of Catholicism was its social utility in a sinful world. But Deschamps was no mere Machiavellian-Spinozist “impostor” appealing to religion for political purposes. By laying down the conditions under which the dismemberment of the religious apparatus would be possible, Deschamps subtly advertised his own system. He tried to create the need for something that would fulfill those needs. He attacked the philosophes not in the name of the established religion, but in the name of a system that would make possible the reform of the established religion by reforming the whole “social contract.” He did not find it impossible to use “pure Theism,” which was to be found only in his own system, in order to demonstrate that all religions were false.

Both the theism and the atheism of the philosophes were false because they were religions of man in opposition to the establishment, but not of the social man. No system

of government, Deschamps claimed, could be built on pure theism or on atheism.\footnote{Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l'esprit du siècle}, 16.} Deschamps shared Linguet's low esteem for natural law systems and argued that natural laws could regulate human interaction only if men were angels.\footnote{Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l'esprit du siècle}, 16-17.} But, Deschamps slyly added, in a state the social architecture of which was tainted by the “original sin” of moral and material inequality, people needed dogmas and laws to regulate their passions: the “mysteries” of religion dealt with the “depravation” of men.\footnote{“Vouloir aujourd’hui une Religion simple, ou, pour mieux dire, ne la vouloir pas abondante en dogmes & en lois, c’est vouloir que l’homme ne soit pas dans l’état de dépravation ou il est. La Religion, telle qu’elle existe dans ses mystères relatifs à l’homme dépravé, dans ses développemens et dans ses loix, est celle qui doit nécessairement exister” (Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l'esprit du siècle}, 17).} Deschamps argued that the Philosophes aimed to destroy any religion, that they were atheists attacking Christianity merely for the sake of destroying any and all religions by means of destroying the established religion. Therefore, Deschamps’ aim was not to defend any specific religion, but religion in general. And in doing so he could in fact defend his own system and his own pure theism.

Talking about “religion genre” and “religion espèce,” Deschamps argued that the philosophes, being against the “religion genre,” could not accept the proofs, however convincing, of a “religion espèce,” of a revealed religion such as Christianity.\footnote{Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l'esprit du siècle}, 18.} Deschamps argued in favor of Revelation in terms that seemed conventional enough, saying that, without Revelation, “a great number of people” would have found it impossible to develop the principle of religion engraved by God in their souls. God also, according to Deschamps, revealed not only the “interior cult” and the “essential dogmas” of the pure Theism, meaning the interior awe and reverence toward a God who created the world and who recompenses and punishes humankind, but also the “other Dogmas”
and the “exterior cult.”\textsuperscript{778} It was at this point that Deschamps then proceeded to attack the philosophes as trying to propagate a religion of their own. And he did this by suggesting that the theism of the philosophes was actually revealed, and not rational: “For would we know without a revelation that there exists a God who creates, recompenses, and avenges, and whom we have to adore?”\textsuperscript{779} The relation between this revealed theism and the revealed rituals was that between cause and effects. And, added Deschamps, in a fallen world many causes would remain without effects without divine revelation.\textsuperscript{780} The way in which the philosophes subverted this cause, this pristine original Theism, was by not considering it a “fixed principle,” engraved by God in our hearts, but part of the “mass” of revelations that were to be discarded.\textsuperscript{781} According to Deschamps, the aim of the philosophes was to create and propagate a religion of the lack of religion. Deschamps maintained that it was impossible to establish a religion based solely on reason. It was unreasonable to give reason so much power.\textsuperscript{782} What seemed a conventional defense of the revealed religion, of Catholicism in this particular case, had, read in the context of Deschamps’ whole work, much more subversive undertones. Because when Deschamps said that the idea of a Father who created, rewarded, and punished us was revealed to us, he actually understood by this that it was a false idea.

One of Deschamps’ main points of attack was that the philosophes shared with the establishment the idea of an anthropomorphic God. According to Deschamps, this was a false image of God, a projection of our moral values onto God. But, according to

\textsuperscript{778} Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l'esprit du siècle}, 19.

\textsuperscript{779} “Car saurions-nous sans une révélation, qu’il est un Dieu Créateur, Rémunérateur & Vengeur, qu’il nous faut adorer?” (Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l'esprit du siècle}, 19).

\textsuperscript{780} Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l'esprit du siècle}, 20.

\textsuperscript{781} Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l'esprit du siècle}, 20.

\textsuperscript{782} “Moi je dis qu’il est contre toute raison de vouloir établir un système de Religion par la seule raison, & que leur système est un système de Religion comme toute autre, quoiqu’il établie l’indifférence des Religions, ou pour mieux dire, par-la même qu’il l’établit” (Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l'esprit du siècle}, 21).
Deschamps, since our moral values were the product of a fallen world that could be restored only by accepting the truth of his philosophy, the God All-and-Nothing, these moral values were in fact just the dubious results of the world of “more-or-less” seeping into the world of the “unity” (Le Tout) and “unicity” (Tout). So that what Deschamps said here was that by agreeing to talk about a “good” God, the philosophes accepted somehow an anthropomorphic God, and thus accepted the irrational premises of any and all established religion. What was more, the philosophes combined the irrationality of their system with a relativisation of any religious truth. By being open to all religions, they opened the door to religious indifferentism, to the idea that God was just an imaginary being, and this idea was dangerous because it could lead to the crumbling of the whole establishment. This, again, was very much in accord with Deschamps’ system, which postulated the existence of only one truth, that of the existence of “le Tout” (All, unity, existence) and of “Tout” (Nothing, infinity, being). By giving in to religious ecumenism, the philosophes created the premise for religious indifferentism and thus for the abandonment of the search for God, for Deschamps’ God. The irrationality of “revealed” religion, together with the indifferentism born out of too much religious permissiveness, slowed the impetus to look for the strong, solid metaphysical foundations of society. And this strong foundation, Deschamps’ system, was circulated by the wily Benedictine among his correspondents only. His Lettres showed him walking the thin line between the strong dogmas and the irrationality of the established religion, based on revelation, and the weak dogmas and lazy irrationality of the porous religious thought of the philosophes. Trying to save the idea of dogma, of a strong truth as foundation of social life, Deschamps resented the spectacle of the philosophes dangerously playing with and feeding upon a moribund Christianity that somehow managed to transmit them its own sins without any of its virtues.\textsuperscript{783} Deschamps argued that the main cause of this harmful

\textsuperscript{783} For the theological inheritance of the philosophes, see Carl Lotus. Becker, The Heavenly City of the
cross-pollination was the philosophes’ ignorance in theological matters.\textsuperscript{784} Willingly or not, the way in which the philosophes tried to establish the veracity of their theism actually subverted the truth of religion. Deschamps worried that the philosophes supported theism merely for the sake of not appearing to destroy religion. But they destroyed any religion by allegedly propagating a sort of religion.\textsuperscript{785} History, claimed Deschamps, should have made clear to the philosophes that no society could live without an established religion, and that atheism was a form of bestiality.\textsuperscript{786}

For Deschamps, one of the most clear signs that the philosophes were set on destroying society was that they talked about a purer religion without talking about purer morals. Deschamps regarded this as an indication of the philosophes’ investment in the actual state of things. While it was true that the philosophes did not have anything to do with the Catholic Church, they gained a lot from their academic and social connections. The philosophes did not allow anyone to criticize these connections from that new moral point of view coming with a new religious point of view. Rousseau, who tried to preach a simpler way of life, was attacked and punished for his ideas by the same philosophers who preached a new religion.\textsuperscript{787} But, Deschamps noted, even if Rousseau wanted to destroy the actual state of things, he was at least more consistent than the philosophes,

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\textsuperscript{784} Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle}, 22.

\textsuperscript{785} Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle}, 23.

\textsuperscript{786} “Il faut de la religion, ou que les hommes se dispersent sur la terre pour y vivre comme les bêtes” (Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle}, 22-23).

\textsuperscript{787} “En même temps qu’il ne tiennent point à la Religion qu’ils reprendent, ils tiennent extrêmement à l’état actuel, par les sciences & les arts qui constituent sa nature, & par une pure réversibilité à eux-mêmes. Un d’entr’eux a écrit contre cet état, pour porter les hommes a avoir des moeurs aussi simples que la Religion qu’il voudroit qu’ils eussent [...] Et il voit tous ces confrères contre lui, quoiqu’il apporte d’ailleurs le bras le plus vigoureux a détruire” (Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle}, 23-24).
proposing both a new religion and a new way of life while managing to protect what was good in the established religion: “And this is what they will never forgive him.”

Deschamps advanced the thesis that religion was part of a whole way of life and that that whole way of life was the consequence of a religion. As such, he believed that one could not treat religion as just a replaceable element of a mechanism. Nobody could just throw out a religion and replace it with another without disturbing, reshaping or even bringing to a halt the entire life of a certain society. As such, Deschamps’ approach was anti-mechanical and anti-technocratic. His ideas were much more akin to Hume’s sceptical Toryism and anti-ideologism and to Burke’s counter-revolutionary organicism than to the “well-ordered police state” of the increasingly technocratic and mechanicist Enlightenment. Deschamps’ lack of regard for sciences might perhaps explain why the only philosophe that he approved of, at least partially, was Rousseau. And even Rousseau did not escape the criticism of Deschamps, who questioned Rousseau’s *Discours sur l’inégalité* for its idyllic depiction of a natural state the very existence of which was highly hypothetical. Here, as in all his other dealings with the philosophes or the mainstream Enlightenment, Deschamps questioned their realism and its lack of adequate solutions. One of these solutions, proposed by the philosophes, was the freedom of thought. Similarly to Hobbes, who derided nominal liberties and understood freedom as the capacity to move unhindered, whether living in a republican or “despotie”

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792 “Une idée de nos Philosophes encore plus singuliere que celle de leur Théisme, est que chaque homme ait la liberté de penser comme il voudra” (Deschamps, *Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle*, 25).
Deschamps objected that freedom of thought was nothing without freedom to act. Since the law was concerned only with the actions of citizens, the unmanifested thought escaped the empire of the law. Freedom of thought might have been important for relatively tolerant religious sceptics and moral relativists like the philosophes, who argued for the relativity of all things that, like religion, morals or aesthetic judgment, could not be scientifically determined. But for Deschamps, living in a world of competing truths meant living in a world of competing lies. His new man was to be regenerated by truth and was to act in accordance with that truth. And that meant acting in the same way, doing the same things in a sort of exaltation of unity (“le Tout”) that would attenuate the differences between individuals, or the seasons of the year. And since the truth would be not a mere idea, but a way of life, books would also become futile, and their spurious knowledge would be discarded once and for all.\textsuperscript{794}

While appearing to defend the establishment and its laws, Deschamps actually implied that, since the philosophes did not offer a new truth, then they could not hope to lead mankind out of the shady realm of “more/less.” Indeed their half-truths could prove more harmful than the laws that were somehow organically related to the stage of history named by him “the state/stage of laws.” So, since freedom of thought was nothing without freedom of action, the philosophes were actually reclaiming the freedom to act based on half-truths. This was something the dogmatic Deschamps was not prepared to grant them. Instead, he mounted a defense of the establishment along seemingly conventional lines, declaiming for example against Protestantism and religious freedom in France. Even though religious tolerance was harmful because it accustomed the


people with different versions of the religious truth, which according to Deschamps was one,\textsuperscript{795} Protestantism was a religion, and as such it was better than the irreligiosity of the philosophes: if some states other than France, founded on a single established religion, Catholicism, could accommodate Protestantism, the philosophes’ lack of religion was completely and globally unacceptable.\textsuperscript{796}

Deschamps’ thesis was that theism, or “la Religion,” was the common spring of all religions. Moreover, in the “state of laws” “la Religion” could exist only in the form of particular religions. Destroying a certain religion meant destroying Religion, because destroying a type one destroyed a hypostasis.\textsuperscript{797} Particular religions were cultural expressions of the transcendent truth of an anthropomorphic, in this case, God who created the world, who wanted mankind to relate everything to him as the source of all “good” and “justice,” and who rewarded or punished the human beings. Deschamps saw religions as fragmented, imperfect approximations of a relationship with God specific to the fallen world of “more and less.”\textsuperscript{798} Deschamps not only put Christianity in the same category as other religions, he made them all fruits of a fallen world, not ways to sanctify the world, but expressions of that fallen state. In a fallen world, in the “state of laws,” the

\textsuperscript{795} And here Deschamps was less liberal than the famous abbé Bergier, who, while proving the superiority of Catholicism, indicated that religious tolerance was not a matter of whether a religion is true or not (of course only the Catholic Church was the defender of the true religion), but on whether a certain church, sect or faith is seditious or not. For Deschamps, the plurality of “truths” was in itself a scandalous matter, even if a certain religion proved to be useful or peacefully productive. See Kathleen Hardesty Doig, “The Abbé Nicolas-Sylvestre Bergier and the History of Heresy,” in Laursen, ed., \textit{Histories of Heresy}, 271-73.

\textsuperscript{796} “A tout prendre, demander liberté pour elle [the Protestant faith] en France, quoiqu’il soit contre la nature de cette Monarchie, qui n’a jamais connu dans son sein qu’une seule Religion, de la lui accorder; mais ce qui fait qu’elle peut, c’est qu’elle est une Religion; au lieu que leur Philosophie détruit toute Religion, & qu’a ce titre elle ne peut être tolérée nulle part” (Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle}, 26).

\textsuperscript{797} “Car la Religion, comme je l’ai fait voir, ne pouvant exister pour les hommes en général que par ses espèces ou ses composes, il s’ensuit que détruire ses espèces qui sont les Religions particulières quelconques, c’est la détruire pour les hommes en général” (Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle}, 27).

\textsuperscript{798} “Car il falloit avoir l’air d’établir le genre pour mieux détruire les espèces, & il falloit le détruire ensuite pour qu’il ne ramenât pas a ses espèces dont on ne veut ni de près ni de loin; & qu’on sent intimement être inséparables de lui” (Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle}, 28).
existent religions could serve as introductions and preparations for a higher truth, for Deschamps’ “vérité” opposed to the “demi-lumières” of the age. But none of the established religions was a way to escape the curse of the original sin. The vicarious nature of religion in relation to truth was not debatable for Deschamps. The existing religions had to play the cultural role of preparing mankind for the final revelation, and the limited political role of stewards of the humankind until the final revelation of the truth would come. In this last role they were closely akin to the laws that depended on them.\(^{799}\)

Deschamps defended the alliance between the Throne and the Catholic Church, not because he believed in the Catholic truth, but rather because he saw this alliance as a type, as an image, an icon, of the perfect relation, of the indissoluble relation between one state and one religion. He did not want this image destroyed through relativism, through philosophical agnosticism or due to freedom of thought. For the sake of preserving this metapolitical form, Deschamps prompted the philosophes to abstain from making any consideration (“de s'imposer un silence éternel”) on the question of religion, and especially not to preach religious tolerance.\(^{800}\) Deschamps defended the Catholic Church only in the metapolitical terms of an ideal relationship between Church and State, in fact in terms of his own ideal theocracy, or theocratic “atheism.” He first stated that there was a sense in which all existing religions were bad, but then added that

\(^{799}\) “Notre état social demande au moins un fond de Religion dans le cœur de tous les hommes qui le composent” (Deschamps, *Lettres sur l'esprit du siècle*, 27).

\(^{800}\) “Combien leur [the philosophes] seroit-il facile de partir de-la [from the necessity of a religion for any social contract] pour se prouver la raison d’une seule espèce de la Religion; espèce qui n’en seroit plus une, qui ne seroit plus la Religion Chrétienne, mais la Religion même, si elle existoit seule. Un état qui ne souffre qu’une seule Religion dans son sein, agit conséquemment au principe incontestable qu’il ne faudroit que la même Religion à tous les hommes, & que les différentes Religions qui se trouvent dans notre état de société, y sont un très-grand vice & un très grand mal. Mais encore une fois, ce n’est pas le Théisme qui peut seul être la Religion qu’il faudroit la même à tous les hommes; mais le Théisme, avec toute ses conséquences, avec un culte & des lois Religieuses” (Deschamps, *Lettres sur l'esprit du siècle*, 28).
since the pure Theism that would supersede them was not attainable, the existing established religions have to be preserved at all costs against philosophe attacks. By stressing that what he understood by “Theism” did not bear any resemblance with the deism of the philosophers, Deschamps hoped to make his potential readers wonder about the nature of his own theism. The Lettres were intended as a prolegomena, a preparation for Deschamps’ system. In refuting the objections of the philosophes, he took care to hint toward the real weaknesses of the official theologico-political synthesis as well as toward some possible, if undisclosed, ways to supersede it.

Deschamps wrote that the philosophes destroyed both the Catholic “species” and the Christian “kind” without putting any other religion in place, as if a religiously void society would be possible or desirable. It would, it seems, if the philosophes were more reasonable and would not have started to demolish everything “without any logic” (“sans aucune logique”). There was then a logical way to destroy the established religions. This way had to do with prompting people to progress toward the Theism that stood as the basis of all religions. It was an upward movement. But the philosophes destroyed the established religions in a downward movement. Despite their claims, wrote Deschamps, the philosophers were not logical, rational seekers of wisdom or knowledge. They were just sinful people compensating for their lack of logic with an abundance of depravation that helped them believe what they needed to believe. Deschamps thus borrowed another conventional element of the Christian apologetics, that of denouncing the Atheist as sinful and the Sinner as an atheist, and used it for his own purpose.

804 “Il est si naturel à l’homme dépravé de prêter l’oreille à tout ce qui peut le soustraire au joug de sa Religion, & si conséquent pour lui de passer du mépris de sa Religion a n’en avoir aucune, que la raison ne sauroit trop se faire entendre avant la Théologie, pour démontrer aux hommes qu’il leur faut de la Religion,
Facing the prospect of persecution, the philosophes argued that they were asking for freedom of thought only in religious not in political matters. But Deschamps maintained that this argument was flawed, since laws were based on religion. Deschamps argued that, since the philosophes claimed that both laws and religions were human inventions, they had to have a deep, essential connection, and so it would be futile to insist, while being aware of their common source and aim, that one could ask for religious freedom without attacking the laws of the realm. The laws allowing the ridicule of religion would implicitly subvert their own standing. While arguing that religion and laws are interdependent, Deschamps subtly draw a line between political absolutism and religious absolutism. Therefore, while allegedly defending religious and monarchical absolutism, Deschamps subverted both by showing that it was not natural for the French people to be Catholic. Catholicism, wrote Deschamps, had been imposed on the French for political considerations. And since the people did not chose their religion, they were not free to change it either, for the sake of the legal and spiritual unity of the kingdom. It was precisely because this uniformity was against nature that religion needed the support of the temporal power and why the secular power needed the Church to uphold its laws. What Deschamps actually said here was that the ultimate

& une Religion, & pour confondre une fois & à jamais nos Philosophes & leur Philosophie. C’est cette raison qui va continuer de parler seule, en revenant à la liberté qu’ils demandent avec tant de force, & dont ils regardent le refus comme la plus grande des tyrannies” (Deschamps, Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle, 29).  
805 “Elles sont au fond de la même nature” (Deschamps, Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle, 30).  
806 “Croient-ils, (en supposant avec eux la main & la seule main des hommes dans la Religion) que cette main y ait été mise de gaieté de cœur & sans nécessité? Ils se tromperoient bien lourdement” (Deschamps, Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle, 30).  
808 “Il est de leur essence que les hommes ne soient pas les maîtres d’obéir ou de ne pas obéir aux lois de la Religion, sur-tout à celles qui, plus radicales que les autres, demandent nécessairement une police uniforme, comme, par exemple, de reconnaître extérieurement, dans la Religion Chrétienne, la Jurisdiction des Évêques, des Cures & des Prêtres, de faire baptiser ses enfans, de se marier en face d’Église, de prêter les sermens requis; & conséquemment qu’ils ne soient pas les maîtres d’adopter extérieurement ou de rejeter ses dogmes sur lesquels portent essentiellement ses loix” (Deschamps, Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle, 31).
source of temporal legislation was the revealed law. But since that revealed law was only a convention, something un-natural, the state upheld itself upholding the “truths” of the Church. The Church was the source of temporal laws only because metaphysics was the source of laws and bad metaphysics (or theology) was the source of bad laws, that is of the laws defending private property, social inequalities, and everything that went against the egalitarian morals founded on the metaphysical principle of the unity of “le Tout.”

Since the link between a certain sort of truth, an ontological truth, and laws was, for Deschamps, undebatable, the Benedictine saw a conflict between two kinds of radicalism: that of the philosophes, and his own. The radicalism of the philosophes was above all their wrongheaded reformism, the fact that they worked for change based on what Deschamps saw as an unfinished and false ontological project that allowed them to attack religion while pretending or sincerely attempting to preserve the moral values and political institutions underpinning Old Regime France. Deschamps saw this “half-light” reformism as a sure recipe for disaster. Deschamps was engaged in thoroughly reworking the religious and ontological assumptions of society. He was far more radical in discourse. But he did not call for any immediate change. On the other hand, Deschamps firmly believed that his ideas were the only ones that could help the philosophes escape the lure of political expediency marring some of their best intuitions and intentions.

The price paid by Deschamps for working outside the dominant paradigm was his marginality.\textsuperscript{809} The philosophes wanted to merely reform some things, and in order to do so they had to become part of the mainstream and thus to allow some ideas or institutions to go unchanged. Working inside the dominant paradigm compromised the integrity of their concept: the means corrupted the end. According to Deschamps, the misguided “half-truth(s)” of the philosophes could lead to violent upheavals. He

therefore warned against the philosophical spirit that spread among a French people always ready to “throw off the yoke of the law” (“secouer le joug des loix”). Like Gresset before him, and Linguet after him, Deschamps denounced "philosophie" not as a rational system, but as an irrational system, as a false religion competing with an ontological “Truth.” Compared with the established religions, the philosophes’ “system” was harmful because it was alien to the political, social and cultural system in place and therefore was unable to support it, even while trying to preserve it in order to gain access, for reformist purposes, to its means. The liberty reclaimed by the philosophes was, according to Deschamps, a liberty that went against the very grain of the civil laws that were supposed to give the philosophes their liberties. For Deschamps it was irrational to want to have laws that would protect someone who wrote against the laws, against religion and the government that were the guarantors of those same laws.

Asking for the freedom to contest the laws, the philosophes were actually asking for the freedom to live outside the laws, to disobey the laws. Religious or intellectual freedom would be, according to Deschamps, merely the legal recognition of a fait accompli, the philosophes living already independently of laws, like the atheists lived outside the moral laws. In fact, Deschamps probably saw philosophy merely as a way to accommodate oneself with the “original sin.” While allegedly claiming that the philosophes were dangerous revolutionaries, Deschamps attacked them for being mere opportunists, people who did not challenge the establishment but used it for their own purposes. Actually, Deschamps claimed, the philosophes were not seeking the truth. They were merely under the spell of a “speaking and writing mania” (“fureur de parler &

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812 “Nos Philosophes usurpent cependant cette liberté à un point & si impunément, qu’ils pourroient se dispenser de joindre à l’audace de l’usurpation celle de la demande” (Deschamps, *Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle*, 33).
d’écire”) born out of their desire to distinguish themselves from the pious vulgar people, the same people whom they pretended to defend against tyranny. Philosophie was then irrational because it was deeply rooted in desires, wishes, whims and inclinations (“penchans”). It was not the overwhelming drive of that truth that, in the state of morals, would make people manifest their metaphysical sameness. Philosophie was the discursive result of the blind determinism of those “penchans” that, as a false consciousness, were a principle of separation, of individuation, not of sameness. According to Deschamps, philosophie could not abolish the original sin of private property and separation. It could merely manipulate it. It could perpetuate a lie through other lies. The philosophes would change a religion with another: they were, said Deschamps, mere heresiarchs. And as such they would reignite the wars of religion, a new sort of war of religion since any religion can be replaced only by war. Deschamps assimilated the philosophes to the mainstream discourse, usually read in a Jansenists-Jesuit key, about the 16th century religious wars. But only Deschamps’ truth could put an end to history as the perpetuation of the original lie, that of private property and of individual separation, and start a new age under the sign of an ineluctable and unifying truth.

The “truth” proclaimed by Deschamps would make both the Old Regime and its pseudo-revolutionary philosophe profiteers obsolete by radically altering the ontological basis of the public orthodoxy. In Deschamps’ world, the philosophes would not contain their servants by appealing to God because the whole society would be swiftly equalized

813 Deschamps, Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle, 35.
814 Deschamps, Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle, 34.
815 “Mais on ne peut enter une Religion sur une autre que par des guerres, que par le sang; & des que nos Philosophes ne peuvent tout au plus parvenir qu’à en enter une sur une autre, il s’ensuit qu’ils se mettent dans le cas de renouveler, par l’inconséquence la plus grande, les guerres de Religion qu’ils détestent avec tant de raison,” (Deschamps, Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle, 34).
under the magnetic pull of the same metaphysical truth of unity. And that truth would set them free, since exercising their freedom of thought and of speech in the clear light of the “state/stage of morals” would expose the philosophes as the puny, inconsequential thinkers that they, according to Deschamps, were.\textsuperscript{817} Freedom of thought and of speech in the light of the truth would only allow the philosophes to admit their mistakes and to make metaphysical amends.\textsuperscript{818}

According to Deschamps, the philosophes were interested in perpetuating a fundamental lie about the existence of God, while his own system would unchain even the lower classes from any illusions regarding this ontological issue. Dom Deschamps’ attack on the philosophes also included a very subtle take on the naturalism of the philosophes. Deschamps mentioned that, since Christianity was more spiritual that pagan religions, it was then more appropriate to “intelligent Beings like us.”\textsuperscript{819} Deschamps denounced as illegitimate and contradictory the philosophes' fight against Christianity as a religion against nature. According to Deschamps, the great merit of Christianity was precisely that it was against that realm of multiplicity and of the relative that was nature. Christianity was a sublimated, “perfected” religion, more akin than the primitive religions to that “refined religion, the religion understood beyond any sensible determination that our philosophes should respect.”\textsuperscript{820} This (Neo)Platonic strain became more evident when Deschamps put Christianity on the same continuum with Platonism,

\textsuperscript{817} “Quant à moi, mes réflexions actuelles sur eux & leurs systèmes une fois dans la tête des hommes incapables de réfléchir par eux-mêmes, je la leur accorderois [the liberty that they asked for, n. M.P.], & je crois qu’ils se donneraient bien de garde d’en user: car leur Philosophie ne seroit plus vue alors avec les yeux de nos penchants, mais avec ceux de la droite raison, & on ne leur prétérerait plus l’oreille. Il n’y aurait pas jusqu’à leurs Valets, leurs Cordonniers & leurs Tailleurs qui ne courroient plus les risques qu’ils leur font courir de ne point croire en Dieu, qu’ils leur font courir tres-inconséquemment, car ils veulent que ces gens-la croyent en Dieu” (Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle}, 33).

\textsuperscript{818} Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle}, 35.

\textsuperscript{819} Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle}, 36.

\textsuperscript{820} “Religion perfectionnée, la Religion prise hors du sensible; & nos Philosophes devroient la respecter” (Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle}, 36).
seen as an early approximation of Christianity, but similarly guilty of maintaining the laws.\textsuperscript{821}

Deschamps’ ontology thus opened itself into a philosophy of history since Deschamps embraced, like the eminently enlightened physiocrate Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot,\textsuperscript{822} an evolutionary scheme of religious progress, in which each age brought further advances on the previous ones.\textsuperscript{823} In this scheme of things, the philosophes seemed reactionary, since by criticizing Christianity in the name of what Deschamps considered a full-bloodied naturalism, the philosophes stood in the way of the progressive development of a pure religion, of a spirituality freed from the cumbersome demands of the flesh, of history. By selling Christianity short for the sake of practical improvements, the philosophes actually managed to prevent the flowering of the true religion that would put a stop to history as a perpetuation of iniquities sprung from the original sin. According to Deschamps, Voltaire’s attacks on Plato\textsuperscript{824} confirmed the immorality of the philosophes and the groundlessness of their moral systems.\textsuperscript{825}

\textsuperscript{821} Deschamps, \textit{Oeuvres philosophiques}, 1: 276.
\textsuperscript{825} “Avec quel mépris Platon vient-il d’être traité par un d’eux, & à quel titre, d’après quelle vérité découverte sont-ils fondés à mépriser Platon? Je dits plus, seroient-ils fondes a le faire, la vérité à la main? Non; la vérité detruirroit respectueusement ou l’orgueil détruit injurieusement. Le même dit contre ce Philosophe, qu’il n’y a pas plus de souverain bien que de souverain cramoisi. Qu’on juge, par ce seul trait, qui ôte tout fondement
Deschamps believed that societies lived under either a divine or a human law.\textsuperscript{826} The human law was always predicated on the basis of some divine law.\textsuperscript{827} As such, law and religion were distorted by people, but were not bad in themselves. They were rather bridle to what was bad in people. But the abuses of the law or of religion could not be, according to Deschamps, turned against the law or against religion in the way in which the philosophes did.\textsuperscript{828} Without mentioning him by name, Deschamps took over Bayle’s argument and shaped it in a brilliant manner by saying that it was indeed possible to have a society of atheists, but only because the laws of that society were based on divine laws, they were based on a point outside the physical reality.\textsuperscript{829} Therefore, Deschamps charged against the philosophes not so much to defend Christianity, or religion in itself, but religion as a kind of ontology. Deschamps attacked the sceptical morals of the philosophers in the name of a morality grounded in ontology. He did not even preclude the possibility of discarding religion for some more secure ontological moorings.\textsuperscript{830} In the absence of these moorings, the philosophes could either accept descending into a Rousseauian state of nature\textsuperscript{831} or just remain silent and allow the government to exercise its authority. Otherwise, lacking any good metaphysical grounds on which to oppose the

\textsuperscript{826} Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l'esprit du siècle}, 38.

\textsuperscript{827} Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l'esprit du siècle}, 39.

\textsuperscript{828} Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l'esprit du siècle}, 38.


\textsuperscript{830} “Or de quelque coté que se tournent nos Philosophes, il faut ou qu’ils reconnaissent la nécessité de la Religion, ou qu’en la détruisant, ils donnent à nos mœurs un point d’appui hors du Physique, plus sur & plus avantageux que le sien” (Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l'esprit du siècle}, 39).

\textsuperscript{831} Again, Rousseau was not named, only implied: “Il faut qu’il jettent leurs regrets, avec l’un d’eux, sur l’état sauvage & qu’ils y rentrent.” Deschamps thus seemed not to have put great weight on the quarrel between Rousseau and the philosophes here, even though in a precedent letter he acknowledged it and took the part of Rousseau. He also seems to have known about Pallisot’s comedy, \textit{Les Philosophes}, in which Rousseau was depicted as walking on all his four and indicating thus a return to a savage state.
morality enforced by the government, their attacks on the established religion and morals should be punished by the government even with the aid of the Inquisition.\(^{832}\)

Once arrived at this point, Deschamps hinted again at his own “Truth”, to which religion was a precursor, an annunciation and a training ground. In order to popularize his ideas, Deschamps always used a conditional mode, as if to stress their pure virtuality and their scholastic nature of mere antithesis to be refuted.\(^{833}\) Teasing the philosophes, Deschamps asked rhetorically on what “Truth” other than “Religion” could they hope to base their morality, and in the absence of a relationship between human beings and a “supreme Being, a perfect substance,” what could secure social life?\(^{834}\) What Deschamps actually did here was to open the way for a truth higher than religion, a truth for which religion represented merely a transitory phase. This was a truth hidden in Deschamps’ Spinozian equivalence of “a supreme Being” with a “perfect substance.”\(^{835}\) Only in the light of that “Truth” could the philosophes prove that all established religions were false.\(^{836}\) But as long as that Truth remained undiscovered, religion was good enough as a

\(^{832}\) “Il faut qu’ils se taisent, ou du moins qu’ils ne trouvent pas a redire aux moyens que l’autorité peut employer pour les faire taire, au lieu de leur accorder la liberté qu’ils demandent. Dieu veuille qu’elle ne vienne pas à employer celui de l’Inquisition! Mais si elle en venoit -là, à qui s’en prendre particulièrement, sinon à eux qui ont de bonnes raisons pour être les plus grands ennemis de ce moyen, & qui cependant sont si capables de la forcer a l’employer?” (Deschamps, *Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle*, 39-40).

\(^{833}\) “Si la Religion n’etoit pas la Vérité, & que la Vérité vint a paroitre, la Vérité diroit à la Religion: vous avez tenu ma place, & vous avez du la tenir; l’État social vous demandoit nécessairement ou moi, & on ne pouvoit venir à moi que par vous, qui seule pouviez mettre sur la voie de me chercher & de me trouver. C’est ce qu’elle lui diroit en effet dans ma supposition, & je pars de-la pour dire à nos Philosophes, qui devroient rougir d’obliger à de pareilles suppositions pour les combattre, ou qu’ils mettent la Vérité à la place de la Religion, ou qu’ils respectent la Religion & se taisent sur elles, en attendant qu’ils aient la Verite a mettre à sa place,” (Deschamps, *Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle*, 40).

\(^{834}\) “Mais cependant quelle Vérité, outre que la Religion, peuvent-ils trouver sur laquelle portent les mœurs, qui ne soient pas, comme la Religion, le rapport de l’homme à un Être suprême, à une substance parfaite? Je le leur demande” (Deschamps, *Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle*, 40).


foundation of society and free speech was useless since that Truth was not to be
discovered by public discussion, in the public sphere, but by delving into the “secret
depths of your understanding” (“secret de votre entendement”). Contrary to the tenets
of the philosophe Enlightenment, Deschamps did not value the public sphere, the salons,
or the conversation. Since his Truth was not first of all an instrumental truth, but a
rational truth to be discovered by keen reasoning and not by mere agreement,
Deschamps did not believe that conversation or sociability had any importance for social
improvement.

But since discussion was of no consequence for establishing the “Truth,” it
followed that the freedom of speech that the philosophes were clamoring for was of no
importance. Since the philosophes did not know the Truth, they had to abstain from
attacking religion. Deschamps wrote, in a Hobbesian-Spinozian manner, that since
“nobody could force you to believe in a certain religion” (“personne ne peut vous forcer
de croire a la Religion”) because “your inner life is independent of other people” (“votre
intérieur est indépendant des hommes”), all the philosophes had to do was to just
maintain a neutral silence regarding the monks and popular piety. Attacking the
monks, the visible sign of a useful religion, and trying to secularize monasteries would
unleash a torrent of quarrelsome theological discourses that would prove of no benefit
for the state. Like Linguet, who regarded religion as a bulwark of the people against
those in power, and denounced its use as an instrument of the establishment,
Deschamps argued that, as long as they were not of the people, the philosophes had no
right to dictate what the people had to believe. Deschamps saw in the philosophes’
“system” a vapid product of elitist disregard for the real needs of the people, of those
mothers and fathers identified by Deschamps by their Platonic function, and implicitly

by their future - gendered - role in the “state/stage of morals,” as “Plowmen” (“Laboureurs”) and “Nurses” (“Nourrices”).

From his ontological vantage point, Deschamps rejected the naturalization of the morals operated by the philosophes. If the philosophes made their arguments based on natural sciences, establishing analogies between humans, animals, and physical matter, Deschamps countered that “the moral and reasoning human being” (“l’homme moral et raisonable”) had nothing in common with beings without reason and lacking a moral consciousness (“état moral”). Furthermore, Deschamps did not see any relationship between the necessity of the “physical evil” (“mal physique”) and that of the “moral evil” (“mal moral”). In fact, assimilating the “moral evil” to the “physical evil,” treating morals as a question of physiology, philosophes such as Helvétius or d’Holbach helped perpetuate the “moral evil” by abolishing the whole field of moral concern and by transforming it into a simple playfield of blind physical forces. The fact that the philosophes ignored the first principles (“ignorance du fond des choses”) would, according to Deschamps, actually disqualify them from being “philosophes,” since it was not scepticism (“l’ignorance prétendue nécessaire par nos Philosophes”), but a precise knowledge of the “Supreme Being” and of our relationship with It, that counted as philosophy.

Consistently with the principles exposed in his manuscript system, Deschamps claimed that knowledge of the physical reality was a subaltern knowledge, as was history, literary history, mathematics, or rhetoric. Only metaphysics and morals, metaphysically grounded and understood as “the knowledge of what human beings should think and do according to their understanding, which is the same in all of us,”

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840 Deschamps, Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle, 43.
841 Deschamps, Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle, 45.
842 Deschamps, Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle, 45.
843 Deschamps, Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle, 46.
counted as philosophy.\textsuperscript{844} Deschamps played upon the etymological sense of “philosophy.” If the philosophers did not possess \textit{sophia}, they could at least justify their title by seeking wisdom, that is a lived understanding of truth, instead of redefining it as negation of the very existence of truth. Neither a doctrine, nor a definite way of life, philosophy as represented by the philosophes stroke Deschamps as mere imposture, designed to upheld the establishment at the expense of the people.\textsuperscript{845}

According to Deschamps, his understanding of reason was more democratic than the scientific reason, the privilege of an elite, based as it was on a highly technical or mathematical sort of knowledge that was not available to everybody. Deschamps grasped the egalitarian implications of technology and of applied science, but he was completely dismissive of “pure” science. In comparing Bayle and Newton, the philosophical models of the philosophes, “leurs Coryphées en Philosophie,”\textsuperscript{846} he dismissively acknowledged Bayle as a philosophe indeed, due perhaps to what was perceived as Bayle’s utter scepticism,\textsuperscript{847} but he denied that Newton was a philosophe. For Deschamps, Newton was more than a philosophe, due to his discoveries, but also less than a true benefactor of humanity because he was not able to extract any moral code from what he understood

\textsuperscript{844} “La connoissance de ce que les hommes doivent penser & faire d’après leur entendement, qui est le même en eux tous,” (Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle}, 47).

\textsuperscript{845} “Mais nos Philosophes veulent être Philosophes par une route toute opposée; ils veulent l’être sans autre principe radical que de détruire tout principe radical, & par des connaissances Mathématiques & Physiques supérieures à celles du vulgaire, mais dont le vulgaire, qui a toutes celles qu’il lui faut, ne connoit, ni ne doit connoître le prix,” (Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle}, 47).

\textsuperscript{846} Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle}, 47.

about the universe. There was, Deschamps wrote, no relation between what Newton
knew and how people had to live.848

Summing up his charges against the philosophes in this third letter, Deschamps
accused them of hypocrisy, of not actually caring for humanity, although they appealed
to the word in order to justify attacking their enemies, particularly the religious ones.849
Deschamps launched thus a theme that would eventually become a staple of post-
Revolutionary counter-enlightenment: that of the inhumanity of the ideological
humanists.850 In a manner later used more successfully by La Harpe in the revolutionary
period,851 Deschamps attacked the philosophes as “fanatics”: “I am sorry to say it, but
you are as fanatical, and even more fanatical in your own way, than the fanatics against
whom you cry so loud and so often.”852 Disenchedanted with the philosophe intellectual
acrobatics, Deschamps took the path of Rousseau’s Savoyard vicar, who prompted his
readers to follow the religion into which they were born since it was impossible to know
the truth. Deschamps believed that the best one could do was to live according to the
laws and customs of his own state, without trying, as the philosophes did, to challenge
the established authorities except in the name of the truth.853 Republicanism was not
better than monarchy or aristocracy, nor vice-versa. The philosophes had only a “system
of destruction,” a “seemingly radical remedy” to all that ailed mankind. But, Deschamps

848 “Sans parler de Baile, que je comprends dans leur classe, ils ont beau vouloir que Neuton soit Philosophe,
& vanter ses découvertes, comme si elles pouvoient faire le bonheur des hommes, ils lui préfèrent toujours
dans leur quart-d’heures lucides, l’inventeur des aiguilles” (Deschamps, Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle, 48).
849 “L’humanité n’est qu’un mot dans leur bouche & sous leur plume, qui leur sert de prétexte pour être
souvent tres-inhumains & tres-injustes à l’égard de ceux de leurs semblables que la Religion attache
particulièrement à elle,” (Deschamps, Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle, 48).
850 Darrin M. McMahon, Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the
851 Jean-François La Harpe, Du fanatisme dans la langue révolutionnaire (Paris, 1797).
852 “Je suis fâché de vous le dire; mais vous êtes autant & plus fanatiques à votre façon, que les fanatiques
contre lesquels vous poussez des cris si hauts & si frequens,” (Deschamps, Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle, 49).
cautioned, their “theism” was shallow, and its propagation resulted not in improving the lot of mankind (“L’Humanité”), but in irritating and disturbing everybody because the philosophes did not start from the true principles: “They have no other effect than anxiety, and methodical pride or ambition.”

As a man of true principles, Deschamps deplored with President Hénault the “simplicity” of ancient times, when people “believed” without ratiocinating. Underpinning Deschamps’ criticism of the philosophes was a scepticism that was historically informed but that questioned the fundamental (for the philosophes) link between culture and progress. According to Deschamps, a change in the constitution could not prompt a change in morals so that, in the end, any constitution would eventually conform to the corrupt morals rather than the other way around. Looking at England, Deschamps noted with Burlamaqui, otherwise a staunch supporter of Genevan patricians against Genevan artisans, that the mob was indeed acting like a tyrant there and that even England could not be used as a proper example of a “free” society. A change in constitution did not therefore change the nature of the social and political reality. It would be useless to change monarchy with democracy as long as vice would still prompt the ruler, a man, a faction or a mob, to turn tyrannical.

This realist-Hobbesian understanding of freedom was matched by Deschamps’ skepticism regarding the moral and political value of education. Like Rousseau and Linguet, and unlike the philosophes, Deschamps did not care too much for the ideal of an

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educated people, or for the progress of arts and letters. According to Deschamps, all
empires and republics started to decline precisely when at their cultural peak.\textsuperscript{858}
Rejecting secular or providential historicism, and working along the lines of his own
ontologically informed philosophy of history, Deschamps argued that if the great
empires and republics would have been flourishing because they had been built on some
true principle, that principle would have withstood the test of time. But the fact that the
most flourishing ages were followed by the most barbarous ones, that empires gave place
to barbarians,\textsuperscript{859} indicated that there was nothing substantial in their constitution. Since
the truth is eternal, what is not eternal is not the truth, claimed Deschamps in what
amounted to a philosophy of history of Platonical Christian persuasion.\textsuperscript{860} In conclusion,
Deschamps noted that, while nobody seemed to be aware of a sound principle according
to which one could judge the advantages and disadvantages of a certain constitution, the
political agitation of the philosophes was without any grounds and their popularity was
due to their magic-like rhetorical skills allowing them to hide the “nothingness” (“le
néant”) and the “dangers” of their “systems.” The sophistry of the philosophes convinced
Deschamps, as would convince Linguet, that the most educated centuries run the risk of
being the most inhuman ones, since the sophists close to power were able to justify any
abuse of their patrons, and ratiocination dulled both sense and sensibility.\textsuperscript{861} This

\textsuperscript{858} “Il est triste de voir dans ces histoires, que les Empires & les Républiques finissent presque toujours aux
siècles les plus policiés, aux siècles ou les hommes sont les plus cultivés à leur façon de l’être, & ou ils
raisonnent le plus à leur façon de raisonner,” (Deschamps, \textit{Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle}, 56).

\textsuperscript{859} John Greville Agard Pocock, \textit{Barbarism and Religion: Barbarians, Savages and Empires} (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 2005), 9-96.

\textsuperscript{860} “Mais s’il y avoit en effet une valeur intrinsèque dans ce siècles pour le bonheur des hommes, ainsi qu’on
le prétend, seroient-ils succèdes, comme ils le sont communément, par des siècles de grossièreté &
d’ignorance, & ne seroient-ils pas toujours subsistans, loin d’être les siècles les plus rares?” (Deschamps,
\textit{Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle}, 57).

\textsuperscript{861} “Il faut que leur art soit bien magique, s’il nous cachent leurs inconséquences & leurs contradictions, &
s’il nous aveugle sur le néant, le danger de leurs systèmes, au point que nous ne pensions plus que d’après
eux; ou il faut que les siècles les plus polices soient les siècles ou les hommes sont le moins hommes”
ideological de-humanization would eventually become one of the most resounding criticisms used by the counter-enlightenment figures against the Enlightenment philosophes. Deschamps related the success of their “magic” act to the fact that they corrupted the age by “abusing their talents.” Moreover the philosophes “claim to stick together all throughout Europe today, and they form the party of those detesting any partisanship.” Deschamps was not insincerely upholding the alliance between “Throne” and “Altar,” since until the advent of the “state of morals,” people living in the “state of laws” needed some bridles on their vices and their appetites. Laws, constitutions, religions, all were, according to Deschamps, just temporary measures whose function was to alleviate the evil consequences of the original sin that was private property. As long as the philosophes did not find the Archimedean point outside the system which could be used to give the world a new spin, any tampering with the way in which the historical wounds cicatricized themselves was dangerous and could lead only to more blood shedding. It is in this light that we have to look also at one of the recurring and most personal motifs of Deschamps’ Lettres: his defense of the monks against the Philosophes. Deschamps warned that society would not profit by leaving the monks alone to bear the brunt of the philosophe attack, since the philosophes did not care much about the power of the “pope or of the secular clergy,” and once the regulars out of their way, the secular clergy would surely follow as grist for the philosophic mill.

(Deschamps, Lettres sur l'esprit du siècle, 58).

862 “Prétendent faire corps aujourd’hui dans l’Europe, & qui forment un parti en detestant tout esprit de parti,” (Deschamps, Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle, 60).

863 The anonymous Deschamps liked to deflate the orgueil of the philosophes by taunting them. Thus, he claimed that, because they did not stand for some true principles, they were easily defeatable and that in writing his anonymous letters he was actually defeating them: “Mais qu’ils fachent que le plus petit insecte peut reduire leur force à zero, & que c’en est un qui ecrit ces Lettres” (Deschamps, Lettres sur l’esprit du siècle, 54).
Fighting against the philosophes from a more radical perspective than they, Deschamps can be read as one of the main purveyors of unorthodox sources of orthodoxy. If, as Alan Kors demonstrated, the theological debates between Jansenists, Jesuits, Newtonians and Cartesians were the orthodox sources of disbelief,\textsuperscript{864} Deschamps attacks on the philosophes brought to light some important questions that would become choice weapons in the counter-enlightenment arsenal: a political “realism” and historical pragmatism that encouraged constitutional scepticism, and the denunciation of the “fanaticism” of the philosophes together with an astute cultural criticism of the dehumanizing effect of radical “humanist” ideologies.\textsuperscript{865} Like Hume, Deschamps argued against the philosophes and their ideology. As Donald W. Livingston showed, Hume argued against a “pathology of philosophy.”\textsuperscript{866} Hume made a distinction akin to Deschamps’: between true and false philosophy. Hume also argued that replacing religion, however false or corrupt, with a false philosophy was not progress. Like Deschamps, Hume was not exuberant about secularization \textit{per se}, and where a d’Alembert, a d’Holbach or a Diderot saw an inevitable progress from the darkness of superstition to the light of knowledge, Hume, like Deschamps, saw a more problematic reality. If Deschamps was of a Platonist bent, positing a direct relation between ignorance (which did not have to do with lack of the then existing “education”) and unhappiness on the one hand, and happiness and metaphysical knowledge on the other, Hume’s philosophy was based on skeptical Pyrrhonian self-questioning. If Hume questioned philosophy itself, Deschamps never doubted the possibility or the duty of finding the truth through reason. If for Hume the sign of the true philosophy was that it


doubted itself, for Deschamps it was exactly the opposite. If Hume denounced the philosophes for their dogmatism, Deschamps denounced them for their skepticism. But, according to Deschamps, it was a dogmatic skepticism. Like Hume, Deschamps saw the philosophes as “fanatics,” as people stubbornly avoiding the truth. Like Hume, Deschamps saw the philosophes as the practitioners of some sort of “magic” which somehow dehumanized those entranced by it. Hume also talked about Hobbes and his materialist followers as practicing a sort of “philosophical chymistry,” a form of “magic,” and of “witchcraft.” Like Deschamps, Hume saw some social utility in religion, especially in what Livingston called the “humanizing value of religious art, ritual, and ceremony,” but none in what Hume called “malignant philosophy” that diminished the philosophes’ own humanity. “Be a philosopher; but, amidst all of your philosophy, be still a man,” wrote Hume in a way that resembled that of Deschamps writing that the ages of maximum philosophical flourishing seemed to be the ages in which humanity, that is human nature, seemed to experience a certain diminution, seemed to become thinner. The sign of this diminution was for both Hume and Deschamps, the pride of the philosophes, their self-conceit. Hume denounced the philosopher who spoke with “the voice of PRIDE, not of NATURE.” This pride, pointed out Gresset, Rousseau, Hume, Deschamps, and Linguet, served to untie the philosophes from their moral obligations toward the people, it prompted the philosophes to become mere sophists in the service of the rich and powerful. The essential difference between Hume and Deschamps was that Deschamps’ system fitted perfectly what Hume called the “enraged Platonist” mold, while Deschamps would have probably dismissed Hume’s thought as another variation on the skepticism of the philosophes.

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Compared to Deschamps’ systematic attacks on and complex defenses of the Old Regime theologico-political synthesis, the philosophes appear much less radical than they appeared to previous historians. Deschamps accepted the institutions, but never the concepts of the Old Regime, and he attacked the philosophes for their acceptance of the concepts and attack on the institutions of the Old Regime. This strategy, pointed out Deschamps, could turn out to lead to a mere crisis, albeit a bloody one, of the Old Regime, but not to the renewal of the French society and the abolition of social inequalities and injustice. Through the philosophes, the Old Regime was at institutional war with itself. Deschamps’ strategy was to use institutions, and discourses, as incubators of new concepts. Whereas the philosophes attacked the institutions of a world that, in the end perpetuated itself through their perpetuation of its concepts, Deschamps defended the Old Regime institutional framework in order to develop new concepts that would lead to its complete moral obsolescence. If for the philosophes the Old Regime stood in a “more/less” relationship with “truth,” for Deschamps the Old Regime had a vicarious relationship with the “Truth”: it might represent it, through theology or monarchy and its principle of unity, but it never was it - the “Truth” - in any degree. Therefore, Deschamps refused to believe that society could be brought to fruition, that it could be reformed along its own lines.
CHAPTER V:
Linguet, the Physiocrats, and the Politics of Simplicity

If Linguet argued throughout his whole life against “philosophie,” in both its cultural and economic forms, and if the main thrust of his argument concerned both the philosophes and the physiocrats, Linguet’s concern for the culture of politics stayed with him longer than his preoccupation with the politics of culture. If Linguet’s first writings were dominated by literary concerns, the middle to late 1760s and the early 1770s saw him increasingly engaged in economic debates against the physiocrats, and the late 1770s and the 1780s witnessed a Linguet mainly pursuing political and economic subjects. The philosophes did not completely disappear from his map, since “philosophie” remained, in Linguet’s opinion, a powerful and harmful influence that made “France more than English” (“la France plus qu’Angloise”), a country in which, in his opinion, philosophic ideas about freedom led to despotism. But in the 1770s, and 1780s, Linguet argued mainly against the politico-economic embodiment of philosophie that was Physiocracy.

In a truly civic republican vein, Linguet argued that in order to be happy and peaceful human beings needed a certain wholesomeness. Spirit and body had to be one: “The citizen obeys without reasoning. His heart and his arm are always in harmony.”869 This was not a mechanical, unthinking harmony. The lack of inner and outer conflict sprang from a certain agreement about fundamentals, from a certain unity of meaning and purpose among citizens regarding the laws of a republic, that is of a state. The citizen

869 “Le Citoyen obéit sans raisonner. Son coeur et son bras sont toujours d’accord” (Linguet, Le Fanatisme des Philosophes, 20).
“obeyed without thinking” because he was living mostly according to his own nature by living in accordance with the laws, if and when the laws were not corrupted by “reasoning” and if the sovereign was legitimate (“une Puissance légitime”). Apparently, Linguet was on the same page with the physiocrats, who talked about “legal despotism” and about the necessity of living according to the laws of nature, of actually enthroning the law of nature as the positive law of any well-ordered state. But the fact that Linguet, who also talked about “despotism” and the importance of the “laws,” never came up with something similar to “legal despotism,” tells us something about deeper differences hidden by linguistic similarities.

The main difference was that between what we might call a Platonic, essentialist “Classical,” static nature of the physiocrats’ understanding of the natural law, and the historicist, empiricist, “Romantic,” nature of Linguet’s take on legal history. The “natural laws” of the physiocrats were rationally reconstructed “natural laws,” exemplary laws abstracted from “Nature.” Nature was an ontologically closed essence untouched by history and unpolluted by politics, and the Physiocrats proposed what Grimm mockingly called a “rural Newtonianism.” As such, “legal despotism” meant something akin to “natural law” made flesh, political flesh: Nature becoming man, so that man might finally become “natural,” that is happy because living in accordance with his true nature and higher purpose. This explains why the state had such an importance for the physiocrats: because society could not be trusted to recreate by instinct the natural laws, and the state could help people, could “mould” them (as Tocqueville observed when talking about the

physiocrats in general and about Letrosne in particular), could engineer their ascent in that direction.\textsuperscript{873} For the Physiocrats, the ultimate reality was that of nature and of natural law. The state was important in the measure in which it participated in that reality and mediated man’s participation in that reality too. But in that same measure, the state was not merely an institution of fact, but one of right: it was, so to say, deified according to this physiocratic Platonic deism. People were a component of the state, and their “happiness” was an element of the perfect, natural, physiocratic state. The physiocrats recognized, as Warren J. Samuels noted, “no rights independent of state law,” and even property was less “sacred” than “expedient” and useful in maintaining the ideal physiocratic “State.”\textsuperscript{874} The starting points were not the people, but Nature and the state that had to “naturalize” mankind, that is to bring the people into living in accordance with the laws of nature. One historian of eighteenth-century agrarian reforms noted that the physiocratic teleological drive toward streamlining the state for future progress was not accompanied by any sustained or systematic efforts to propose any way of “coping with individual misfortune and poverty” and did not take into account the historicity of human existence.\textsuperscript{875} In fact, though, Turgot created the \textit{ateliers de charité}, a sort of public works system offering a temporary job in building roads – these played an important role in helping the free trade in the physiocratic scheme of things - to women, children and unskilled men unable to win their daily bread otherwise. Unfortunately this was a solution that, successfully applied by Turgot as intendant of Limoges, lacked the adequate funding necessary to be extended on a national scale, even

\textsuperscript{873} Alexis de Tocqueville, \textit{The Old Regime and the Revolution}, 2: 368, 359-373.


though the destitute population of France stood at around a fifth of the total population and the physiocratic reforms aiming at increasing agricultural productivity by partitioning and enclosing common lands and woods resulted in leaving many families without their livelihood.\textsuperscript{876} In the absence of a sustained systematic effort by the Physiocrats to come up with another solution, Turgot’s public works system depended upon the state, thus hinting at the possibility that economic liberalism, far from resulting in a “minimal state,” would actually lead toward an increase in state responsibilities and therefore growth, since economic liberalism tended to sever people from their traditional ties and safety networks.

For Linguet, on the contrary, the starting point was the people, and the natural law was not one based primarily on the laws of system of the universe, but on the needs, passions and sufferings of human beings. For Linguet, the state authority rested on its being first an authority of fact becoming one of right, not the other way around, as it was for the jusnaturalistically minded physiocrats. For Linguet, the state’s legitimacy did not rest on its putative “natural” or supernatural (Christian) foundations. The legitimacy of the state did not precede its social utility, did not rest on anything other than social utility. Linguet’s despotism was not legal, it was a despotism of fact, legitimate as long as the ruler defended people’s rights, the most important of which was the right to life, and subsistence. In Linguet’s conception, the state was a sublimation of an original usurpation. That is, it was an injustice made right. The state existed only because there had to be some laws and some institutions overseeing and guaranteeing that first usurpation of right: the appearance of private property by theft. Linguet argued that since it was impossible to go back to the initial state, to the primordial, truly rightful,

situation before the appearance of private property, the state existed as a means to a
social end: to ensure public peace and to protect the right to life of its citizens. The state
did not have any mission to bring citizens in line with a rational, transcendent, “natural
order.” In his polemics with the physiocrats, Linget argued that the “legislator” was
“sacred,” but as Morellet noticed and denounced as a “paradox,” Linget subjected in
fact the legal and judicial system to a harsh, desacralizing or at least demystifying
critique.877 Morellet argued that Linget’s “paradox” was the fruit of his desire to fight on
two fronts: both against the legal system in place and against the philosophes who
criticized the legal system in place. While this was true, we should also note that, in true
fashion, Linget regarded the king less as a judge than as a legislator. If Linget praised
legislators, this did not mean that all the laws were to be regarded as a product of true
lawgivers. If a state was to grow, economically as well as geographically, then, Linget
argued, its laws needed to keep up with and help this growth, especially since “many
laws” were “absurd rather than ancient.”878 In what Linget considered to be stable
societies, such as the Asian empires, laws could be ancient and good, since they
corresponded to social stability, to the fact that in Asia a revolution meant merely a
change of dynasty, not a change of the ways of life. But ancient laws were good in
ancient, stable, that is civilized societies, like Persia or the Ottoman Empire. Europe,
Linget argued, was still a recent civilization, fresh out of the “frozen” Germanic woods,
still in the making, and therefore its growth crisis had to be accompanied by suitable
changes in its legal systems.879 Linget argued that since European powers started to
acquire colonies and thus shattered their old geographical and social stability, they had
to use this imperial momentum also to improve their legal systems. Colonialism afforded

877 François Morellet, Théorie du paradoxe (Amsterdam, 1775), 121-22.
879 Linget, Théorie des loix civiles, 1: 17-9.
a legal revolutionary momentum not to be missed. Therefore, conserving, defending and putting into practice the old, inherited, “feudal” mishmash of laws was not to be confused with reforming and improving the legal system in such a way as to correspond to reality and to lighten the burden of the common people. In fact, in rejecting the natural law, Linguet stripped the state of its last medieval teleological bearings. The state’s de facto authority gave it its legitimacy, and that legitimacy depended upon the state fulfilling a certain practical, utilitarian mission.

Linguet argued against the philosophes that it was dangerous to discard the state’s raw, brutal, matter of fact identity rooted in certain power relationships and in the need to preserve their smooth functioning. By trying to put the state on a more secure foothold by way of philosophical ratiocination and appeal to natural law ideals, the philosophes replaced the real, if empirical, de facto legitimacy of the state with an illusory de jure, philosophical one that masked the reality that laws were simply “weapons.” And this was dangerous not only because, from a conservative point of view, it opened the door to speculation, to criticism, and finally to disobedience, but also, from a radical point of view, because it left the people without adequate means to appeal to the state to protect their livelihood. Philosophy, Linguet believed, led not to revolution, but first to despotism, by way of corroding the civic republican virtues that underwrote political peace and security. And the chief civic republican virtue was that of equality. In Linguet’s view, “despotism” was defined by an inequality of cultural, not merely economic, conditions. According to Linguet, Ottoman rulers, despite their impressive paraphernalia and their de facto authority, were closer to their subjects than English lords were with their compatriots. The difference between the Sultan and any of

880 Linguet, Théorie des loix civiles, 1: 21-4.
his subjects was, in Linguet’s view, that between two landowners. Both the Sultan and his most humble peasant subjects shared the same conceptual framework, and therefore they could manage and negotiate their interests as property owners. But, Linguet argued, due to the discursive turmoil perpetrated by the philosophes, the physiocratic elites and the French people did not share the same conceptual framework, since the state talked in the name of an ideological legitimacy that preceded the citizens and in which the citizens could hardly have any stake since the ideology of “natural law” was alien to the citizens, and illusory. And that is why philosophe and physiocrate ideology fostered a sort of cultural inequality contrary to the civic republican tradition of the public good. Being ruled according to alien principles led to a form of despotism more harmful than the Oriental kind since it refused the people the criteria by which they could hold the ruler accountable.

This concern with preserving a common ground as well as a common political discourse had to do with Linguet’s concern with the politics of representation. Eighteenth-century politics were largely the politics of complaints, since Old Regime authorities were not representative in the sense of being “of the people,” but in the sense of acting “for the people.” France was governed not “by the people,” but “for the people.” Lingnet feared that rooting the politics of representation in a natural law


883 “La servitude ennemie décidée des lumières de toute espèce, seroit le fruit de ces recherches laborieuses, entreprises pour nous éclairer! Cela n’est que trop vrai. L’excés du pouvoir arbitraire naît partout des études philosophiques (...) Telle este la marche invariable des hommes depuis qu’ils existent, successivement barbares et corrompus, ne pratiquant la sagesse que quand ils en ignorent les règles, et négligeant leurs devoirs, des qu’ils sçavent les définir” (Linguet, Le Fanatisme des Philosophes, 21-22, 23, 25, 26).

884 Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, The Concept of Representation (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972
discourse would make it hard for the people to couch their complaints in what would be acceptable, successful “natural law” language. If historians have pointed out that the positions of the physiocrats and of the philosophes diverged in many points, or that Montesquieu’s naturalism and historicism were not easily reducible to a one fit-all “system,” Linguet’s attacks on his enemies were in fact fueled by his concern with a crisis of representation.885 The antinominalism implicit in this advocacy of legal, institutional, political, cultural, and economic “simplicity,” with its probing refusal to consider words as facts, separated Linguet from the physiocrats and their stream of Enlightenment thought.

On the one hand, Linguet criticized “feudalism” in all its guises, legal, economic, and political.886 In this, he proved to be a worthy representative of the Enlightenment, like Gresset, arguing for reforms, for shedding the “feudal” skin of justice, for simplifying judicial procedures, for making justice more expeditive, and for slashing those First and Second Estate “feudal” privileges that had in fact lost their reason to exist. All that morass of outdated customs, privileges and procedures led, Linguet argued, to a double crisis of representation, in that they neither helped represent or defend the interests of the people, nor did they represent to the people a workable, consistent, and reasonable standard of justice. The whole edifice of the Old Regime, Linguet argued, falsified social reality in that it did not faithfully defend the interests of the people, or faithfully embody

885 Victor de Riqueti, marquis de Mirabeau, feared as well this crisis of representation, and despite Quesnay’s strictures and attempts to make him replace “plaintes” by “representations,” Mirabeau stubbornly used “plaintes” so as to maintain the expressions’ more popular, less technical roots. See Weulersse, Les manuscrits économiques de François de Quesnay et du marquis de Mirabeau aux Archives nationales (Paris: Geuthner, 1910), 30.

some reasonable standards of justice.\footnote{Linguet, \textit{Théorie des loix civiles}, 1: 8-10.} Under the “feudal” legal system, the people lacked any means of holding people involved in the legal professions accountable.\footnote{Linguet, \textit{Théorie des loix civiles}, 1: 30-1.}

On the other hand, Linguet cautioned in very strong terms that the same realism that presided over the critique of the Old Regime had to influence the reform movement. And, according to him, both the philosophes and the physiocrats, who together with Montesquieu could be said to form a sort of Anglophile party\footnote{Linguet, \textit{Lettres sur la Théorie des loix civiles} (Amsterdam, 1770), 11-3.} that Linguet fought against for four decades. According to Linguet, the Anglophile party challenged the Old Regime in the name of principles whose relationship with the social, political and economic reality were as tenuous as the “feudal” ones. Therefore, the crisis of representation, Linguet argued, would only be worsened by the “philosophic” economic and political discourses. Similarly to Deschamps, Linguet argued that the philosophic schemes for progress lacked even the somehow organic, piecemeal accommodation with the social reality that history had forced upon “feudal” ideas and institutions. If French society had outgrown the social realities out of which the feudal institutions and values had been born, if therefore “feudalism” was outdated, the new ideology of the Anglophile party (the philosophes, the physiocrats, and Montesquieu) was utopian, unrealistic, and therefore harmful and dangerous because of both its revolutionary and despotic undertones. Linguet pinpointed the natural law theory as the root of this ideology. The offshoots of natural law were economic and political liberalism, respectively the Physiocrats’ \textit{laissez-faire} economics and the “balance of power” theory as advocated by Montesquieu and other supporters of “moderate” regimes.

However, Linguet did not oppose legal, economic and political liberalism because of its democratic implications, but because of what he perceived as its oligarchic, anti-
democratic consequences. This lies at the core of the “paradox” denounced as such by Linguet’s enlightened enemies who liked to portray him as an “enemy of the human race” and a supporter of “(Oriental) despotism.” Linguet answered these accusations by analyzing the despotic implications of his adversaries’ ideas. Writing in his *Théorie des loix civiles*, he argued that economic liberalism would lead to the development of the bureaucratic-administrative state that would stifle precisely the freedom it was supposed to defend and would allow the abuses which it was supposed to keep in check. Linguet argued that there were two sources of law. The principles of the first type of law were “original, fundamental, unchanging” and were derived from “property.” The ruler, in this conception, was merely the “pontif” of property: he had the mission to defend it. The stability of Asian states was due to the recognition of this fact, entrenched in Islamic law and societies.\(^{890}\) The second type of law, rooted in the system of the “balance of powers,” produced, Linguet, argued, a new kind of anarchy, not feudal, but bureaucratic, an anarchy more prone to foster despotism than the flourishing of property.\(^{891}\) In one of those paradoxical insights making him sound to us like Tocqueville, Linguet argued that: “The freest Democracy, in which everybody seems to be Sovereign, and the most absolute Monarchy, in which everybody seems to be a slave, are the two extremities of a circle. Nothing else seems more far away, yet nothing is in fact in closer contact: nothing else is more easy to mix up.”\(^{892}\) The centerhold of this (quasi-Polybian) political circle is private property. Political regimes are merely modes of existence of this “essence” ("centre essentiel"\(^{893}\)), custom is as good as the law, “Oriental despotism” is as good if not better than Old Regime France, and true despotism starts only when a certain


political regime slips out of its private property-centered orbit. And the “balance of power,” jusnaturalistic, economically liberal English system was, according to Linguet, a true departure from the prescribed orbit of freedom.

Linguet indicated that natural law theory, as developed by Grotius, Puffendorf, Barbeyrac, was based on the idea of a social contract between the ruler and the people. This theory, argued Linguet, was harmful because it led either to anarchy or to administrative despotism. The administrative apparatus fostered by the idea of balance of powers, the need to multiply the branches of the state, would create the “real despotism” of that “horrible administration which is death, the putrefaction of a state.” Yet, Linguet made clear that in attacking “bureaucracy” he did not have in mind what today is called “big government.” Linguet did not deplore the regulating state, but the dissolution of the state authority due to its bureaucratic and political proliferation, the incapacity of the state actually to enforce its standards. Linguet wrote that what makes the state a burden for the citizens was not the concentration of power in the hands of a single person, but on the contrary, the inflationary dispersal of such power because this leads to a total neglect of the laws and to executive and judicial incapacity. In fact, for Linguet, despotism was not the same as a strong government, but similar to a ghostly government, to an absence of govenment, or a “minimal state”: “Despotism is so little like a government, that right from the moment when despotism begins any form of government ceases to exist.”

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895 “Administration horrible, qui est la caducité, la putréfaction d’un État” (Linguet, *Lettres sur la Théorie des loix civiles*, 45).
896 “Ce qui la rend à charge aux Peuples, ce n’est pas la réunion du pouvoir dans les mains d’un seul homme, c’est au contraire sa dispersion dans toutes les mains, qui soutiennent et favorisent le Tyran; c’est l’oubli des loix; c’est le défaut d’une main ferme et vigoureuse, qui assujettisse également toutes les parties de l’État et les empêche de se déplacer. Le despotisme est si peu un Gouvernement en forme, qu’à l’instant où il existe, il
lead to a political system making those in power unable to do good, but able to harm the citizens. Beside the political conditions for the proliferation of a “big government,” the English liberal model would create the economic conditions favorable to this growth. As Linguet would argue in his writings against the suppression of the guilds attempted by Turgot, liberalizing the economic life and purging it of corporations, “freeing” it for unlimited growth, meant making the state take the place of the social safety network dismantled by economic liberals. In the absence of the corporations, the state would have to both provide for the welfare of the poor and to take over the policing duties formerly exercised by the guilds.897

The result of this bureaucratic proliferation, most associated with the “social contract” natural law theory, and with the “moderate,” parliamentary monarchies shaped after the English model, would be a sort of “aristocratic monarchy,” an oligarchy where the people would have no recourse to justice and the rich and powerful would go unpunished.898 Political liberalism, argued Linguet, was merely a way of making the


people a prisoner of the institutions. The multiplication of institutions benefited only the rich, since the poor would never have enough money or time to pursue justice through the required institutional channels. In fact, argued Linguet, it would be only by pruning the institutional maze, by bringing the seat of justice closer to the people, by decentralizing the administration of justice as much as possible, that the interests of the people would be served.

In true Enlightenment fashion, Linguet wanted to disentangle the political system from its medieval dead roots and cumbersome accretions. But he argued that multiplying the institutions in order to build a “check and balances” system was not the rational, and thus the truly enlightened way to reform the state machine. Simplicity, he argued, required a different solution since a “balanced” system would always be in danger of being thrown off balance. That is why Linguet supported a heavily unbalanced system, dominated by a very strong ruler. In order to use a historical precedent for this, Linguet referred to the Ottoman Empire and Persia, thus becoming, in the eyes and under the pen of his adversaries, a supporter of “Oriental despotism.” The matter might be judged in a different light if we take into consideration that his *laissez-faire* adversaries, the physiocrats, were ardent supporters of China, with its authoritarian bureaucracy. The physiocrats were not very keen supporters of the English “checks and balances” system either, but their economic liberalism subtracted a large segment of social reality from the state’s authority. Moreover, if Quesnay and the physiocrats considered the doctrine of checks and balances a “lethal” (“funeste”) idea, they thought in similar terms about the “multiplicity of the small farmers.”

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state would be supported by big agribusinesses, while Linguet’s strong state rested on the shoulders of small farmers and craftsmen, whose livelihood the state had to defend. It might also be argued that, in fact, both Linguet and the physiocrats used the Ottoman Empire or China in the same way in which Tacitus had used the Germans: as an idealized vantage point from which to castigate their contemporary society. It is true, though, that in choosing the Islamic empires over China, Linguet indicated that he still attributed a social role to a revealed organized religion, while physiocrats such as Quesnay maintained that, since all religions were simple lies, religion had to be replaced by the pure, universal morality that had held Chinese society together for so many centuries. In other words, like the marquis de Mirabeau, Linguet was not prepared to forego religion in favor of Quesnay’s “produit net” as the mainspring of society. By using the Ottoman Empire or Persia as a reference point, Linguet was, in a way, more Montesquieusian than he would have admitted. But beside these tactical points, the fact remains that by using the Ottoman/Persian empire as a model, Linguet wanted to stress the specificity of his proposed political, judicial, and social reforms. Linguet also used the Roman Empire as reference, although choosing to discuss in a revisionist manner the merits of Tiberius, Nero and Caligula did not help his cause.

To the physiocrats who mixed enlightened absolutism with different degrees of economic liberalism, and to what he considered to be the Montesquieusian philosophes who argued for political and economic liberalism (“checks and balances” political system and free-trade political economy), Linguet opposed a combination of what might be called Machiavellian/Hobbesian liberty with civic-republican economics. For Linguet as

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2: 949, 953.

900 See Quesnay’s comments and Mirabeau’s replies in Weulersse, Les manuscrits économiques, 21-3.
for Machiavelli, whom Linguet considered a “genius,”"901 there are no “political rights” and freedom is “one of the profits or benefits to be derived from living under a well-ordered government."902 Putting on an equal footing republican Lucca with the “despotic” Ottoman Empire, Hobbes also retorted to his neo-Roman republican foes that “what matters for individual liberty is not the source of the law, but its extent,” and therefore that the freedom of the citizens was possible not only in free states, that is in state governed by the people according to a certain bill of rights, but wherever the political authority, be it a monarch, an aristocracy or a representative body, did not hinder the free action of individuals.903 Linguet defined democracy as the “masterpiece of perfected/improved politics” whose aim was to “maintain the dignity of the name ‘man’ and to see that the name of ‘People’ does not become debased, since this name designates the real Sovereign.”904 But Linguet argued that this definition of democracy was, with the exception of ancient Athens and Rome, better represented by other forms of government than democracy, such as “Asian despotism,” which might lay undue stress on those in the close proximity of the sultans, but leaves the peoples largely undisturbed and allows even the poor access to swift justice and thus to defending their property or livelihood, however meager these might be.905

Traditional neo-Roman theory - authors like James Harrington, John Milton, and Fénelon - stressed that luxury encouraged vice and therefore weakened civic-republican virtue. Luxury was still associated in the first half of eighteenth-century France with despotism.906 The commercial-republicanism that started to gain an

906 Marissa Linton, *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001); Jean-
audience in the second half of the eighteenth-century France combined neo-roman political theory, or “political rights” liberalism, with economic “despotism,” one in which individuals were left at the mercy of the market forces. If Linguet was a political Hobbesian, Linguet’s adversaries were economic Hobbesians, leaving the people at the mercy of a “despotic” market. For the physiocrats, economic freedom was not dependent upon the existence of a just economic system, of a certain set of economic rights designed to secure the right to life. For Linguet, individual freedom was not dependent upon the existence of a free, “checks and balances” state, and political freedom did not have any meaning without economic security. Therefore, Linguet’s civic-republican economics combined with a theory of political “despotism.” For Linguet, there were no political rights, but there was one human right: the right to life, to subsistence. The ruler had to guarantee to its subjects that subsistence. This obligation of the ruler did not result from any social contract, but was a matter of self-interest. Thus, instead of reforming the state according to the social contract theory, a contract concluded by two unequal partners - one of which, the people, being poorer than the other, would not have any means to enforce it - Linguet argued that self-interest is the only means to put the state on a sure footing.

For Linguet, there were two categories of people: rulers and subjects. The first ruled, the second obeyed. Whatever the amount of institutional sugarcoating, the reality remained the same. The citizens were in the power of the state, so they were engaged in a rapport of power in which they had the weaker hand. Therefore, Linguet argued that this

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monopoly of power could not be countered by multiplying the branches of the government and by creating state institutions that would balance each other, since these institutions would just fall in the hand of the powerful and only add to the oppression. Despotism, Linguet argued, thrived in societies reduced to a multitude of “isolated individuals,” easier to oppress. And since economic liberalism tended to recast societies in precisely such atomistic terms, Linguet argued that the political answer to such a social crisis was not the multiplication of state bureaucracies, even though Linguet warned that economic liberalism would force the government to grow, in an attempt of the state to take the place of the former, organic, forms of solidarity and policing. The price of political freedom was, Linguet argued, social and economic solidarity. The complex web of social and economic solidarities existing at a popular level could not be destroyed in the name of an economic liberalism that would then guarantee the citizens’ freedom by fostering a web of political solidarities, of political representative institutions and political mediating instances between the rulers and the ruled. Social and economic organic solidarity and complexity could not be replaced by individualism at the grass-roots level and labyrinthine bureaucratic solidarities at the state level. Linguet’s politics of simplicity required a relatively simple, strong, and swift legal, executive and judicial system overseeing, protecting and regulating in a benign paternalistic way the intricate organic solidarities of the people. Linguet’s “Asiatic despotism” was an example of a “small government” made possible by a complex, strong society, opposed to a corporate, in-grown government ruling over an atomized, liberal “small society.” Linguet warned that in the absence of strong social ties and of a politics

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guaranteeing the subsistence of all by protecting the small private property, all mediating instances, from the French parliaments, or the courts of justice, to the British Parliament, or the legislative bodies, and to the philosophes, or the intellectuals, would fail to protect the freedoms of the people since they would be and actually were corrupted by the influence of money and power.

It is true that, after his September 1780–May 1782 stint in the Bastille, Linguet seemed to have changed his ideas about England, noting with approval that, in England, the garrison of the Tower of London was submitted to the supervision of the Parliament, “the guardian of private liberties, as well as of public privileges.” Hence, any prisoner “ill-treated has ample means of forwarding his complaints to superiors competent to redress them,” and any prisoner might rest assured that his case would be publicly tried, that he would have “counsel and advocates,” that he would know what were the accusations against him, and that he could communicate with his friends and relatives. This, said Linguet, made the British Empire “that quarter of the universe where administration is the most closely supervised and restricted, where they have succeeded notably in protecting persons without power from the arbitrary abuses of power.”\textsuperscript{908} Arbitrary imprisonment in Great Britain, noted Linguet no doubt having in mind the story of his fellow political journalist John Wilkes, would be treated as “high-treason against the people, punishable almost as severely as high-treason against the King.”\textsuperscript{909}

But even in writing about his Bastille’s imprisonment, Linguet did not abandon his realist theory of freedom, and his decision not to become a generic champion of a generic liberty, but to contextualize things, and to produce new “paradoxes.” Linguet’s


\textsuperscript{909} Linguet, \textit{Memoirs of the Bastille}, 190.
book became a best-seller precisely because his “paradoxical” take on the notion of liberty helped him make a case for the peculiar, subtle barbarity of the civilized France’s Bastille by contrast with the “mild” conditions of countries deemed to be barbaric or despotic. Linguet’s paradoxes worked by giving his analysis a poignancy that helped him make a striking case against the barbarity lying at the heart of civilized Christian France. Linguet noted that prisons similar to the Bastille had existed either as an exception, as a bloodthirsty ruler’s temporary abdication from the rules of common decency, such as was the case of Dionysus, the tyrant of Syracuse,910 or in a much milder versions, such as the Ottoman Empire’s Seven Towers, “a dépôt rather than a prison,” where “scarcely anyone except Christian ambassadors of Powers who break with the Porte are consigned [...] and they continue not only to see whomever they please, but to be attended by their own servants”911. Even Russia, where lettres de cachet indeed flourished, was actually preferable to France, since: “There an entire province has become a State Prison. In France part of a prisoner’s torment is the smallness of the prison; in Siberia they bewail only its immensity.”912 It was only in France, Linguet argued, that the harsh treatment inflicted on the prisoners in the Bastille – isolation, lack of contact with any friends or relatives, lack of information about the heads of accusation against you, lack of legal counsel - was sanctioned by a State law, and where the lieutenant of police was mandated by precise warrants to be the royal commissioner for such operations as the “clandestine abductions effected secretly by officers of the police”913.

910 Linguet, Memoirs of the Bastille, 180-81. See also the case of Denmark, 191.
911 Linguet, Memoirs of the Bastille, 185.
913 Linguet, Memoirs of the Bastille, 188. Linguet found some similarities between Bastille and the prison system in Ceylon (Linguet, Memoirs of the Bastille, 189).
Linguet’s positive appraisal of the Tower of London by comparison with the Bastille can not be read as a complete renunciation of his “despotic” ideas. If his Bastille ordeal made him cast a less jaundiced eye on the English Parliament and on the institutional guarantees of private freedom and property, Linguet did so without really abandoning his paradigm. In opposing the Tower of London to the Bastille, he did not oppose liberalism to despotism, but state control to outsourcing. Indeed, when comparing the Tower of London with the Bastille, Linguet actually ranged England with the ancient Rome, with the Byzantine Empire, with the Ottoman Empire and with various Far East empires, as an example of the benefits of regulation, while the Bastille was operated as a private enterprise, outsourced by the state, and thus combining the worst elements of state despotism and private tyranny, the result of which was the complete annihilation of the human being. The prisoner of the Bastille was, Linguet pointed out, the property of the state, a slave despoiled by “the search” of everything “that may belong to him.”914 Stripped of any means of subsistence, isolated, the prisoner had to depend upon his gaoler for his survival.915 But depending on the chief jailor, “a venal-hereditary officer of state [...] and a hostelry entrepreneur,”916 meant depending upon the self-interest of a state contractor whose only interest was to conceal the prisoner’s existence, to treat him, according to the lettre de cachet, as if he had been obliterated. “The governor feeds prisoners by contract,” pointed out Linguet, “and this

914 Linguet, Memoirs of the Bastille, 199-200.
royal cook-shop is profitable.”917 The ministry paid the governor up to 2,500 louis per year for fifteen places at the Bastille which, whether occupied or not, brought the governor ten French livres a day. To this, each lettre de cachet brought a supplement per head, depending on the prisoner’s rank: a peddler received an “endowment” of half-crown a day, a bourgeois, five francs, a priest or a financier, ten francs, a field-marshal, thirty-six francs. The governor also received the privilege to stock his cellars with one hundred tax-free wine casks, as table supplies. The governor sold this contract, for two thousand crowns, to a certain Joli, a tavern-keeper in Paris, who in exchange supplied the Bastille with the cheapest possible wine at the most expensive price possible, thus siphoning off public money. Linguet also accused the governor of buying food only within the limits of the supplementary money, while appropriating the fixed income of ten francs a day per prisoner.918 As for heating, the King had ordered that during the winter the wood distributed “in the King’s name” be “given without stint or reckoning, and in proportion to the consumption of each prisoner,” as a way to mitigate the hardships of the prison life.919 The governor-farmer of the Bastille also had the obligation to pay from his own revenues in order to provide and maintain the prison’s furniture in good order and in sanitary conditions.920 But these provisions regarding the prisoner’s subsistence, if not welfare, were disregarded by a governor-farmer who, due to the fact that the prison was operated as a private enterprise, was allowed to gain money by worsening the condition of his prisoners. The prisoner, not unlike the proletarian, could be treated more pitilessly than a slave since he was just fodder for the money-making

917 Linguet, Memoirs of the Bastille, 209.
919 Linguet, Memoirs of the Bastille, 201.
schemes of a governor who was allowed to make the prison “serve a self-interested economy.”

The crisis of representation could not be solved by multiplying the representative instances since these political and judicial signifiers tended to betray or get free of their signified, the people. Linguet was pessimistic about the workings of a “balanced” state, and due to this fact his political economy did not start with the good of the state, like the physiocrats’ system did. The physiocratic system of political economy aimed at strengthening the authority of the king by freeing it from the need to obtain approval from the parlement with regard to financial matters. With the help of only one tax, on land, the physiocrats calculated that they would be able to fill up the royal coffers and thus free the monarchy from the parlements and from the complicated structures of credit in place in eighteenth-century France. If Linguet agreed with the physiocrats about the need to curtail the power of the parliaments, a harmful “feudal” remnant for Linguet as for the Physiocrats, he was not ready to sacrifice for this the subsistence of the people. Linguet wanted, like the physiocrats, a powerful central authority. But Linguet’s powerful ruler was not only a legislator but also a judge, a distributor of swift justice and just retribution. If the eighteenth-century saw the shift from the traditional idea of the king as judge to that of the king as legislator, this new legislative role went hand in hand with an interest in setting up new institutions, in regulating an increasing number of aspects of the private life. The heroes of the Enlightenment, Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, Joseph II, or the ancient Chinese emperors, Egyptian pharaohs,

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921 Linguet, Memoirs of the Bastille, 212.
923 Wisner, The Cult of the Legislator in France 1750-1830.
924 Raeff, The Well-Ordered Police State.
Hebrew kings and Greek legislators, were glorified by eighteenth-century authors as creators of laws, as inventors of durable political machines and institutions. For Linguet, the role of the ruler was primarily that of protecting his subjects’ life and property. In other words, the state was important because it protected private property, which was essential for guaranteeing people’s subsistence. Property, in Linguet’s view, was the main, if not the only, way of enfranchising people, and he certainly deemed it more efficient in this sense than a written constitution or a parlement. Linguet did not see any way of alleviating economic inequalities by political rights, insisting that any political rights that a person might have are essentially grounded in his right to live by way of owning private property and thus to not depend on anyone for his subsistence. Therefore, protecting private property and guaranteeing the right to live became the pillars of Linguet’s political system. This meant that not the state, but the person became the centerpiece of his system. Linguet rejected physiocracy because of its laissez-faire ideology which, Linguet argued, disenfranchised people by leaving them to the mercy of the market forces, of rich oligarchs and of speculators. And the physiocrats did so by changing the focus from man to the market, meaning to a place dominated by various exchange and mediating instances such as money: the state itself became an “emanation” of the market. If the proliferation of institutions threatened to stifle liberty under bureaucratic supervision, an economic life put under the sign of infinite growth, of an ever increasing “net profit” expressed in money, would, Linguet argued, end up by endangering life itself. Since nobody could really represent anybody, the crisis of political representation could not be solved by multiplying the instruments of economic representation such as money.

Before being an anti-physiocrat, Linguet was an anti-philosophe. In many ways, his anti-physiocratic ideas were part and parcel of his anti-philosophe stance, fueled and complicated by an Anglophobia motivated by Linguet’s Hobbesian reading of the English seventeenth-century civil wars. Linguet warned that any attempt to reform the French political system according to ideas imported from England would lead to civil wars and would ultimately ruin France, and England stood for itself and for the larger Protestant world out of which came the natural law and social contract theories, the “checks and balances,” “moderate” political systems, the ideal of religious toleration, and last but not least the *laissez-faire*, commercial republican ideas. Linguet read natural law theories as a way to cloak specific, national or privileged class-interests in a philosophical garb that would disguise them as universal principles. Linguet’s rejection of natural law theories stemmed from his historicism, from his tendency to see political and economic theories as a matter of political and economic expediency and convenience, not as universal givens. And this expediency had to be put in the service of man, not of the state, or the “natural social order” of the physiocrats. If, for example, England or the Dutch Republic were right to insist on the deregulation of the grain trade, since they depended on imports, France would not have any reason to adopt the same policies, since France did not depend on imports, and the government’s first priority was to make sure that all Frenchmen, even poor people, were guaranteed their daily bread before thinking about the profit brought by exporting grains to England or to the Dutch Republic. As such, opposed to the universal validity of physiocratic precepts, Linguet argued from the specific point of view of French national interests, which had to take into consideration the poor people’s interests.925

925 “Les économistes, c’est-à-dire des abbés, des gentilshommes, des horlogers, des juges de province, &c. sont venus apprendre tout d’un coup aux meuniers qu’ils ne savoient point moudre; au peuple, qu’il avoit
Linguet’s protracted polemic against the physiocrats mixed typically enlightened elements with some strikingly original ideas that could position Linguet as a founder of “humanistic economics.” Thus, among the typically “enlightened” elements of Linguet’s political economic criticism were his concern for the well-being of the people (meaning the Third Estate and what Linguet called the “Fourth Estate,” the laboring poor), his concern with streamlining the judicial process and with reforming the legal system in such a way as to defend small holders, his concern with simplifying the taxation system, his concern for establishing a sort of social welfare system, and last but not least his treatment of the physiocrats as a “sect,” possessed by a sort of economic “enthusiasm” and “fanatisme” that precluded any rational debate on the merits or failures of their theories. Linguet expanded this line of thought from what might be called an intellectual critique into a sociological direction, indicating not merely what he perceived to be the physiocrats’ intellectual failures, but also uncovering the way in which they deployed in a given cultural field, how they penetrated institutions, how they manipulated the nascent public sphere, how they dealt with their enemies or with those in power. Most of these criticisms were also aimed at the philosophes, whom Linguet also considered a “sect” and the progenitors of the physiocratic “insect” by way of the *Encyclopédie* where Quesnay and other future physiocrats published articles on economic themes.


<sup>928</sup> See Levy, *The Ideas and Careers of SNH Linguet*, 252, for a discussion of Linguet’s plans for a caisse nationale, and his *Plan d’établissement, tendans à l’extinction de la mendicité* (1779)
If this argument, which aimed at boiling down to “enthusiasm” and blind “fanatisme” the ideas of his opponents, was at once typically enlightened and rhetorically plausible, Linguet’s attacks on the universality of the liberal “laissez-faire” principle in the name of historicism and political expediency exposed the tension at the core of the Enlightenment between natural and social sciences, between universal laws and empirical relativism, between Newton and Montesquieu, between the attempt to discover the universal laws of the political universe and the use of the empirical method that led to the discovery of so many exceptions that it forced the social sciences to abandon the path of prescriptive sciences for that of descriptive sciences. Even though Quesnay himself deplored the displacement of the natural sciences by the new, Newtonian science,929 and conceived the physiocrat “economic science” as a way to recover the human scale dimension of sciences, man would ultimately vanish from the physiocratic quest for the higher, ultimate reality of the “produit net.” If the physiocrats naturalized science in such a way as to recreate a geocentric scientific universe, this universe was not anthropocentric too. The physiocratic naturalization of the theory of value did not amount to a moralization of value. Therefore, the physiocrats were not very keen on solving the moral and social questions posed for human subsistence by the readjustments of the market. One of the most original articulations of Linguet’s criticism of the physiocrats was his analysis of the physiocrats’ theory of costs and profits and the way in which Linguet analyzed the theory of the economic cycle from the point of view of what might be called a theory of underconsumption, pointing out that sacrificing small farmers for the sake of creating big agribusinesses would lead to a decrease in the number of consumers. Underconsumption would come to the fore of economic literature

929 “Les sciences mêmes abandonnent le système du territoire et vont se perdre dans le système de l’univers” (Quesnay, in Weulersse, Les manuscrits économiques, 28). See also 124 for Mirabeau’s scorn for Condorcet’s Newtonian and Copernican enthusiasm.
only in the nineteenth century, due to Jean Simonde de Sismondi in the French speaking world and to Thomas R. Malthus or John A. Hobson in the English speaking world.  

Indeed, the war between Linguet and the physiocrats had all the bitterness of the confrontation between the Jansenists and the Jesuits. Not merely because both were wars of attrition, with one party fighting for the annihilation of his adversary, but because they were family quarrels. If the Jansenists fought from inside the Catholic Church, insisting on their obedience to the Catholic Church while protesting against what they denounced as political manipulations of Catholicity and resisting any “ultramontane” reformulation of the doctrine, Linguet, a man larger than a party, confronted the physiocrats on their own turf. Indeed, the alacrity of this decades-long polemic could not be understood without making it very clear that both Linguet and the physiocrats fought from inside the Enlightenment. Both Linguet and the physiocrats were enemies of “feudalism.” To narrow it down, both were supporters of simplicity. But for both Linguet and the physiocrats this “simplicity” played the role “grace” played for both Jansenists and Jesuits. If there was a “simplicity” of the Enlightenment, its precise meaning was not at all simple. Indeed, if for the physiocrats the “simplicity” of the government meant above all what came to be known as the “small government” take on politics and economics, for Linguet the politics of simplicity meant primarily that the government had certain definite things to defend. If the physiocratic simplicity was an operative simplicity, meaning that the government had to apply the principles of *laissez-faire* and make itself as scarce as possible leaving everything to the care of the “grand Ordonnateur,”} 


principles and then it allowed the government to operate as it saw fit in order to defend those principles, without worrying whether it would act largely or minimally. If Turgot would argue that it was not the government’s mission to come cheaply, but to ensure the order and the prosperity of its subjects in any way possible, Linguet posited that the first duty of a government was not to be unobtrusive, but to defend the right to subsistence of all its subjects. Linguet himself acknowledged this similarity when, to Dupont de Nemours’ declaration that between the physiocrats and Linguet there would always be a war like that between dogs and wolves, he retorted that, indeed, there is some resemblance in their principles, resting mainly on their common acknowledgment of the importance of private property, and of the “simplicity of the laws,” and on their common rejection of “republican anarchy,” and support for the monarchy.932

Another similarity between Linguet and some of the physiocrats was their common opposition to the anti-religious discourse of the philosophes. Both Linguet and physiocrats like Mirabeau and Turgot denounced the anti-religious “fanaticism” of the philosophes and cautioned against it.933 Mirabeau and Turgot, as well as their adversaries Linguet or Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, a civic-republican adversary of the physiocrats and of the philosophes, considered that not just religion in general but Christianity was an integral part of the social and political order. If Mably saw in Christianity and in the belief in a personal God the safest guarantee of the political order,


Turgot saw Christianity in terms of an evolutive scheme of things in which Christianity played its progressive role. For Linguet, or for Mably, Christianity could not be replaced by “magistrates and soldiers,” and the services brought to society by a Christianity purged of its medieval cruelties, encouraging social harmony (“concorde”) even by its liturgy, was inestimable and was the last resort against any tyrant that might have taken possession of both armies and courts of law. Linguet’s regard for Christianity sprang from political realism. Since Christianity was part of the French and European political reality, devising and promoting an insistent anti-Christian political philosophy might, Linguet cautioned, bring about a violent revolution, an uprising of the poor untied from any sense of moral obligations, since the moral precepts preached by the philosophes, be they deists or theists, were good just for an elite minority. These arguments would not convince Quesnay, who kept trying to temper Mirabeau’s attacks on the philosophes and to rewrite and change Mirabeau’s fervent Christian statements. Thus, where Mirabeau argued that God was “the center and the source of all advantages” that men might look for in society, the source of “beauty, goodness, justice, and harmony, four pillars of all the goods that we are searching for in this life, even in our illusions,” and that “duty does not have any other sure footing than in religion” (“la devoir n’a de règle sure que dans la religion”) Quesnay retorted that “this last expression is too vague,” and that anyway all religions being false, they could be of any social use only when subjected to the “divinely instituted morals, that is to the natural law” such as that governing the Chinese. “Man made religions,” Quesnay argued, ought to be governed by the state embodying the universal natural/moral law, not to govern the


935 Linguet, Examen raisonné des ouvrages de M. de Voltaire, 223-233.
Quesnay’s “collegialism,” his argument that churches were mere civil associations, institutional and cultural subsystems to be governed for the benefit of the well-ordered state, left the way open for religion itself to be governed in the name of the pursuit of a greater individual profit. If the physiocrats talked of their regime as a “Theocracy,” it was a reign of the priests of the “net product.”

Aware of both similarities and contrasts between himself and the physiocrats, Linguet argued that the differences between them were more important than the similarities, since the differences were principal ones. Even though the physiocrats sometimes seemed to support the same principles as he did, Linguet warned that he was a realist while the physiocrats were utopians, prisoners of what the Enlightenment denounced as the “esprit de système.” But this deficit of realism marring the physiocratic discourse was bound to lead, Linguet argued, to real deficits in reality: to the enslavement and ultimately to the death of millions of families. If Linguet oscillated between straightforwardly accusing the physiocrats of manipulating the people with discourses about “liberty,” and warnings that they meant well but that they naively took themselves and France on the wrong path, he was adamant about their harmfulness. And

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936 “À la morale d’institution divine, c’est à dire a la loi naturelle, qui est de toutes les religions, de tous les pays de tous les siècles, et qui est le guide souverain de toute législation, le fondement de toute piété et la règle universelle des bonnes mœurs. Cette religion divine et pure est depuis plus de deux mille ans la religion du gouvernement de la Chine... Une politique peut-il donc croire qu’un État serait sans religion parce qu’il n’aurait pas une religion particulière?... Les religions d’institution humaine [...], ces religions, dis-je, d’institutions humaine ne doivent avoir de rapport avec le gouvernement dans les États où elles sont établies que parce qu’elles ont elles-mêmes besoin d’être gouvernées” (Quesnay on Mirabeau’s *De la monarchie*, in Weulersse, *Les manuscrits économiques*, 21-2).


Linguet considered that at the root of the physiocrats’ damaging utopianism stood a mistaken anthropology.

While both the physiocrats and Linguet recognized the importance of passions for human politics, they addressed this question from different perspectives. The Physiocrats, taking what might be called a more “Jesuit”/”Pelagian,” optimistic perspective, believed that passions could be easily controlled by reason, and that was why they insisted so much on the role of education, as a way to harness the passions, to “enlighten” them by reason. Their “science économique” was a way to rationalize the human passions, and to create a social world entirely permeated by reason. The opacity of the world, its failures and poverty, were due merely to the lack of alignment between this socio-political system and the natural, rational order underlying the universe. Only Quesnay’s codification of this last order could give birth to, in the words of Le Trosne: “A simple, constant, invariable, necessary order that we could know based on evidence.” Linguet was more “Jansenist”/”Augustinian,” and his politics were not devised as a systematic harmonization and transfiguration of passions. Linguet’s politics of simplicity, more pessimistic, were a way to keep in check these passions by reducing their field of manifestation. Passions like greed or violence were less harmful to society when they manifested themselves on a human scale and were not amplified by the huge wealth of oligarchs. If the physiocrats advanced a “natural,” “laisser-faire” way of

939 And their optimism made them Pelagians rather than Stoics.
940 Knowledge was, the physiocrats insisted, the first property that a man had, and a bad educational system depriving a man of a good education was similar to a system of organized expropriation.
harmonizing the citizen’s self-interest and passions,\textsuperscript{942} and if communitarians such as Mably or Morelly, who praised “the holy violence” “forcing” the citizens up from their “vices,”\textsuperscript{943} argued for a violently political way of harmonizing private interests for the greater good, Linguet did not offer any grand scheme to harmonize politically self-interest and passions, but he advanced the traditionally Augustinian solution of a strong king ruling over a nation of small holders whose passions would be kept in check by their own human scale property. As for the ruler, his own passions would be kept in check by his desire to rule peacefully, that is to enjoy his own sovereign rights over his whole country. But for Linguet history would be forever moved by passions, and greed, and hunger, and fear, and the desire of perpetuating one’s own existence.

In fact, Linguet rejected in the physiocrats an early avatar of what would become a staple of liberal political economy: the “neutralization of history” in political economic discourse.\textsuperscript{944} This neutralization or evacuation of history from the political economic discourse had two aspects: the first one was to announce the “ontological enclosurability” of the economic factor and to attribute to this space “natural dimensions,” thus severing it from history. The economic factor was thus treated as a “natural” reality decipherable in terms of eternal, natural laws, adverse to


\textsuperscript{943} “Il n’est plus temps d’espérer, si un Lycurgue ne nous fait violence, & ne nous arrache par force à nos vices” (Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, \textit{Entretiens de Phocion sur le rapport de la morale avec la politique} [Amsterdam, 1763], 195). For the more vigorous French eighteenth-century republican tradition, see Guerrier, \textit{L’Abbé Mably moraliste et politique}, 41-58; Wright, \textit{A Classical Republican in Eighteenth-Century France}; Dan Edelstein, \textit{The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, and the French Revolution} (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009).

experimentation and predisposing to the deductive method.\footnote{Arnaud, Barrillon, Benredouane, “Esquisse d’un tableau historique,” 412.} This also meant that the variations, the alternatives, the afterthoughts and the specific situations that had required specific answers from the economic masters would be overlooked or discarded as errors in order to preserve the uninterrupted ideological homogeneity of political economic orthodoxy. Thus liberal political economy (including its Marxist offspring) refused historicization and contingency. But the elimination of history from economic thinking would also mean, as the economic historian Mark A. Lutz showed, disregarding the amount of time (years, even decades) required for “the market” to regain its balance after a shock. If it is true that, in the end the market always regains its equilibrium, there would always be an “in the meantime” of hunger, cold, joblessness, death and quiet or rebellious desperation that liberal political economy, content with “the big picture,” would not address.\footnote{Lutz, \textit{Economics for the Common Good}, 21-54.}

Linguet’s objections aimed at precisely this set of problems. In the first place he showed that economic policy could and had to be treated not as a matter of universal dogma, but as a matter of political, social and geographical contingency. One country’s policy toward its neighbors and vice versa, its population, its resources, its political system, its perspectives influenced its possible economic policy. Linguet advanced that political economy could be historicized and he historicized it with a vengeance as a way to confront the physiocratic dogma. Linguet also contended that, due to its dogmatic nature and to its proselytizing tactics, physiocracy was in fact a sect, and as such both unenlightened, harmful to the public sphere on account of its “double-speak,” and dangerous to the state due to its inclosed, cult-ish climate. Finally, Linguet advanced that, due to a peculiar combination of unenlightened self-interest and naïveté, the
physiocrats were blind to the sufferings of the poor, and that while they embraced the rhetoric of humanitarianism, their policies resulted in misery, alienation and death.

The physiocrats affirmed that there was a certain natural order based on eternal and unchanging laws, as “imprescriptible as those of physics.”\(^{947}\) In order to prosper, any society had to follow these rules.\(^{948}\) The reforms proposed by the physiocrats were not “a result of temporary economic necessity, but a rigid deduction from certain unassailable and immutable principles, newly discovered by their master Quesnay.”\(^{949}\) Quesnay’s system, expounded, developed and popularized by his followers, Pierre Samuel Du Pont de Nemours, the marquis de Mirabeau, Nicolas Baudeau,\(^{950}\) and Pierre-Paul Le Mercier de la Rivière,\(^{951}\) who advanced the idea that agriculture was the only productive endeavor in a nation. Only agriculture offered a “net profit,” that is “a rent over and above the costs of production and the entrepreneur’s profits.”\(^{952}\) In agriculture, the physiocrats thought they discovered the source of a wealth that “has the privilege of multiplying infinitely” (“a le privilege de se multiplier à l’infini”)\(^{953}\) thus breaking with the zero sum economic theory of classical civic republicanism. This also meant that if the first generation of physiocrats (the early Quesnay, abbé Gabriel-François Coyer) were interested in small-scale agriculture, the second generation of physiocrats (lead by a reconstructed Quesnay, Harold Laski, The Rise of Liberalism (New York: Harper, 1936), 207-8.


Mirabeau, Baudeau, Dupont de Nemours, Le Mercier de La Rivière) would insist upon large farms, since these would be more profitable, meaning that by cutting costs they would create more “net product,” thus allowing for the creation of that wealth, of that capital needed to sustain the whole economic body. This, as Linguet shrewdly pointed out, meant that the physiocrats became engaged in a pursuit of the “produit net,” not in a search of ways to ensure the well-being of the people.

Ontologically impermeable to history, and therefore to the sufferings of a humanity reduced to being merely a cog in the wheel of a naturalized, greater scheme of economic things, physiocracy, in Linguet’s opinion, betrayed its promise, even while fulfilling its premises. Despite its promise of freedom and prosperity, physiocracy, according to Linguet, would bring to the people only “servitude,” poverty, and death. And these would be the results because physiocracy aimed at increasing the “net profit” by cutting costs in order to increase productivity. Since one of the “costs” that were to be cut as much as possible was that of human labor, physiocracy reduced human beings to the status of mere tools, of cheap and therefore expendable tools. The physiocrats promised a flourishing economic life that would eventually lead to the prosperity of all. But this was dependent upon the idea that wealth would eventually trickle down and spread out, in a naturally, perfectly balanced system. Linguet argued that, in fact, the increase of wealth postulated by physiocracy was dependent upon imbalances in the system, that economic liberalism thrived on imbalances: such as those produced by enclosing the common pastures, by cutting costs by renting one’s land to the higher bidder after expelling the peasant families who used to work that land, and by sudden increases in the price of bread. These revenue increases, Linguet argued, lasted only

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955 See Joan Thirsk, “L’agriculture en Angleterre et en France de 1600 à 1800: contacts, coïncidences et
until all the other prices rose to keep up with them, with the more expensive price of bread, for example. So, if the increase in wealth was dependent not upon the balance but upon the imbalances of the system, the net result would mean that the physiocratic system would only be favorable to those able to create such imbalances.

Linguet argued that a laissez-faire agricultural economy such as that predicated by the physiocrats would create the conditions for the apparition of big monopolists, of oligarchs that would create hunger by design. The physiocrats disparaged state-controlled prices and guild-controlled standards of quality and argued for the advantages of free-market. Playing on French public opinion’s obsession with demographic decline, and despite studies to the contrary, the physiocrats argued that guilds contributed to the depopulation of France by not allowing the influx of immigrant craftsmen and by blocking the poors’ access to work, thus forcing them to lead unsettled and unproductive lives, from both an economic and demographic point of view. For physiocrats, economic liberalism and demographic growth went hand in hand. But Linguet argued that in a physiocratic economy people would be at the mercy of private monopolies and oligarchally controlled prices. The consequences of this monopoly would be depopulation by death or exile. Therefore, instead of increasing the wealth of some individuals and then hope for it to trickle down, instead of the politics of the “produit net,” Linguet proposed what Darlene Gay Levy has called the “politics of subsistence,” arguing that Linguet’s “politics of subsistence” consisted in something akin to a welfare state. But perhaps it could be argued that Linguet’s “politics of subsistence” envisioned something more akin to a state of small proprietors. Even though he proposed a sort of

social welfare fund for sick or jobless workers,\textsuperscript{956} Linguet was not so much interested in redistributing the wealth by way of a progressive tax, for example, or in economic equality \textit{per se}, as were Mably or Dom Deschamps in his “state of morals” projections, as in preserving and encouraging the small agricultural holders, craftsmen and merchants.

For Linguet, preserving the dignity of the human being meant preserving the autonomy of a human being, ensuring his or her capacity to subsist without depending on others. The only thing that escaped the primordial natural law, that for Linguet meant the absolute, anarchical freedom of all human beings, was this desire to live and capacity to subsist. According to Linguet, society and the state had made impossible the preservation in the social life of that primitive freedom of natural law. The state had, in theory, power over all its citizens, and it was, in a way that sounded strangely similar with the physiocratic Théories, the actual owner of everything within its boundaries. But in fact it was in the interest of the state to protect private ownership and the free enjoyment of one’s own capacity to act, work, buy, sell, advance his or her own interests. Property helped people subsist not as mere tools, as means, but as ends. If life could not go unhindered, if it could not manifest itself as freely as in the pre-social stages, it had at least the right to perpetuate itself. And this right was, Linguet argued, inalienable since it was written in our flesh, in our biochemistry, in our stomach. The degree of our freedom was not related to the pangs of our conscience, as was the case for Rousseau, but to those of our stomachs. According to Linguet, and to Scholastic theology, people had the right to preserve their lives, and this right was the source of a liberty of action that included, in extreme cases, even the right to steal in order to eat. Refusing to start from the political freedoms and rights postulated by natural law theorists, Linguet did not intend to become an advocate of despotism, but to indicate that, since dependence bred

oppression, and that living in society imposed certain iron casts upon the individual, his freedom needed to be cast in real, not in nominalist terms. And these, for Linguet, meant a historicist, empirical reading of both economic and political power relationships.

Linguet’s political economy was built not upon excluding history, but around it. Linguet’s natural laws were not “natural” in the classical sense of rational one, expunged of all contingencies, but “naturalist,” in the sense of being rooted in man’s physiology, in his real needs. According to Linguet, private property was a usurpation anyway, but it had to be protected by the state because it was part of the existing systems of prescriptions and tacit understandings that made society possible and the state work. Private property had an existence of right because it was a fact. It was not a right striving to become fact, such as the natural laws, that could peacefully coexist as an ideal rational system with the most blatant abuses of the rulers, or such as the natural order of the physiocrats, that was a political-economic dogma aiming at replacing all other social and political considerations. If Linguet was neither so cynical nor so sophisticated to maintain that everything that is real is rational, if he was not content with the existing system of institutions and laws, which he judged as too “feudal,” cumbersome and overcome by reality, he rooted both his reformism and his conservatism consisting in a sharp criticism of any “utopian” reformisms, in the reality of a man’s life. Linguet refused to break the proverbial eggs in order to make a physiocratic omelet, even if it was supposed to be a huge, gourmet omelet. Linguet therefore rejected the physiocratic way of maximizing the “net profit” in agriculture, a solution that included reducing the number of small independent farmers who would become rural proletarians, or reducing the number of rural proletarians who would have to choose between perishing, leaving the country, and going the way of the big cities in order to become urban proletarians. In some brilliant pages, Linguet showed how the economic calculations of the physiocrats
were demographically and economically ruinous and humanely cruel, leading to a “sum/community of privations rather than to an equality of pleasure.”

Linguet deemed the “net profit” obtained by slashing costs less important than the question of how many people could subsist on a certain piece of land. He was not interested in how much “energy” one physiocratic farmer could milk out of “Nature,” but how many livelihoods could be preserved by a political economy favoring the small farmer, craftsman or merchant. Political freedom, the political rights of a human being possessing nothing, being reduced to selling personal labor on a market swelling with cheap available workforce, was nothing. If certain advocates of absolute monarchy argued that the right to work was a royal right that the monarch was free to sell to his subjects, thus justifying the existence of guilds, the physiocrats made a case for making work available to everyone. But if in the first case the “price” of a job was above a poor man’s means, in the second case the wages of work were often bellow a poor man’s needs. Democratizing work did not mean making people able to subsist by their own work, since the price of work went down. If the physiocrats offered a man the right to emancipate himself by selling his own labor on the marketplace, Linguet maintained that politics, even parliamentarian politics, as in England, was a game of force, and that only an independent, self-sustaining man could stand for his freedoms, while a hired hand was worse than a slave.

957 Linguet, Réponse aux docteurs modernes, 2: 210-11.
Freedom, for Linguet, existed first as a fact and only afterwards as a right, like property. It was, in a way, a non-nominalist, human scale, prescriptive liberty. It could be recognized, but not instituted. For Linguet, small property was the only bulwark against the grasping hand of both the state and the big private monopolies. Because he deemed property as the best way of ensuring freedom, Linguet became the apologist of an “oriental despotism” of his own making, whose combination of vague real features and imagined improvements allowed Linguet to oppose to the image of the Physiocratic enlightened absolutist ruler the image of an Islamized good Christian king. Linguet’s defense of “Oriental despotism,” his sympathetic eye cast on Islam, would mark him as an exception from Edward Said’s “Orientalist” thesis, which saw in the Enlightenment rationality one of the sources of modern European imperialism. Nonetheless, Linguet’s knowledge of Islam was second-hand. Linguet never traveled in the Ottoman Empire, and he did not appear to know any Near or Middle Eastern languages. Linguet praised the Ottoman Empire for what he supposed to be the extreme simplicity of its political, legal, cultural, and economic systems of representation. Linguet believed that political, economic and cultural representations that were as close as possible to social reality made impossible the circulation of any spurious wealth, political impostors, and empty cultural “icons.” An economy based largely on self-subsistence farming and crafts could avoid being as heavily monetarized as the liberal physiocratic economy, based on continuous consumption and on a swift circulation of money and goods. In Linguet’s political economy, financial speculations, monopolies, and everything associated with faulty monetary economic representation would be eliminated. A political system based largely on small landowners and overseen by a strong central government interested in

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defending private property, in distributing justice (as against the grain speculators) and in protecting the poor, would leave limited amounts of space for political maneuvering and for phony political representations.

Accordingly, in order to understand Linguet’s stance on educational matters, we have to consider first the Physiocrats’ ideas on education. Simply put, the Physiocrats believed that the state had the right to fashion citizens after its own interests, a position later denounced by Tocqueville as proto-totalitarian. Indeed, in many ways it is Linguet who in retrospect seems a liberal, in the Tocquevillian sense of the word, while the Physiocrats look like “totalitarian” ideologues, since their “theocracy” had the ambition to embrace and to mold all aspects of life. It is true that the physiocrats saw in education the strongest bulwark against a despotic ruler, but that education was a universal education in their own principles. “Economics” were to become, under an eventual Physiocratic rule, the main object and general framework of study in schools. If Linguet retorted that it was better for peasants not to learn anything, this was not, as Weulersse maintained, out of a cynicism similar to Voltaire’s. In the context of his polemics with the physiocrats, Linguet was merely advancing a point, developed previously, regarding the falsity and the shallowness of much of what passed as learning in his day. Like Rousseau, he denounced the “luxury” of learning, its superficiality, and its market (salon)-orientation. Exposed to this kind of learning, a peasant would be imbued with false ideas, and would eventually rebel for false causes. Linguet wanted to preserve a certain closeness between a man’s life and his axiological criteria. Although some of his remarks sound as though he wanted to close the door of learning and of

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social advancement to poor people, Linguet in fact tried to warn that oligarchic liberalism encourages also the mercenary mass-producers of “literature,” of ideas keeping the slaves becalmed and befooled, content in their chains. Similarly to Rousseau, even if without Rousseau’s philosophical and in fact theological depth, Linguet denounced the philosophes as the accomplices of the Old Regime system. And the physiocrats were, according to Linguet, the “philosophes économistes,” the economic branch of the philosophes. As such, his battle with the Physiocrats was just an episode of a bigger, more important battle, for a true representative state, in which neither the economic nor the political specie were counterfeited by speculative oligarchic middlemen.

Linguet was not a follower of Montesquieu’s political theory, and he disparaged intermediary bodies such a parlements, which he saw not as bulwarks against despotism but as a way of trickling down despotism and corruption, of ensuring that the people got their fair share of these afflictions. Yet, Linguet’s politics of simplicity left enough space for the economic intermediary bodies known as guilds, or “jurandes.” When, in January 1776, Turgot promulgated his famous six edicts, one of which dissolved the craft guilds, Linguet jumped to their defense. Paradoxically, Turgot attacked the guilds precisely because he was not an orthodox physiocrat, and as such he was not ready to overlook industry for the sake of agriculture.962 The corporations suppressed by Turgot were professional organizations having the right to manage their own affairs, to define their standards of quality and to enforce them, to establish the selling price, and to issue professional licenses. The guilds also functioned as support networks for their sick, poor

or otherwise afflicted members. But Turgot’s *Édit portant la suppression des jurandes* charged the guilds with stifling free competition, with keeping the prices unnecessarily high due to their monopolistic practices, with encroaching upon the right to work by their quality controls and by their conditions of access to mastership after long years of apprenticeship, after producing a “masterpiece,” and after paying what Turgot deemed to be high taxes in order to accede to the rank of master. The guilds, wrote Turgot, precluded competition among craftsmen by refusing to allow work for immigrant jobless craftsmen coming from England. Turgot maintained that, due to their standards, the guilds made it impossible for women and poor people to practice certain crafts, such as embroidery, for which, Turgot argued, women were particularly suited. The right to work was “sacred,” argued Turgot, it was God-given, and therefore it was not a right that the monarchy should sell to its subjects: everybody should do whatever he was willing and able to do. The guilds were also guilty, in the eyes of Turgot, of squandering huge sums of money on feasts as well as on lawsuits. Either too convivial or too querulous, the guilds spent money in ways that Turgot could single out as particularly heinous in the context of the French government’s frantic attempts to deal in the 1770s with France’s huge fiscal deficits. Turgot therefore attacked the guilds not merely from a “laissez faire” perspective, but also from the perspective of the discourse of frugality that was becoming increasingly important for a monarchy submerged in public debt. Turgot

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suggested that the state might profit more from a flourishing industry liberated from guild constraints than from selling offices related to these corporations. Therefore, with the exception of four guilds, those of the barbers-wigmakers-steamroom keepers, of apothecaries, of silver/goldsmiths, and of printers/booksellers, all the other guilds saw their rules and their corporate freedoms abolished.

Turgot’s bold measure was supported by Loménie de Brienne, archbishop of Toulouse and reformer of monastic life in the name of social utility, by the duc de La Rochefoucauld, by the physiocrats such as the abbé Baudeau (*Nouvelles Éphémerides*), the abbé Pierre-Joseph-André Roubaud (*Journal de l’Agriculture*), and by physiocrat-friendly philosophes such as the abbé Morellet, Condorcet and Voltaire. Among those opposed to Turgot’s measure were Louis-François, Prince de Conti, the leader of Parisian Parliamentarian opposition to Turgot’s edicts, and more importantly for Linguet, Jean-Jacques Duval d’Éprémesnil. D’Éprémesnil would later, in 1780, attempt to put Linguet on trial for high treason. A dedicated defender of the Parlement, d’Éprémesnil resented and documented Linguet’s attacks on the parlements and denounced Linguet as a defender of “despotism.” However, in 1776, in defense of the corporations, d’Éprémesnil attacked the principles of free trade and denounced Turgot and the physiocrats as subversives, as people whose “cadaveric principles” made them more dangerous to the state than the Jesuits. In defending the guilds, Linguet found therefore himself on the same page as Jansenist parliamentarians who would otherwise spring to persecute him.

Linguet opened his pamphlet of Réflexions de six corps de la Ville de Paris, sur la suppression des Jurandes with a short exordium which clarified the terms in which he chose to lead this debate and that reveal the way in which public debate managed to appropriate and change the public discourse of the monarch and his ministers. Thus, if Turgot supported his decision to dismantle the guild and regulatory system by appealing to the Frenchmen’s “sacred” right and duty to work, Linguet defended the guilds by transforming subjects into citizens. Linguet expressed his certitude that, faced with a law threatening to annihilate their livelihood, the “submissive and faithful citizens” (“citoyens soumis et fidèles”), the fathers (“pères de familles”) could complain (“faire des representations”), and be heard by a “beneficent king” (“Roi bienfaisant”) and an “enlightened Minister” without the fear of being accused of forgetting their “duties.” “Nature,” pointed out Linguet, made any fatally wounded creature emit a sound of despair, and his pamphlet should be read as such a cry by those (“Sa Majesté, son Conseil, et les Magistrats”) in position to modify the unjust law suppressing the guilds.970

Having thus appropriated for himself the discourse of “justice” and of “charity” supporting his “will” to defend the persecuted guilds (“c’est ici la justice et l’amour du bien public qui s’arment d’un fer exterminateur”),971 Linguet proceeded to a very methodical examination of the issue at hand. First come a brief historical disquisition on the guilds, followed by an enumeration of Turgot’s points against the guilds. After arguing against Turgot’s claims, Linguet proceeded in a third and last section enumerating some reasons for preserving the guilds.

Linguet started by pointing out that China, a country of reference for the Physiocrats, regulated the trades in the spirit of a very “rigorous” “despotism,”

970 Linguet, Réflexions de six corps de la Ville de Paris, sur la suppression des Jurandes (n. p., 1776), 1.
971 Linguet, Réflexions de six corps de la Ville de Paris, 1.
completely opposed to Turgot’s attack on the guilds in the name of “liberté,” “indépendance,” and “concurrence.” This regulation, Linguet argued, was only normal, since there had never been a period in the history of any “great Empire” or “significant City” without “Corporations.” The corporations, Linguet argued, were either “established” by the state, or sui generis creations (“s’y sont formées d’elles-mêmes par la seule nature des choses”). Indeed, the history of guilds shows that there were two ways of establishing a corporation: the Roman way, by state-sponsored organization and incorporation, and the Germanic way, by the grass-roots, democratic establishment of confraternities consecrated by no positive law but consisting in groups of people seeking, according to “natural law,” to become friends and look after their own common interests and justice. It was thus possible to embrace a Montesquieuian take on the guilds and trade corporations and see them as historically confirmed cogs in the governmental wheel, as pillars of the establishment with a foot in the “public sphere.” It is significant that while Linguet would not allow the Parlements to claim this role, he fully embraced the craft guilds as parts of the “Nation.”

If France was a society of orders, for Linguet these orders had more to do with the social division of manufacturing and agricultural work than with the aristocratic

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972 Linguet, Réflexions de six corps de la Ville de Paris, 2. However, the physiocrat Simon Clicquot de Blervache argued that China was a beacon of free-trade, alongside England, Holland, and Switzerland. Clicquot also denounced the regulatory system as a form of “Asian despotism,” thus managing to relate economic to political liberalism. See Jules de Vroil, Étude sur Clicquot-Blervache, économiste du XVIIIe siècle (Paris: Guillaumin, 1870), 219.

973 Linguet, Réflexions de six corps de la Ville de Paris, 2.

974 Anthony Black, Guilds and Civil Society in European Political Thought from the Twelfth Century to the Present (London: Methuen, 1984), 3-43.

975 For a comparison between Montesquieu’s understanding of the guilds as one of the useful intermediary bodies preserving the state from the dangers of despotism, and the role played by the guilds in those “Oriental despotisms” advocated by Linguet, see Said Amir Arjomand, “Coffeehouses, Guilds and Oriental Despotism. Government and Civil Society in Late 17th to Early 18th Century Istanbul and Isfahan, and as seen from Paris and London,” European Journal of Sociology, 45: 1 (2004), 23-44.
corporate bodies claiming to serve as bulwarks against despotism. In Linguet’s view, it was not the parlements but rather the guilds that composed the political nation, united under the king, or a head of State.976 Guilds were therefore useful from an administrative point of view, since they articulated and policed society. Far from being inimical to freedom, guilds secured the existence of that order without which freedom was impossible. Or, as Linguet explained using a military analogy, the guilds were the “regiments” without which society would crumble in dissaray since people would desert their duties.977 What was required then was to reform the guilds, not to abolish them. Their existence was not a hindrance, but a resource of the state. Linguet hinted that instead of using them merely for fiscal reasons, for taxes and corporate loans to the state, the state should consider the much more important political service that the corporations could make to the monarchy. Linguet was thus, in 1776, already on the same page as in 1788-89, when he would call for an alliance between the monarchy and the Third Estate.978 Linguet’s society of orders would be based on Third Estate corporations, on productive orders structured not in an English-style constitutional monarchy, but in a guild-ed monarchy.979 The suppression of the guilds was, for Linguet,

976 “Les grands peuples agricoles ont toujours eu soin de se diviser en diverses sociétés, dont la différence était marquée par les occupations de ceux qui s’y attachoient, et qui composoient, en s’unissant toutes sous la tête, sous le chef de l’État, le corps général désigné par le nom de la Nation” (Linguet, Réflexions de six corps de la Ville de Paris, 3).

977 “C’est le même principe qui fait partager une grande armée en régimens. Sans cette séparation utile, il serait impossible de la réunir, et la prétendue liberté de suivre toutes les enseignes à la fois ne serait que le signal de la désertion, ou du moins du plus affreux désordre” (Linguet, Réflexions de six corps de la Ville de Paris, 3).


979 “Politiquement les corporations ont donc un objet; elles sont salutaires, indispensables: si en les établissant en France, au lieu d’y voir un des plus grands, des plus précieux ressorts du gouvernement, on n’y a vu qu’une ressource fiscale, c’est sans doute une grande méprise: on a fait un mauvais usage d’un excellent principe. Il faut reformer l’abus et conserver la chose; premier point important dans le fait; par elles-mêmes les corporations sont utiles” (Linguet, Réflexions de six corps de la Ville de Paris, 3-4).
merely another step in the direction of physiocratic despotism, the despotism of the rich depleting the livelihoods of the people under the guise of liberalizing the right to work. Indeed, Turgot and the physiocrats saw in dissolving the guilds an essential step toward creating an urban space for the rural proletarians displaced from villages by the enclosure of communal lands, by the push toward the creation of big farms that were deemed more profitable than the subsistence agriculture.\textsuperscript{980} If, refused a livelihood in the villages, as agricultural workers, the poor would also have been unable to enter a trade in the cities, the government might have had on its hands a huge mass of discontented people, in the already difficult context of revolts caused by the rising price of bread due to bad crops and the deregulation of grain trade.\textsuperscript{981} Turgot’s attack on the guilds had therefore political overtones as well as ideological motivations.

If Turgot saw the guilds as “monopolies,” and therefore attacked them from a liberal point of view, Linguet saw them as associations of citizens, as free confraternities the role of which was not purely economic but social, the guilds ensuring the social order that a meager police force was unable to. Linguet resisted Turgot’s economism, and his defense of the guilds focused on showing that, besides their economic efficiency, the guilds were essential for the preservation of civil liberties. Linguet’s defense rested not on economic liberalism, but on the citizens’ welfare. Linguet noted four ministerial

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{980}] Not all physiocrats agreed though with the fact that big farms were more productive than small or medium ones. Mirabeau, and Clicquot de Blerville remained staunch supporters of small holders. So was Maurepas, who divided some of his land among small holders. See Vroil, \textit{Étude sur Clicquot-Blerville}, 303-306.
\item[\textsuperscript{981}] In fact, as Miller showed in \textit{Mastering the Market}, the intendants managed to engage in subtle manipulations of the grain market, supplying it with provisions bought with state money in order to lower the prices. It was, in agricultural terms, the same two-tiered system that was actually put in place for manufacturing sector too, when following the abrogation of Turgot’s edict on the guilds and their milder reorganization, the state encouraged the creation of a two tiered system in which regulated and unregulated manufacturers coexisted.
\end{itemize}
reasons supporting the abolition of the guilds: first, the expansion of industry; second, the diminution of the price of work and of manufactured goods; third, the reduction of what we call now “red tape,” of bureaucratic regulations and interference with the way of conducting a business; and fourth, the suppression of wasteful and vindictive trials between guilds such as the that between bakers and steakhouse proprietors about whether or not the later were allowed to own an oven.

Linguet answered that, in fact, the guilds acted as preservers of quality standards. He noted that neither the Dutch nor the Swiss, where manufacture was unregulated, could compete with English or French craftsmen. Taking as his example the clockmakers, Linguet pointed out that while Swiss clockmakers were good, their workmanship was not on the same level with that of their English or French guild counterparts. Indeed, the recent literature on the history of the guilds has shown that the Parisian clockmakers guild was open to talented foreigners and was keen to embrace any useful or profitable innovation, despite Turgot’s accusations. In fact, it was a Swiss immigrant clockmaker, Jean Jodin, who in his pamphlet *Les Échapemens à repos comparés aux échapemens à recul* (Paris, 1754, with a second edition in 1766) mounted the best known literary assault on the Parisian clockmakers guild. Upset for not being received in its ranks, the Swiss attacked the clockmakers guild because, as he put it, the guild was not truly French, since it was full of foreign-born people. It was a rather incoherent, if billious, attack, since if the guild accepted foreigners in its ranks, then the bitter Swiss could not argue that the guild rejected him because he was foreign, but rather because he was a poor clockmaker.

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982 “N’est-ce pas au Maîtres de Londres, et sur-tout de Paris, grevés du joug exclusif, que l’on s’adresse quand on veut avoir des montres et des pendules parfaites?” (Linguet, *Réflexions de six corps de la Ville de Paris*, 4-5).

983 See a discussion of Jodin’s case in Anthony Turner, “‘Not to Hurt of Trade’: Guilds and Innovation in
Contrary to the physiocratic praise of requalification and changing one’s line of work in order to suit the market, Linguet argued that any craft can be honed only by daily practice, and that only guilds afforded the long years of apprenticeship that this required. The guilds seemed to answer to Linguet’s demand for quiet, “unenlightened” ways of life, for that happy “ignorance” that he opposed to the unhappy presumptions of a literary life. Guild discipline was a living rebuttal of philosophé culture, since it encouraged people to acquire certain skills, to practice them, to be patient, not to submit to whims or fashions, and to take pride in their work instead of their reputation. The physiocrats argued that “absolute quality did not exist,” that low quality goods selling well were better than good quality products that did not sell, and that the manufacturer’s and the merchant’s duty was not to offer good merchandise, but merchandise that sell well and that could spur demand, that could fuel the “consumer’s” “caprice,” “fantasy,” and “whims.” Trades were thus submitted to the same consumer culture as the intellectual life denounced by Linguet in his anti-philosophé writings. That was the reason why, for Linguet, the guilds turned out to be more useful for the education of civically minded citizens than the fields of the “public sphere,” always moody and rash. Since acquiring a craft was an exercise in stability and competence, the guilds produced useful citizens, even though “unenlightened.” Eliminating the guilds with their apprenticeship requirements was simply another way to leave people at the mercy of their own emotions, whims, and unrealistic ambitions. Instead of learning how to make something, the young would just go from job to job, from profession to profession, without mastering anything. If the physiocrats argued that blocking the entrance of young, poor people in the trades produced a mass of jobless vagrants, Linguet argued


984 See de Vroil, Étude sur Clicquot-Blervache, 102-4.
that suppressing the guilds would erode the economic and symbolic status of work itself, producing a mass of overworked vagrants, of people for whom even having a job would not mean having a secure place in the world. Abolishing guilds would therefore foster that kind of unsettled individual who would easily fall prey to a new mass consumer culture that, influenced by philosophes culture, would fuel wishful thinking, baseless pride, and inflated pretensions. Immersed in this culture, the French would become a people ruined by unwarranted desires excited by philosophie.985

Regarding the claim that abolishing the guilds would lower prices, Linguet pointed out that competition only served to lower the quality of products, since the war of prices would by necessity force craftsmen to cheat on quality in order to maintain as low a price as possible. Honest craftsmen, Linguet argued, would be forced either to stop being honest or get out of business because they would not be able to face dishonest competitors. The battle against Turgot’s edicts raged between January and July 1776. In January Turgot issued the edict of the suppression of the corporations, in March it was registered by the Parlement after a royal lit de justice, but by July it was abandoned, and the corporations regained their rights in diluted form. By the end of 1776, Linguet, who had quarreled with Panckoucke, left France for England. Therefore Linguet’s letter on the jurandes must be dated around March-June 1776. In March 1776, Adam Smith published what was to become his classic work, *The Wealth of Nations*, in which, from a position inimical to the guilds, he famously and alliteratively hold that the butcher, the backer, and the brewer did not sell their clients a product of quality because of their social concerns, but only because it was in their own interests to do so. We do not know if Linguet read Smith in 1776 or later, but in defending the guilds he pointed out one of the

985 “La médiocrité, l’indigence, seront pour lui le fruit de la cruelle liberté dont on aura accablé sa jeunesse; et pour l’État, ce fruit sera la perte des talens à qui un sage assujettissement aurait procuré la plus parfaite maturité” (Linguet, *Réflexions de six corps de la Ville de Paris*, 5-6).
inconsistencies in the liberal line of thought. Thus, Linguet argued that in order for it to be in the self-interest of producers to turn out, or of merchants to sell, a good product, they would have to live in what Peter Laslett would call a “face to face society.” In a world wide open to the indiscriminate circulation of goods, in big cities swarming with people moving in and out as anonymously as the origins of the goods they buy or sell, the buyer could not exert that quality control that was available to someone living in a smaller, more cohesive community. Someone from the faraway corners of an empire could not chide the faulty craftsmanship of the metropolitan producer, nor the other way around. Distance bred irresponsibility, and free circulation encouraged transporting the goods to increasingly faraway areas. Therefore, free circulation fostered that kind of self-interest that was not checked by responsibility.

Society, Linguet argued, can not be read in purely economic or rational choice terms, since the alternatives available in a rational choice calculus were informed by a certain social setting. And according to this line of reasoning, it would be more rational from an economic point of view not to subject society to a purely economic reduction, since a healthy economic calculation takes place inside, not outside society, and economics do not contain, but rather are contained by society, the values and institutions of which influence economic reasoning and calculations. Economic values are only one set of values, influenced and interacting with a whole different range of other social, economic, and cultural values.

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987 “On dit toujours, l’intérêt personnel sera un frein; celui qui hasarderoit ainsi des denrées altérées, seront puni par le decri public. Cela peut être dans quelque cas; mais dans presque toutes les occurrences, dans tout ce qui s’appelle détail, dans les occasions qui sont presque tout le commerce actif des grandes Villes, dans le débit journalier, qui a pour objet des étrangers, on en seroit sans inquiétude autant des victimes. Le Marchand reserveroit tout au plus sa conscience pour les pratiques dont il voudroit se ménager l’estime; mais à l’approche d’un visage inconnu, la fraude emusquée dans sa boutique, se manifesteroit avec autant d’audace que d’impunité” (Linguet, Réflexions de six corps de la Ville de Paris, 6-7).
cultural, and intellectual values. The enlightened “self-interest” postulated by classical liberal economic thinking could not exist without factoring into it some un-profitable emotions such as shame, or a certain degree of concern for the public good. It would also be empirically demonstrable that these determinants of self-interest are fostered more “efficiently” by a face to face society than by a totally “open” one, dedicated only to trade. Therefore, it could be argued that, in social terms, the semi-closed or discriminately open societies that were the guilds fostered the kind of social setting upon which depended the fruitful manifestation of classical liberal self-interest. Linguet stressed the importance of what we would call now “social capital,” meaning those underlying natural, social, cultural, and political realities that usually go unaccounted for in the classical liberal theories of price.

Linguet pointed out the social and economic benefits brought about by cooperation instead of unbridled competition, and his accent on the importance of social capital prompted modern scholars to bestow upon him the title of “the first anti-economist.” Cooperation allowed manufacturers to be extremely flexible in meeting the fluctuating demands of the market without raising the prices or hiring and firing people according to the impersonal demands of the marketplace. And this flexibility was possible only because the cost was partly absorbed by social capital, by guild solidarity yet uncorroded by a free-market economy dedicated to fierce competition for markets and lower costs. Guilds functioned as an insurance, welfare, and supply network that

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helped producers and consumers avoid the fluctuations of the market. The guild system cushioned the effects of the boom and bust capitalist economic cycle by not allowing craftsmen to give in to what we now call “bubbles,” and to what Linguet called “this imaginary bigness” ("cette grandeur chimérique") to which they were suddenly catapulted by good times. Linguet argued that reducing everything to competition for a corner of the market and for profits would not produce results favorable to the buyer, who would end up buying shoddy goods produced at the lowest possible cost, nor in that of the manufacturer, who would end by being at the disposition of the middle-man, of the distributor, whose interest was to buy cheaply and to sell dearly. Faced with competition, the producer would try to meet the orders of the distributors as fast as he could, thus sacrificing quality for the sake of productivity: “He will cheat the merchant, who, at his turn, will cheat the buyers.”

Linguet also noted that the physiocrats liberalized the grain trade arguing that this would lead to higher prices for the grains, while they liberalized the industrial life arguing that this would lead to lower prices for industrial goods. Ne noted the apparent paradox of this position. But we have to keep in mind that for the physiocrats the only real profits came from agriculture, not from trade or even manufacture. They were therefore entirely consistent inside their own system when they argued that the price of grains had to go up, while the price of manufactured goods had to go down, since this meant to correct an imbalance in the price of grains (too small) versus the price of manufactured goods (too high). The price of grains had to go up also because it would have to be the basis of the physiocrat single tax system. That was one of the reasons why the physiocrats talked about the “fair price” of grain. It happened that the fair price for grain was higher than it was at that moment, but this did not mean that only high price were “fair prices.” In the case of manufactured goods, the physiocrats “fair price” was a lower price. However, Linguet was onto something
Therefore, liberal economic rationality, far from simplifying the economic life, would just result in flooding the market with a wave of fake artisans, shoddy goods, and dishonest middlemen. Rushing to replace the old, honest masters craftsmen, would be “parasitical masters,” eager to manufacture or to invest in manufacturing anything that sold well, and thus ruining the old masters dedicated to the perfection of their craft. In order to control this deluge of fake goods, the state would be forced to recreate some agency dedicated to quality controls. Removing therefore the quality controls at the guild level would not simplify economic life, but would merely complicate state administration since the state would have assume tasks previously accomplished by the guilds. Whenever a certain craftsman would have to have a license in order to practice his craft, this license would have to be provided either by his guild or by state authorities. The alternative would be to dispense with professional licenses altogether in order to attain that “simplicité de régie” much praised by Turgot and by the physiocrats. But if the state deemed that professional licenses would still be necessary, then shifting them from the guild to state administration would not result in any simplification of economic life, or of state bureaucracy. Liberal economics and “big government,” argued Linguet, are implicitly related, since liberal economics required tearing up the whole social fabric based on guild autonomy. Taking its place, the state would have to spin the web of a police state. This growth of state administration, Linguet warned, was the inevitable

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992 Linguet, Réflexions de six corps de la Ville de Paris, 17.
993 “Il faudra donc toujours des visites pour épier les contraventions, des procès-verbaux pour les constater, des procédures pour les punir; qu’auront gagné les Particuliers et la Société? Ce sera le même régime sous un autre forme. Mais pour le rajeunir, est-il donc absolument nécessaire de commencer par le tuer?” (Linguet, Réflexions de six corps de la Ville de Paris, 10).
price to be paid for destroying those very useful resources of the state that were the
guilds, already invested with traditional liberties, and organically involved in policing the
kingdom. It was a perfect example of what Tocqueville would describe later as a growth
of the leveling, administrative state at the expense of civil society, a form of
centralization that violently removed certain prerogatives from civil society, where they
were exercised in a reasonably fair manner, only to award them to the state
administration.

If by liberalizing the manufacturing sector the physiocrats and Turgot hoped to
help foster a larger market for agricultural products, if in other words liberalizing
industry might have helped create a growing market for big farmers, Linguet warned that
liberalizing the manufacturing sector would on the contrary be ruinous for the
countryside. Peasants, argued Linguet, would be lured to the cities by the hope and
promise of easy money, by the idea of engaging in some productive manufacturing
activity, without having to submit first to long years of apprenticeship. Some physiocrats
protested that requiring ten years of apprenticeship in order to be declared a master tub
maker betrayed a dim view of human intelligence. The peasants would be encouraged in
these dreams by the prospect that, with the guilds abolished, the quality of products
would crumble, and the relatively homogenous quality maintained by the guilds would
be replaced by a multitiered system, with different levels of quality, for different pockets.
Lowering quality levels would allow immigrant peasants to hope that, even if they would
never achieve great mastery, they would acquire enough skills to secure a mediocre
living. Thus, lowered manufacturing standards would in fact breed social unrest, since
the market would be crowded by mediocre producers of worthless goods. And those
mediocre producers would soon find themselves in a strange city and out of a job, with
their dreams crushed and unable to return to the countryside. If physiocrats maintained
that knowledge was the first property of a man, and that depriving somebody of a good education was similar to expropriating him, Linguet retorted that destroying quality standards, pushing people in the direction of a perpetual improvisation to meet the demands of the market, and depriving them of the chance to acquire, refine and securely practice a craft was similarly ruinous for the individual and for the state. Linguet warned therefore that the idea, dear to the physiocrats and advanced by Adam Smith in his *Wealth of the Nations*, that any worker who would not find work in the city would just go back to the countryside or would just requalify himself was false.

Linguet presciently denounced the effects of the proletarization of the peasants, described so well by the nineteenth century sociologists and economists. He argued that, far from being a “natural,” that is a smooth because organic evolution, the urban acculturation of a peasantry hunted from the countryside by enclosures and a free-market economy was a violent process in which people, “torn from their rustic and respectable occupations,” would be exposed to a violent cultural shock (the “vertiges de la culture des Arts dans les Villes”). The result of this acculturation would be the creation of a mass of alienated proletarians (“Villageois dépaysés”), neither peasants nor bourgeois, tortured by hunger and moral decay, and impossible to police since, with the guilds gone, there would be a dearth of social control at either civil and social or state

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994 “Il faut, diront-ils, des travailleurs de toute espèce, de bons pour les riches, de médiocres pour le reste du peuple. Ils se flatteront d’arriver sans peine à ce degré facile qui suffit à une indulgence intéressée. Ils se persuaderont qu’en demandant peu, il leur sera permis de mal faire [...] Il s’obstine à lutter contre l’indigence au milieu des Palais où il est inconnu et rébuté. Il va de dégradation en dégradation, d’avilissement en avilissement, cherchant dans la crapule de honteuses distractions, souvent dans le crime d’effrayantes ressources, jusqu’à ce que l’excès de la misère et du chagrin l’ayant épuisé, la première maladie le pousse à l’hôpital, où il s’éteint sans regret” (Linguet, *Réflexions de six corps de la Ville de Paris*, 14).


level. The whole social order would violently crumble. Linguet believed that it was easier to police corporations than individuals. Instead of relying on the old guild structure of civil supervision and professional control, the state would have to build an entire police apparatus, such as Napoleon did later, with far thinner organic connections to the civil society than the guilds. Abolishing the guilds, who policed the “moeurs” and nourished the “purity” of family life, would force the state to ensure public peace with the help of another “guild,” that of professional policemen. The citizens would eventually find policemen far more alien, intrusive, and also annoying than the old guilds that exercised their function of providing social stability at the neighbourhood level. With guilds, society policed itself: with a police force, it would be the state policing society.

In case of a rebellion of jobless workers or ruined craftsmen, the state would be unable to calm social tensions using the proven ways and channels of the guilds. Losing any contact with the people, the state would thus lose its capacity to negotiate with its citizens. This incapacity would in its turn lead to the need for harsher punishments and for more severe repression in case of popular revolt. Linguet warned that governmental violence against jobless workers would only serve to delegitimize the monarchy. The result would be a general revolution resulting in the violent fall of the

997 “Qu’arrivera-t-il dans les Villes ainsi surchargées? Aujourd’hui une hiérarchie sévère contient tout dans l’ordre: chaque atelier est subordonné à un Maître qui y exerce une première police. Lui-même répond à son Corps dont les Officiers sont à chaque instant sous la main du Magistrat. Celui-ci n’a donc qu’une inspection facile: l’abus léger se reforme sans lui, l’abus considérable, il le corrige sans effort” (Linguet, Réflexions de six corps de la Ville de Paris, 19).

998 “Ce ne seront plus des Jurés, si l’on veut, des Officiers du Corps, ce seront des Directeurs, des Affidés, des Espions, et ce n’est pas ce qu’il y aura de plus avantageux; l’ordre sera moins solide et les particuliers plus vexés: seconde perte inappréciable pour l’État” (Linguet, Réflexions de six corps de la Ville de Paris, 15).

monarchy: “Out of the blood of these victims would grow the tree of liberty.” The genius of the guilds was that they “took care of everything, balanced everything, reconciled everything” (“remedioient à tout, balançoient tout, concilioient tout”) securing for craftsmen a certain degree of financial and social stability and also allowing the bourgeois their fair share of social honors and authority. Linguet deemed this last characteristic especially important in a society in which “the manufacturing and commercial bourgeoisie” (“la Bourgeoisie industrieuse et commercante”) was “rejected” from careers, such as the military, allowing a “more luminous glory” than that of the workshop.

Abolishing the guilds would therefore mean abolishing the principle of “honor” that connected the king with his most humble subject. Along with the honour would go any other criteria for judging the quality of a piece of work. The disappearance of professional criteria would lead to the vanishing of any social rules, and also of social solidarity, of the sense of moral obligation that made members of the guilds take care of craftsmen’s widows or craftsmen going through dry patches. The effect of an “indefinite liberty, without distinction of nation, peoples, age, sex,” the fallout from a free-market economic policy and the abolition of the guilds as middle links in the great social chain – all these, Linguet concluded would force the state to specialize in maintaining and managing a monopoly of violence. The monopoly in turn would spur the growth of a bigger and more powerful state. Economic liberalism would result in

1000 “Ce sont des victimes dont les sang fera fleurir l’arbre de la liberté” (Linguet, Réflexions de six corps de la Ville de Paris, 19).
1001 Linguet, Réflexions de six corps de la Ville de Paris, 19.
1003 Linguet, Réflexions de six corps de la Ville de Paris, 19.
1004 Jay, Nobility Reimagined, 182-264.
1005 Linguet, Reflexions de six corps de la Ville de Paris, 20.
political iliberalism, Linguet argued. And both of them were, according to Linguet, legacies of the philosophe culture, one in which there was no absolute value, but merely a fluctuating price, and in which, accordingly, it was impossible to live or speak in good faith, or to hold anyone accountable.
CHAPTER VI:
Linguet and the Philosophe Culture

Edward Gibbon, visiting France in 1763, noted that the pro-philosophe salons were disparaging Linguet’s then recent book on Alexander the Great. Gibbon believed that Linguet was probably a writer of more genius than he was credited for. Edmund Burke translated and published Linguet’s letters to Voltaire on the question of Grotius and natural law theory, which Linguet thought at best useless and usually harmful and which he criticized in the name of a juridical realism akin to Burke’s own historicism. Tocqueville, reading through the vast literature generated by the French Revolution, found that Linguet’s pamphlet *La France plus qu’angloise* (1788) was “written with very remarkable style, great talent, and some profound and prophetic views.” These were mostly *in petto* endorsements, circulating in private letters (Gibbon’s) or confined to private notebooks (Tocqueville’s). Yet, even if obliquely, or from the margins, Linguet managed to throw a light on some of the most central issues of his day: the trial of

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1006 *Histoire du siècle d'Alexandre, avec quelques reflections sur ceux qui l'ont précédé* (Amsterdam, 1762, with a second edition printed in Amsterdam and Paris in 1769).


1008 See Edmund Burke’s translation of Linguet’s letter “On Montesquieu and Grotius” to Voltaire, in *The Annual Register, or a View of the History, Politics, and Literature for the Year 1777* (London: Dodsley, 1778), 164-168.

François-Jean de La Barre, the suppression of the Jesuits, the Maupeou coup, the liberalization of grain trade, the debate about political, financial, and legal reforms, the development of a philosophe culture, “despotism,” and the French Revolution.  

Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linguet’s own family name spelled trouble, since his father, Jean Linguet, was a professor dismissed from the University of Paris in 1731 for Jansenist leanings. Jean Linguet was born into a family of small farmers in Champagne. His academic career lasted from 1719 until 1731, when a lettre de cachet ordered him to leave Paris and settle no closer than twenty miles from the capital. Jean Linguet settled in Reims, acquired a sinecure as a registrar, and married into a local parlementarian family. Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linguet was born on 14 July 1736, as the second child of Jean and Marie Linguet. Linguet’s mother died in 1738. Linguet’s father remarried, sired another seven children, and died in 1747. A gifted pupil, Linguet went through schools on scholarships, winning prizes in classical languages and history. Early in the 1750s,
Linguet tried, like Rousseau, to make a career in diplomacy, travelling to Germany and Poland as secretary to the pro-philosophe Christian IV (1722-1775) duke of Deux-Ponts, but by 1754 he returned to Paris followed by nasty rumours that he lost his job for stealing a horse from his employer.

Between 1752 and 1760, seeking an entrance into the literary world, Linguet befriended the poet Claude-Joseph Dorat, and frequented the circle of Elie-Catherine Fréron, the editor of the *L’Année littéraire* and Voltaire’s archenemy. If Linguet’s feeble literary productions written in collaboration with Dorat brought him little recognition, it is possible that Linguet’s apprenticeship of sorts with Fréron paid off in later years, when Linguet launched his own journalistic career. Leaving for Reims in 1760, Linguet hatched all sorts of economic and diplomatic schemes during the next two years, trying to break into the manufacturing and wine trade with the help of his own family as well as with the support of his former patron, the duc de Deux-Ponts. When these ventures petered out, Linguet again left Reims for Paris, where in 1762 he published a book on Alexander the Great as well as a pamphlet supporting the recently suppressed Jesuits. Linguet’s support of the Jesuits sealed the failure of his book on Alexander the Great, badly received both by the philosophs and the Jansenists, the enemies of the Jesuits.

If the Jansenists considered Linguet a deserter into the Jesuit camp, the philosophers resented him not merely for supporting the Jesuits, but also for advancing a Rousseauist defense of the “anciens” in his book on Alexander the Great, where the real hero was not

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Alexander, but the pre-Hellenistic Greek slave-based but otherwise egalitarian democracies. The Greek city-states won Linguet's praise for remaining unspoiled by civilized refinements, by those arts and letters that were, he argued, merely a sign of moral decay and of political, if not personal, slavery.\footnote{Linguet, Histoire du siècle d'Alexandre (s.n., 1762), 4-5, 228-302. See Luigi Guerci, “Linguet storico della Grecia e di Roma,” Rivista storica italiana, 93 (1981), 615-680.}

Rejecting Voltaire's historical optimism, specific to the “modernes” in the famous quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns, Linguet repudiated a Parisian literary career. In the summer of 1762, Linguet found himself forced to go abroad again, enlisting in the army as an “aide de camp” in the engineering division of duc de Beauveau's army. After the signing of the peace in 1763, Linguet went from Madrid through France to the Low Countries. In September 1763 Linguet arrived in Picardy, in the city of Abbéville. Linguet recommended himself as “Monsieur de Beaumont,” a peripatetic philosopher exploring the world. “Monsieur de Beaumont” received the patronage of Jean-Nicolas Douville, a former mayor and a counsellor in Abbéville’s presidial court. While in Abbéville, and partially with the financial support of Douville, Linguet anonymously published some of his most interesting works, such as Le Fanatisme des philosophes (1764) and Nécessité d'une réforme dans l'administration de la justice et dans les lois civiles en France (1764), a book that opened Linguet’s attack on Montesquieu and on the thèse nobiliaire and advanced the idea of an alliance between the kings and the Third Estate.\footnote{Yardeni, “Linguet contre Montesquieu,” in Enquêtes sur l'identité de la "nation France", 249-64.} The book was banned by the government, and Linguet failed to elicit even the interest of the philosophes party, despite the fact that Linguet’s brother, a Parisian lawyer, contacted Charles Duclos without revealing the author’s real identity in an attempt to gain the support of the perpetual secretary of the French Academy for Linguet’s book.\footnote{Brengues, “Duclos dupé par Linguet,” 64-67.}
In 1764, Linguet announced to Duclos that since he could not gain any literary fame, he would satisfy himself with an obscure life, eventually in the North American colonies.

In October 1764, Linguet had himself inscribed as a *stagiaire* on the rolls of the Parlement de Paris. But instead of obscurity, Linguet gained European notoriety the very next year, in 1765, when he became the defender of the chevalier François-Jean de la Barre, accused of destroying a wooden crucifix venerated by the pious citizens of Abbéville. Since one of the young men accused of taking part in the blasphemy perpetrated on the night of 8 to 9 August 1765 was none other than Pierre-Jean-Francois-Douville de Maillefeu, the son of Linguet’s protector, Linguet was summoned by Douville to defend the accused. Linguet’s judicial *mémoire*, published in June 1766 as *Mémoire pour les Sieurs Moynel, Dumesnel de Saveuse et Douville de Maillefeu, impliqués dans l’affaire de la mutilation d’un crucifix arrivée à Abbéville, le 9 août 1765*, did not manage to save La Barre, executed on 1 July 1766, but it managed to attract the attention of public opinion to the political machinations behind the scenes of the trial and to point out that the initial investigations conducted in this case were tainted by the machinations of the man who made them, Duval de Soicourt, a local political enemy of Douville.\textsuperscript{1018} As a result, Duval de Soicourt was forced by Guillaume-François-Louis Joly de Fleury, the procurator general of the Parlement de Paris, to step down, and in September 1766 the charges against the three remaining defendants were dropped.\textsuperscript{1019}

In 1767 Linguet published his most important work, *Théorie des loix civiles*.\textsuperscript{1020} Ambitious, the work criticized Montesquieu’s *Esprit des lois* and proposed an alternative


\textsuperscript{1019} Levy, *Linguet*, 35-36.

\textsuperscript{1020} Linguet, *Théorie des loix civiles, ou Principes fondamentaux de la société*, 2 vols (London [Paris], 1767), with a revised, 3 volumes edition in 1774.
to Montesquieu’s sociology of law and to liberal natural law theories. Badly received, in private and in public, by the philosophes, and by the physiocrats, the work nevertheless assured Linguet’s reputation as not only a man of letters and a hot-headed lawyer, but an insightful social critic in the vein of Rousseau.

The beginning of the 1770s found Linguet pleading in support of Emmanuel-Armand de Vigerrot de Richelieu, duc d’Aiguillon, then endorsing the chancellor Maupeou and his reform of the parlements, and finally supporting Terray and his antiphysiocratic policies. While the relationship with the duc d’Aiguillon deteriorated and led to a long-protracted legal conflict that would be settled only in 1787, the polemics against the physiocrats made Linguet the target of André Morellet’s Théorie du paradoxe (Amsterdam, 1775), to which Linguet answered with a cutting Théorie de la libelle, ou L’Art de calomnier avec fruit, dialogue philosophique pour servir de supplement a la “Théorie du paradoxe” (Amsterdam, 1775). As a result of his attacks on the Parlement, Linguet was disbarred on 1 February 1774, and the numerous appeals filed until the fall of 1775 failed to restore his livelihood. In 1774, Linguet launched his journalistic career as editor of Jean-Joseph Pancoucke’s Journal de politique et de littérature. Despite transforming it into a succesful venture, Linguet lost his editorship in July 1776, after attacking the French Academy and its secretary, d’Alembert, for

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1023 See Andre Morellet, Mémoires sur le dix-huitième siècle et sur la Révolution, 2 vols (Paris: Ladvocat, 1821), 1: 226-30. In an open letter addressed to the king, Louis XVI, Linguet was still seething, in 1784, over the “cabale” that operated against him between 1770-1776, when Morellet, Vergennes, Miromesnil, and the duc D’Aiguillon all seemed to have allied against the “oppressed” Linguet. See Linguet’s reconstruction of the whole case in his Annales politiques et littéraires, 12: 319-458 (1784, published in London).
receiving in its ranks the mediocre La Harpe. Following Linguet’s article, “outraged”
academicians complained to the government, and both Miromesnil, the keeper of the
seals, and Vergennes, the minister of foreign affairs, wrote to Panckoucke asking him to
sack Linguet or risk losing his publishing license. Despite rumours that the queen was
amused by Linguet’s article and that she might intervene on his behalf, Panckoucke fired
Linguet immediately and appointed La Harpe and Suard in his place. By the end of
August 1776, Linguet was therefore out of journalism as well.

Towards the end of 1776, Linguet left France for England, where he launched his
Annales politiques et littéraires and published an open Lettre de M. Linguet à M. le
Comte de Vergennes, ministre des affaires étrangères en France (London, 1777) that
read like a proclamation of independence and a declaration of war on all the
beneficiaries and tools of “despotism” in France. Facing this new torrent of vitriolic
political journalism, Miromesnil asserted that the only way to silence the journalist
would be to have him “thrown into a cell for life.” Indeed, by 1780, Linguet was
tricked into coming to Paris, where he hoped to reconcile himself with the authorities,
but where he was apprehended and thrown in the Bastille. In 1782 Linguet was freed and
he started wandering through Europe, from England to Austria. Joseph II ennobled and
pensioned Linguet, but afterwards dismissed him for publishing in Annales some
Considérations sur l'ouverture de l'Escaut (1784) supporting the Brabant rebellion
against Austria.

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1025 Thomas E. Kaiser, “From the Austrian Committee to the Foreign Plot: Marie Antoinette, Austrophobia,
and the Terror,” French Historical Studies, 26: 4 (Fall 2003), 586-87.
In 1789, Linguet returned to France where, after being received as a hero of the French Revolution, he allied himself with Danton and Camille Desmoulins and supported the Santo-Domingo revolution. In 1789-1790, French revolutionary newspapers praised Linguet as a forerunner in the fight against “despotisme” and expatiated on his sufferings as a political prisoner with two stints in the Bastille. Linguet’s *Mémoires sur la Bastille* (1783) was a pan-European best-seller extremely influential in shaping the revolutionary discourse about the oppressive nature of the Old Regime. Linguet was, undisputedly, a hero of the French Revolution, recognized as such by German revolutionary publications comparing him with a “lion” impossible to tame. In 1790, the pro-revolutionary journals were happy to contemplate the possibility that Linguet would become a representative of the nation, and it seemed that Linguet was indeed a “lion” of the Revolution, since the publication *Le Martirologe national* announced enthusiastically that during his social calls in Paris Linguet used a calling card depicting a lion keeping in his claws a pike with a Phrygian bonnet on top of it.


1027 “Vous pouvez enfermer un lion, emprisonner un Linguet, mais c’est en vain que vous espérerez de les dompter; ils ressortirons en lion et en Linguet” ([first name unknown] von Clauser, *La Croisade contre les Français. Discours patriotique* [s.n., 1791], 32).

1028 “M. Linguet a déjà fait ses visites dans Paris, laissant à toutes les portes une carte qui représente un Lion tenant sous sa griffe une longue pique surmontée du bonnet de la liberté qui se perd dans les airs” (*Le Martirologe national. Ouvrage patriotique dédié à tous les martyrs, par un heureux de la Révolution* [Paris, 1790], 110-111, 219-222, 262). The publication, obviously a Girondin concoction, styled Linguet “M. le Baron de Linguet.”

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By June 1791, he retired to the countryside, near Ville d’Avray, to Marnes. He lived contentedly with Mme Buffet, his mistress of over twenty years, and dedicated himself to agriculture, to local politics, and to his *Annales*. In June 1793 he was arrested by Order of the Committee of general Security with the accusation of conspiring with the king against the nation.\footnote{1029} Before his execution, Linguet asked for a priest. Since this request was refused to him, Linguet found solace in a book by Seneca, possibly *Letters to Lucilius*, which he took with him to the guillotine.\footnote{1030} He was executed on 27 June 1794 as a “partisan and apostle of despotism.”\footnote{1031} French revolutionary publications would start lambasting him as an opportunist, as a pen for hire, as a hubristic mercenary interested only in inflating his ego as well as his pockets.\footnote{1032}

Despite these post-mortem attacks, Linguet appears in retrospect to be not a man of only few ideas and unlimited stances, but a writer whose ideological fecundity served to buttress a remarkably stable - if not perfectly consistent since, as Keith Baker argued, there is no such thing - social, political, cultural and economic framework. Disbarred, twice thrown in prison under the Old Regime, a defender of both chevalier de La Barre and the duc d’Aiguillon, an enemy of the philosophes and of the physiocrats, and, as it turned out, not quite a friend of Robespierre either, a defender of the poor and of the Ottoman Empire, Linguet cast, in the century of Lights, a long and troublesome shadow. Considered a “brutal realist,” Linguet was definitely an anti-nominalist, refusing to get caught in any ideological cobwebs. Linguet was no defender of the *status-quo*. In fact, his involvement in some of the most resounding trials of the eighteenth century France, such

\footnote{1029} *Le courrier de l’égalité*, issue 411 (5 October, 1793), 22.
\footnote{1031} Levy, *Linguet*, 331.
as the trials of La Barre and of the duc d’Aiguillon, the publication of his trial briefs, and his political journalism\textsuperscript{1033} made him one of the most thorough critics of the Old Regime. As one of the first political journalists, ready to make appeals to the “public opinion,” Linguet crafted elements of the future revolutionary discourse,\textsuperscript{1034} and criticized the “feudalism” of the Old Regime while proposing various fiscal, legal, economic, and social reforms. His embrace of empiricism, his practical involvement in what might in retrospect be called “human rights” causes such as the trial of La Barre, his embrace of revolutionary causes such as that of the Belgians revolting against Austrian rule in 1789, his preoccupation with political economy and the situation of the poor, situated him firmly in the Enlightenment camp. But if he was no defender of the \textit{status quo}, he was no member of a “party of Enlightenment” either.

What, in Linguet’s opinion, united natural law theorists, Anglophile “balance of powers” proponents, physiocrats, and philosophes was a disregard for social and political realities at the expense of the common man. By refusing to take the then existent politico-economic system \textit{at} its face value, Linguet managed to expose the inconsistencies and injustices of both the Old and the New Regime and to offer us one of the most insightful eighteenth-century analyses of the question of cultural and political representativity. Linguet insisted on filling his revolutionary effigy with writings and actions that led to that dummy bursting at the seams and finally being exploded by the “counter-revolutionary” presence of Linguet. Similarly to the way in which he avoided being reduced to a revolutionary wax figure, Linguet challenged the value of other

Enlightenment ideological “currencies.” Thus, he questioned the juridical philosophy of the Enlightenment, the political institutions built upon that legal philosophy, the political economy corresponding to these legal precepts and political institutions, and finally the proponents of the new theologico-political consensus. As such, he argued against natural law philosophy, against a political regime based upon the multiplication, separation, and balance of powers such as that advocated by Montesquieu and by his followers, against the agrarian liberalism of the physiocrats, and finally against the philosophes.

Linguet’s polemic against the physiocrats was of a piece with his stance against the philosophes. The physiocrats and the philosophes, such as Diderot, did not always side with each other, some philosophers having little taste for the benevolent despotism advocated by the physiocrats, others being more supportive of industry than the physiocrats, others being too bourgeois to dream of a rural kingdom, too civic republican to engage in apologies of luxury, or too opposed to the esprit de système to enjoy the physiocrats’ Malebranchian-Confucian esoteric system, which Galiani ridiculed as “economystification.”\textsuperscript{1035} Despite these fault lines, and despite protestations to the contrary on the part of the physiocrats, Linguet denounced the physiocrats as an avatar of the philosophic “sect,” a term that even Adam Smith would later use when talking

about the physiocrats. Therefore, Linget labeled the physiocrats as the “philosophes économistes,” tying them firmly to the philosophes. According to Linget, the two groups had in common the characteristics of a “sect,” a “cabal.” Both partook of the same Anglomania, even though Linget openly acknowledged that the physiocrats were not supporters of Montesquieu’s “English-style” “moderate” monarchy. Both the physiocrats and the philosophes advertised a “freedom” that, Linget warned, would end up impoverishing, enslaving, and sacrificing the people for the benefit of the rich. This last characteristic was related to the first one, since the sectarian singleheadedness and discipline of the “sect” made them, both the philosophes and the “philosophes économistes,” the guardians of the new, oligarchic establishment arising from “laissez-faire” politics. Linget argued that the established “public intellectuals” of the day, far from being free intellectual agents, were mere tools of those aiming to increase their economic power in order to achieve a form of economic despotism and then to convert this into political power.

Linget acted as if it was the duty of any truly “enlightened” thinker to oppose the philosophes in their literary, political and economic guises, and claimed to make a lonely stand against the sweeping regimentation of public discourse: “In a century when everything, even philosophy, or philosophy more than anything else, is only sectarianism and intrigue, here I am, a member of no sect, propped-up by no cabal.” Linget, the lonely thinker, dared to “be right in matters where extremely great men,” such as

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1036 For some pre-liberal readings of the physiocrats, see Florence Gauthier, “À l’origine de la théorie physiocratique du capitalisme, la plantation esclavagiste. L’expérience de Le Mercier de la Rivière, intendant de la Martinique,” *Actuel Marx* 32 (September, 2002), 51-72.

1037 “Dans un siècle ou tout, jusqu’à la philosophie, ou bien plutôt ou sur-tout la philosophie n’est que secte & cabale, j’ai osé me présenter sans être revendiqué par aucune secte, sans étayer d’aucune cabale,” wrote Linget, in his *Réponse aux docteurs modernes* (s.l., 1771, 2 vols.) 1: 1.
Montesquieu, “were wrong.” Linguet’s debunking writings were received with a mild, involuntary “sneeze” and a temporary “agitation” that would become, in time, “a long-lasting delirium” (“un délire durable”). As such, Linguet argued, it was the typically unenlightened, even fanatical reaction of a sect trying to control and shape the public discourse in order to impose its own orthodoxy instead of merely taking part in a public conversation. Linguet pointed out that he was not merely, dispassionately contradicted, but literally hunted down, insulted, viciously slandered, almost destroyed by his enemies. The *Ephémerides du citoyen* were rather those of the “fanatisme,” Linguet complained, and in terms of “mauvaise foi, la charlatanerie & l’indécence,” they were not one step behind the *Mercure de France*. Among these foes, the journalists Samuel Dupont de Nemours, in the *Ephémerides du citoyen*, and La Harpe, in the *Mercure de France*, were the most virulent, writing on behalf of more than one of the “sects” “disturbed” by Linguet. The activity of these people acting as transmission belts between various networks of intellectual and political power confirmed Linguet in his belief that the philosophes and the physiocrats were connected and worked together for the suppression of anyone challenging their orthodoxy rather than for freedom.

This obduracy and dogmatic inflexibility was, for Linguet, the sign of a sect at work on a takeover of France. This takeover required the creation of chaos, and therefore it asked for the destruction of any and all moral or professional criteria. As someone who had dedicated his life to studying and defending the law, Linguet argued that the “philosophes économistes” had something amateurish about them,

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1041 “Ils se sont rendus les échos des cris de plus d’une secte que j’ai eu l’imprudence de ne pas beaucoup ménager” (Linguet, *Réponse aux docteurs modernes*, 1: 3).
presuming to develop a whole new legal philosophy based on their initial interest in the free circulation of grains. “From their bakery they went on to jurisprudence and to laws,” exclaimed a bemused Linguet, noting that the “floured Solons” were on the verge of altering the whole “political machine.”1043 This legislative amateurish frenzy, this deluge of politicking was, Linguet argued, the result of the philosophes activity that preceded and begat the *philosophes économistes*.

In order to stress the ideological and even the personnel continuity between the philosophes and the physiocrats, Linguet created a stylistic continuum by using baking metaphors in order to describe the “fomenting” endeavours of the French encyclopedists. The Anglican “fermentation” produced in the midst of the nation by the encyclopedic “yeast” “heated” the nation to the point of an explosion.1044 The result of this fervour was the “fanatisme,” a sort of collective madness with both grotesque and scary touches and the consequent proliferation of publications that replaced reality with words and pipe dreams: the printing presses created the philosophes as mere avatars of a parallel reality rhetorically perpetuating itself. Reality was defined by language, not language by reality. Part of this new reality were the philosophes, proliferating in the interstices of a linguistic universe loosening up. Words were not merely uttered by, but actually started to give birth to “philosophes.”1045 The printed mayhem unleashed over France had a

1043 “De leur boulangerie, ils ont passé à la jurisprudence & aux loix. D’une main toute blanche encore de leur pâte & de leur mouture, ils se sont avisés de vouloir repaitrir notre législation; de derrière des meules bien ou mal repiquées, on a été fort surpris de voir sortir des Solon enfarinés, qui ont prétendu reformer toute la machine politique; & l’on a encore battu des mains” (Linguet, *Réponse aux docteurs modernes*, 1: 9).
1044 “La fermentation donnée aux esprits par le levain enciclopédique, avoit bine échauffé la nation, & produit je ne sais quelle effervescence anglicane [...] mais, jusqu’à l’explosion du gros dictionnaire, la pâte n’étoit encore à son point” (Linguet, *Réponse aux docteurs modernes*, 1: 10-11).
1045 “Ce fut là l’époque du fanatisme. Alors on vit sortir, des feuilllets de cette masse énorme, une foule de petits philosophes, comme on voit à la foire les enfans de la dame Gigogne s’élancer de dessous son vaste panier” (Linguet, *Réponse aux docteurs modernes*, 1: 11).
debilitating and corrupting effect, alienating people from both age-proven criteria of judgment and each other. The philosophic invasion of the public sphere left people isolated and epistemologically dizzy, incapable of working out any new way of reconnecting with reality beyond the overflowing deluge of signs. Linguistic explosion caused epistemological poverty and social implosion; relativism bred both despotism and rebellions since in the absence of an order based on consensual values the sheer power to enslave others remained the only guarantee of staying alive. Appealing to the fear of a revival of the sixteenth century wars of religion, a fear discursively shared by both Jansenists, Jesuits and the philosophes,1046 Linguet argued that instead of reforming the French monarchy the philosophes were unwittingly reopening old wounds and had pushed France on the verge of a civil war: “Throwing around words such as ‘humanity,’ and ‘reason,’ we came near the point of seeing a revival of the quarrels, the schisms, and maybe even the wars of the sixteenth century.”1047 Facing this danger, the government tried to control the damage made by the philosophes and in 1758 suppressed the Encyclopédie. According to Linguet, this act did not stop the advance of the philosophic spirit, it merely prompted it to assume another identity, that of physiocracy.

1047 “On fut assommé d’écrits de toute espèce, qui insultèrent les anciens préjugés, qui annoncèrent des reformes dans les idées; mais ils ne réussirent guère qu’a corrompre les mœurs, qu’a relâcher tous les liens sociaux, qu’a isoler les hommes, a favoriser le luxe, a introduire partout la dépravation et la misère, l’esprit de despotisme & celui de révolte, le désir et la haine du pouvoir. En prodiguant les mots d’humanité, de raisonnement, on touchait à l’instant de voir renaitre les querelles, les schismes, & peut-être les combats du seizième siècle” (Linguet, Réponse aux docteurs modernes, I, 11-12). Rousseau more obliquely warned that the philosophes were an embodiment of conformism, and that as such they would have been in the first ranks of the League: “There will always be people enslaved by the opinions of their times, their country, their society. A man who today plays the freethinker and the philosopher would, for the same reason, have been only a fanatic during the time of the League” (“Preface” to The First Discourse: Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts, in Rousseau, The Social Contract and the First and Second Discourses, 46).
Robert Shackleton argued that the suppression of the Encyclopédie in 1758 marked the birth of a real “party” of the philosophers. While historians have looked for various other similar watersheds in the decades going from the 1730s to the 1750s, one of them being the 1752 “affaire de Prades,” the importance that Linguet attached to physiocracy as a second, practical, incarnation of an already existing philosophic “sect” deserves consideration because it hints that the “crucial developments” of the Enlightenment were not already over by the middle of the eighteenth century, as Jonathan Israel, who neglected economic ideas and change, would have it. With the physiocrats, a version of “philosophie” went from a theoretical to a practical phase, from being a more or less oppositional intellectual discourse to being accepted as part of a program of government. According to Linguet, the suppression of the Encyclopédie merely ushered in a new incarnation of the philosophical “sect.” Abandoning, chrysalidlike, its “enveloppe encyclopédique,” the “sect” became an “insect”: “The buzzing insect that, since then, all of us have called economics or economic science.”

Linguet looked upon this process as a sort of Kafkaesque, downward, metamorphosis. The metaphysical speculations that preoccupied the first incarnation of the “esprit


1050 Israel, Radical Enlightenment, 6-7. See Darrin M. McMahon, “What Are Enlightenments?,” Modern Intellectual History, 4 (2007), 601-616. Israel’s “radicalism” courts the danger of becoming undistinguishable from the “reactionarism” of those whom he would label as eighteenth century conservatives who seemed to detect, exactly like Israel, traces of Spinozism everywhere.

1051 “L’insecte bourdonnant que l’on est convenu depuis de nommer l’économie ou la science économique” (Linguet, Réponse aux docteurs modernes, 1: 13).
philosophique” were abandoned for less dignified matters such as the price of flour. The philosophic sect devolved from butterfly into a worm gnawing at people’s bread.¹⁰⁵² What started as a salon game, as an exercise in metaphysical deftness, something that Linguet did not approve but that he could put up with merely because he considered dogmatic matters superfluous, became more serious in the new economic guise.

If, Linguet stated, Voltaire, d’Alembert or La Harpe chose to amuse themselves with the alleged absurdities of Christian dogmas, he did not aim to stop them, as long as these amusements remained an elite affair, without popular echoes and repercussions of a nature to shake up the political establishment. The philosophes’ constant (anti)theological bickering was, according to Linguet, a sign of alienation and selfishness rather than one of rebellion. Since the Christian belief in an afterlife in which the good would be justly rewarded and the wicked would be rightfully punished was an essential element of the French theologico-political establishment, attacking the dogma of “transsubstantiation” or of the Trinity was, for Linguet and for most of the Christian apologists of the age, either a harmful or a futile act.¹⁰⁵³ Linguet argued that the theological polemics of the philosophes did not improve anybody’s earthly lot, but risked worsening it by cruelly shaking the belief in a better world. Concerned mainly with improving social conditions while preserving the civil peace and keeping anarchy at bay, Linguet was therefore worried that, by morphing into “philosophes économistes,” the philosophes put themselves in a position to inflict some real harm upon the French nation. As philosophes, the “sect” could be contained and its effects circumscribed to elite salons, whereas as “économistes” the philosophical spirit was bound to affect the

¹⁰⁵² “Il s’est rabattu sur des matières grossières, il s’est attaché au pain qu’il a rongé” (Linguet, Réponse aux docteurs modernes, 1: 13).
people. While philosophes could mostly change ideas shared by elite people, the économistes could change ways of life by direct political and economic intervention. Linguet was convinced that the philosophes harmed people by multiplying the number of empty intellectual signs, thus making social commerce impossible. On the other hand, the économistes altered the very conditions of life by fostering economic monopolies, oligarchies, and by an excessive monetarization of economy that forced people to bow to the market. The poor could therefore ignore the philosophes, but it was impossible for them to remained untouched by the économistes. Ignorance or a difference of opinion did not free anyone’s daily life from political and economic constraints. Both the intellectual “sect” and the economic “insect” issued signifiers without a signified, and managed the proliferation of an intermediary, false, discursive reality that menaced to engulf the existential, concrete and therefore “true” referent, or reality.

In order to fight the philosophical spirit in both its literary and economic guises, Linguet analyzed the symbolic economy of a society dominated by the “esprit philosophique,” that is by economic and ideological “laissez-faire.” Similarly to Gresset and to Dom Deschamps, Linguet was taken aback by the inflation of conceptual simulacra and denounced the alienating effect of half-ideas and of empty words. Gresset countered this symbolic quantitative easing in the name of an old-fashioned, classical and bucolic, courteous simplicity, that is in the name of a certain existential wholesomeness that found its expression in arts as well. Dom Deschamps denounced

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them as an anonymous prophet of “Tout/Rien” and “le Tout,” as a supremely proud self-effacing apostle of a “true Enlightenment” consisting in a metaphysical restauration of reality by truth. If Gresset defended a certain social order, while Dom Deschamps defended a certain metaphysical order, Linguet talked in the name of the - we might say- “person.” Gresset opposed the philosophes in the name of a past simplicity, while Dom Deschamps disparaged the philosophe culture in the name of future, utopian simplicity. Linguet chose to fight in Rousseauist terms, that is by self-dramatization, by putting himself at the center of the story, by appealing not merely to common-sense (like Gresset or Hume) or to reason (like Dom Deschamps), but to his readers’ (com)passion(s) as well. Linguet found in himself the exemplary victim of the philosophes’ plots. Gresset and Dom Deschamps appealed to less personal, more objective criteria, and in doing so managed to isolate themselves from the people and to give to their discourse a somewhat “elitist” character, confirmed by its confinement to academic utterance with Gresset or private papers and correspondence with noble friends in the case of Dom Deschamps.

Linguet instead managed to make his battle national by making it personal. Like Rousseau, he appealed to the people on an emotional level that could be easily understood. Even if he did not pretend to suffer along with the people because of the wrong physiocratic policies, he succesfully claimed to suffer for the people, to being

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persecuted because of his defense of the people and of his denunciation of misguided physiocratic policies. And both his sufferings and those of the people were due to a defective and even evil system of symbolic (in his case) and political (in the case of the people) economy based on simulacra: on simulacra of identity, liberty, and worth.

Thus, Linguet noted that the rise of public opinion encouraged not an affirmation of rational debate, but a broad circulation of empty effigies that facilitated hating at a distance and distorting the true meaning and identity of one’s adversaries. Linguet complained that his honesty and vivacious reasoning, far from bringing him the esteem and the rational rebuttals of his adversaries, provoked their persecutions and attempts at character assassination.\textsuperscript{1057} Therefore, Linguet made clear that he published self-apologetical writings hoping that “the simplicity” of his “character” and of his life would convince the public that he was not the heinous person depicted by his enemies.\textsuperscript{1058} Paradoxically, since debate tended to become more impersonal, involving people who did not know each other, this made it imperative for the writer to try to construct not merely a discourse, but also a character for public circulation and consumption. The impersonal public sphere thus imposed on the writer the necessity to reveal or to expose himself, to let himself be known to his readers. Without being supported by a character, any discourse was mercilessly distorted in the wide concentrical circles of the public

\textsuperscript{1057} “Les plus honnêtes me représentent comme un étourdi qui ne respecte rien, comme un cerveau brûlé qui attaque tout [...] Les autres, plus adroits et plus criminels, s’efforcent de me faire passer pour un homme méchant et dangereux [...] dont la retraite rend le fiel plus acre, et qui ne se tient à l’écart, que pour composer plus sûrement des poisons” (Linguet, \textit{Réponse aux docteurs modernes}, 1: 16).

\textsuperscript{1058} “Ce qui m’engage a les publier, c’est qu’avec la simplicité de mon caractère et de ma vie, il m’importe beaucoup d’être connu du public tel que je suis. Bien des personnes que je n’ai jamais vues, à qui certainement je n’ai jamais nui, à qui je ne nuirai jamais, m’honorent de leur haine, uniquement parce qu’elles soupçonnent que je pourrois bien n’être pas de leur avis dans des choses indifférentes; elles n’oublient en conséquence rien pour me décrier: ne pouvant mordre sur ma conduite, ces ennemis, d’autant plus acharnés que leur acharnement est plus déraisonnable, cherchent a se dédommager sur mes livres” (Linguet, \textit{Réponse aux docteurs modernes}, 1: 15).
sphere, and then read back into the image of its creator. The discourse created the character. Detached from a more restrained – courtly, academic, salonlike – hermeneutical community, discourse had to be somehow reappropriated by the writer. Since the public sphere functioned according to rules that were easy to break, mould or renegotiate, the author had to become a witness, his own witness, and a guarantor of his own writings.

The “emergence” of the “bourgeois,” that is “liberal,” public sphere brought with it therefore a certain uneasiness with the real or imagined self-imposed marginality of the writer. In the case of Linguet, his image was socialized by force and his marginality declared guilty. Linguet himself experienced the public sphere as a brutally centralizing movement, not as a decentralizing one, as the imposition of a certain conformity and as forced participation in the affairs and the received wisdom of the day, not as a dialogue between autonomous and dispassionately engaged individuals. For Linguet, the public sphere implied a certain promiscuous relationship between a mystified public and counterfeit public figures. As such the public sphere fostered in the public the illusion of knowing someone or something, when in fact the public merely knew what was said about certain topics or persons without having a first-hand knowledge of said topics or persons. Representations - reviews, gossip - became more important, and in a sense more “real,” since people learned to live by them, than what they were supposed to


The emergence of the public sphere brought a significant difference of symbolic “firepower” between those who played the game and those who chose to stay outside of it. If the play of a laissez-faire economy tended to concentrate the economic power in the hands of an oligarchy, the public sphere tended to do the same thing, pitting characters staying at the top of the networks of information against more obscure writers who did not have access to the same means. Far from being a way to decentralize, democratize, and make the intellectual debate more reasonable, the rise of the public sphere meant for Linguet the concentration of intellectual power and prestige in the hands of a few coteries now endowed with tentacular connections, spreading their ideas far beyond their natural habitat, and engaged in the production of “effigies” for mass consumption, of fake intellectual currency or wealth.

Beside developing various “conspiracy theories” that would try to account for the visibly skewed trajectories of news in the public sphere, a writer could pit his own textual and physical presence against the tentacular pseudo-reality muddying the public sphere. One way to do this was literally to meet with people, and Linguet noted with satisfaction the results of his minor authorial epiphanies that led people to shed their previous unfavorable opinions about him, based on hearsay. The second way to manifest his real presence was for the author to allow the public into his textual

1061 “Comme je ne parois point dans le monde, et que je rends assez justice à la bonne compagnie, pour n’être point du tout curieux de la voir, ces idées répandues avec adresse, et sans contradiction, s’accréditent. Qui est-ce qui se soucie de prendre la défense d’un homme que l’on ne connoit point, contre des gens avec qui l’on vit? Qui est-ce qui répugne à croire des calomnies qui tendent à la fois à humilier un contemporain isolé, et à satisfaire des personnages que leurs intrigues rendent célèbres et redoutables?” (Linguet, Réponse aux docteurs modernes, 1: 17).


1063 “Je me suis entendu moi-même honorer de ces qualifications par des gens qui ne me connoissoient point, et qui, ayant eu l’équité d’examiner, après m’avoir connu, si elles etoient fondées, ont été fort surpris de s’être trouvés si injustes” (Linguet, Réponse aux docteurs modernes, 1: 16).
intimacy, to publish some sort of candid confessions or letters that could be construed as "true mirrors of the soul." The artificiality of public discourse, the thinning of any accepted conventions, the wanning of the consensual rules of intellectual conduct in the newly emerging public sphere thus prompted the appearance of the confessional literature and the implicit appeal to a "higher" reality, transcending the economic and literary "commerce": that of the solitary human soul or conscience. Rousseau or Linguet could take himself as the object of his writings because subjectivity marked a territory that escaped the manipulation of hostile public sphere middlemen. If many eighteenth-century linguists such as Condillac, Bergier, Charles de Brosses, Court de Gebelin, or Rousseau argued that there once existed a “primitive,” natural, and therefore universal language, the descent of the writer toward his own depths was a search for a common, because natural, ground with his readers. His own self was the last strip of reality that a writer could allow his readers free access to, and existential authenticity was the last resort in the face of widespread cultural speculations ruining any public axiological system, such as the neoclassical cannon that banned the temptations of autobiographism. Linguet was aware that, according to the classical rules of literature, “any author who makes himself the object of his own writings is sure to be badly received." But in a world that had corrupted the public truth, that had distorted reality, Linguet’s self-dramatization was not meant to distract from reality, and from the truth of its representation, but on the contrary to reassert it. The writer exposed

1064 “Contre ces genre d’attaques aussi sourd que meurtrier, je n’ai qu’une ressource, c’est de publier des lettres écrites sans affectation, sans prétention en aucun sens; ces sortes de pièces sont le vrai miroir de l’âme. C’est la que le vrai caractère se peint, et d’après leur lecture, on peut se former une juste idée du caractère de leur auteur” (Linguet, Réponse aux docteurs modernes, 1: 17).

1065 See Bénichou, Sacre de l’écrivain, 30-39.


1067 “An auteur qui se fait lui-même l’objet de ses écrits, est presque toujours sur de se voir mal accueilli” (Linguet, Réponse aux docteurs modernes, 1: 18).
something that was in him but that was also beyond him, that somehow escaped his control and that thus acquired a character of objectivity in striking contrast with the utterly contrived, mass-produced representations of reality engulfing the public sphere.

During the second half of the seventeenth century, or what some scholars consider to be the early Enlightenment period, “libertine” writers shared with the Christian moralists a desire to “unmask” “imposture,” and to expose the vices festering behind a veneer of respectability. By the middle of the eighteenth century, this Christian moralist, Augustinian-Jansenist preoccupation with unmasking false virtue morphed into a quasi-atheistic drive to unmask the “imposture” of any and all religious figures. If Christian piety and rigorous self-examination inadvertently fueled a militant atheistic strain, a milder, more “secularized” Christianity changed the paradigm and favoured unmasking the outer vices in the name of inner, natural virtues, not vice versa: philanthropy replaced misanthropy. In opposition, the Pelagian theology of the Jesuits, rejecting any radical consequences of the Original Sin, made its way even into the widely read pages of a Rousseau, who replaced an ontological with a social reading of the Original Sin and thus allowed for a “rehabilitation” of human nature. Linguet participated in this humanist movement to “reveal” the hidden virtues of oneself and of

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human beings in general. The “religion of sincerity” had its martyrs and its dangers, one of which was that of being shunned by “society.” But by losing his social cachet Linguet regained his popular soul, his readership, and therefore Linguet made public confessions firmly believing that the nature and “naive” details of his letters would help convince the public of his pure intentions and would restore the integrity of his public image by making it coïncide with his true identity.

This semantic reappropriation of oneself went hand in hand with an attempt to reclaim a wider semantic field. The truth of one own’s self could function as a guarantee of that self’s perception of and utterances about the world at large. Reacting against the falsification of one’s own character was part of a larger reaction against the falsification of reality by manipulating the language. And if social and linguistic truth were related, then the authenticity of a solitary self invested in guaranteeing the truth of his or her utterances was crucial for the whole society. Far from being a sign of fanaticism, this personal witnessing for the truth was a common-sensical reaction against philosophic “fanaticism,” meaning against wide, complex, and consistent ideological distortions of reality. Linguet would therefore present his readers with the image of his own modest

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1070 “Que je n’ai point cherché à m’y déguiser; c’est la pure et naïve expression de mon cœur que j’y ai tracée; on y verra un homme sans déguisement, tout plein d’une franchise rude et mal adroite, beaucoup moins occupe du désir de plaire, que de celui d’être v rai; désir dangereux, désir funeste, propre a éloigner de la fortune et de la considération, mais fait cependant pour conduire à l’estime publique, du moins j’ose m’en flatter” (Lingnet, *Réponse aux docteurs modernes*, 1: 18).
station in life, with his own virtuous poverty as the standing ground from which he punctured the ideological illusions woven by the philosophes and by the physiocrats.

If, as Beatrice Didier wrote, d’Alembert was aware that “things” and “words” could not be dissociated and that a “dictionary of things” is also a “dictionary of words,” Linguet argued that both philosophical “sects” (métaphysique and éconомiste) manipulated things through empty, uprooted words. In order to address and cure the social evils, one had to use the proper words, words with a clear meaning. Linguet admitted that he shared with the physiocrats a desire to see property respected, and to simplify and rationalize the system of taxes, laws, and institutions so as to bring them into step with the times. Ultimately, both he and the physiocrats wrote as ardent supporters of the monarchy against the feudal, “republican” anarchy of the parlements and preferred “the power of a single ruler and the monarchical government.”

What distinguished Linguet from the physiocrats was his understanding of “liberty,” different from theirs. Linget’s realism clashed with the nominalism of the physiocrats whom he accused of trying to spread a “liberty” worse than “slavery,” since it lacked any intrinsic guarantees of a decent life. Linguet equated physiocracy to disenfranchisement, to a way of abandoning the poor to their own fate: “Liberty: fatal privilege which does not keep the needs at bay while taking away the resources; frightening prerogative, which delivers the people crushed by it to poverty, hunger, and despair. You talk only of freedom but in the same time you tell millions of people who are groaning under the most real and worst slavery that their position is just, that it has to be so, that it was preordained from all eternity by an uncreated wisdom. They die in misery, under the most intolerable yoke,

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1072 “Le pouvoir d’un seul et l’administration monarchical” (Linguet, Réponse aux docteurs modernes, 1: 116).
and you glorify yourselves for professing loudly the art of multiplying the pleasures of
their tyrants.”

Similarly to contemporary writers such as the popular and populist Nicolas-
Edme Rétif de la Bretonne (1734-1806), Linguet noted that this disconnect between
reality and representation stretched from literary to economic and political matters,
and in all cases it resulted in servitude. If philosophic “liberty” was in fact worse than
slavery it was because it gave the people the illusion of freedom while in reality refusing
them the means to achieve and sustain that freedom. In literary matters, an author was
reduced to slavery by a system that dealt in avatars, in “in those ghostly reputations
whose head is easy to spot, but whose feet we would look for in vain.” Since literary
glory was not rooted in any real merit recognized by the public according to some well-
established criteria, but existed only as a phantom reputation, as a publicitary noise
generated by the people controlling the economic and literary values, the authors aiming
to live off such reputations had to trade their independence for the protection of the

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1073 “Liberté: privilège fatal, qui n’éloigne pas les besoins et qui écarte les ressources: prérogative affreuse,
qui livre les etres qu’elle écrase, à l’indigence, à la faim, au désespoir. Vous au contraire, vous ne parlez que
d’affranchissement, et en même tems vous dites à des millions d’hommes, qui gémissent sous le plus réel et
les plus affreux esclavage, que leur position est juste, qu’elle doit être ainsi, qu’elle est ordonnée de toute
éternité par une sagesse incréé. Ils périssent de misère, sous le joug le plus intolérable, et vous faites gloire
de professer hautement l’art de multiplier les jouissances de leurs tyrans” (Linguet, Réponse aux docteurs
modernes, 1: 117-118).

1074 For a brilliant analysis of Retif de La Bretonne’s communitarian philosophy and sharp criticism of the
physiocrats, see Pierre Hartmann, Retif de La Bretonne: Individu et Communauté, Paris, Desjonqueres,
2009, 7-72. For a survey of the eighteenth century literary opposition to physiocracy, see Yves Citton,
Portrait de l’économiste en physiocrate: critique littéraire de l’économie politique (Paris: Harmattan,
2000).

1075 If modernity has been defined as the systematic search for “the whole,” as a discomfort with the loose,
fragmentary things that post-modernity has revelled in, then Linguet was, in his quest for simplicity, a
“modern” adversary of the “post-modern” philosophes.

1076 “Ces fantômes de réputation dont on distingue la tête sans peine, mais dont on chercherait inutilement
les pieds” (Linguet, Réponse aux docteurs modernes, 1: 21).
cultural brokers. Writers became invested not in illustrating and defending certain values, but in defending and praising the people who advertised their value. Literature became a “trade of lies.”[^1077] If in the economic sphere the economic philosophes talked about “liberty” in order to achieve the mastery of a few over the many reduced to “servitude,” in the intellectual sphere the philosophes talked about “humility,” and “modesty” while in fact gaining a disdainful control over the public sphere by operating a separation between utterance and meaning and by staging the literary life. All this staging, directing, and advertising implied monetary and symbolic costs that could not be covered unless one were willing to become a member of a “party,” of a moneyed faction. As in present day movie industry terms, the new eighteenth century literary life implied big production costs and tight studio control over the end product that spelled the end of small, independent artists. A writer could not make a living without a cohort of friends, emulators, mercenary well-wishers, reviewers, and disciples underpinning his efforts: “One has therefore to build a whole party.” Lingueboldly stated that, while he recognized the “usefulness of such a menagerie,” he was “disgusted” by “dependance.”[^1078]

According to Lingue’s “Darntonesque” reading of eighteenth-century literary life, the emerging public sphere was less a “free market” of ideas and values than a place of cutthroat confrontations between ideological lobbyists, between syndicates of literary

[^1077]: “Règle générale, quiconque veut des éloges, doit en donner; la littérature n’est plus aujourd’hui qu’un commerce de mensonges, ou chacun revend précisément à son apologiste la dose de fumée qu’il en a reçue” (Linguet, Réponse aux docteurs modernes, 1: 21).
[^1078]: “Je n’ignore pas les avantages de cette humiliation orgueilleuse, si bien connue des philosophes modernes, à qui elle assure tout l’honneur de la modestie, sans leur en faire courir les risques. Ils ne parlent jamais d’eux-mêmes qu’avec le plus profond mépris; mais de peur que le public ne les prenne au mot, ils ont des trompettes apostes, qui font retentir tous les cercles et tous les livres de leur gloire. Je connais l’utilité de ce manège, mais j’en suis incapable; et ce qui m’en dégoûte, ce sont sur-tout les travaux qu’il exige, c’est la dépendance qu’il entraîne. Il faut alors se faire un parti” (Linguet, Réponse aux docteurs modernes, 1: 20-21).
crime ruled by ruthless bosses able to train, cajole and motivate a “machine” of talented, and therefore fickle, ambitious, and susceptible thugs.\textsuperscript{1079} Linget rejected this type of socialization of literature, focused on the inner mechanisms of power of a literary sect, or unchartered corporation. The emergence of the philosophe public sphere spelled the end of the individual creator, and the emergence of intellectual teams that Linget denounced as “sects.” In opposition to these “sects,” and their salon society, Linget appealed to the public as his only “master.” But, as we will see in the next chapter, Linget’s public was not the atomized public moulded by a liberal “free market,” but that structured by a society of orders. It was a public that did not need to be contained by applying exterior police or advertising force, since it was largely self-contained by familial and professional values. Linget’s public was not one ready to exchange its place. It was not a very socially mobile public, but one rooted for generations in the practice of a craft, receiving and leaving as inheritance a certain station in life. Linget’s solitude was thus a way to reclaim an ideal community. Linget’s communion with his readers depended then less on technical skills, on virtuosity, on purely aesthetic values that were less accessible to the taste of a large reading public and that were so easy to fake by his fellow writers, but on the affirmation and practice of more humble virtues or democratic values that found in journalism a medium more appropriate than the neoclassical tragedy. Linget was in communion with the weak, with the poor, with the disadvantaged, with the virtuous and the patriotic people who valued his dedication to their cause. This was a bond that he would never propose to betray, since defending his vulnerable readers made up for his own vulnerabilities. Dedicating himself to truth, virtue, and \textit{la patrie} assured his, financially modest, independence: “My friends assure

\textsuperscript{1079} “Il faut se soumettre à la vie dure et gênante d’un chef de secte. Il faut chatouiller la vanité des élèves par qui l’on veut être célébré, et donner plus d’exercice encore à leur reconnaissance qu’à leur enthousiasme” (Linget, \textit{Réponse aux docteurs modernes}, 1: 21).
me that without any protection, efforts or intrigues I managed to attain a certain renown.”

This debate on the independence of the intellectual was made even more salient in that d'Alembert had already published in 1753 his *Essai sur la société des gens de lettres et des grands*, in which he argued that the rich and powerful had a duty to dispense patronage to men of letters, but that men of letters do not have to look for patronage since patronage could hinder their independence and confuse their axiological criteria. In other words, d'Alembert contended that any rich man of real taste should extend his protection to men of letters of real distinction. But patronage was not a guarantee of true literary merits. If patronage was a signifier, true intellectual value was not always the signified. Value was not established by patronage alone, or by the marketplace. Value was, for d'Alembert, something that only the critics could recognize in any intellectual pursuit. Writing as if literary merits were as clearly distinguishable as mathematical merits, d'Alembert argued for what might be called the professionalization of the intellectual recognition. As such, aristocratic patronage would not consecrate individual merit but rather reward a recognition coming from the professionals of each intellectual field. D'Alembert therefore did not actually reject patronage and the financial rewards coming with it, he merely elevated the critics, or the experts, above patrons. The intellectuals were not, therefore, meritorious because the rich and the powerful singled

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1080 “Sans protection, sans efforts, sans intrigues, mes amis m’assurent que je suis parvenu a avoir quelque existence. Je la conserverai par les mêmes moyens qui me l’on acquise [...] par un attention non moins scrupuleuse a éviter tout ce qui auroit l’apparence d’un culte rendu à d’autres divinités que celles que j’adoire, la vérité, la vertu et la patrie” (*Réponse aux docteurs modernes*, 1: 22).

them out as such by taking them under their wing. The rich and the powerful were worthy of praise only because they chose to take under their wing men of intellectual and artistic merit whose excellence was recognized by professional critics. Therefore it was not the “grands” who consecrated the men of letters, but the men of letters who certified certain “grands,” such as Frederick the Great or the marquis d’Argenson in the case of d’Alembert, as men of taste and of fine intellect. Both the men of letters and the “grands” had to follow the professional critics, to take their word for it. This specialization, or social division of the intellectual process, according to which recognizing a value and rewarding it became different activities, was supposed to put the intellectual life on solid, objective grounds. This division of intellectual labor was, in fact, the reason for d’Alembert and Diderot’s announcing on the title page of its prospectus that the *Encyclopédie* was published by a “society of men of letters” ("société de gens de lettres"). Stemming from different areas of knowledge, from all social classes, and from diverse religious and geographical backgrounds, this “society” was supposed to provide a model for the new production of knowledge combining a specialized approach that would shun aristocratic dilletantism with a socialization of knowledge that would shun aristocratic subjectivism. The objectivity of this new enterprise would be guaranteed by both the professionalism of those involved and by the fact that these specialists were united “only by the [pursuit of the] general interest of humanity and by a sentiment of mutual goodwill.”

Yet, it was precisely this “mutual goodwill” that Linguet denounced as inimical to a real concern for the “general interest of the humankind.” The philosophes cared too much for each other to care too much for humanity, and Linguet denounced their

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interest for humanity as a smokescreen for their interest in themselves. Linguet argued that the philosophes’ way of socializing knowledge failed because, instead of working independently of the rich to defend an objective (either universal or particular, but historically, geographically or otherwise environmentally motivated) set of values, the philosophes-referees worked to defend the values of the rich and lavished praise on anyone casting a munificent eye on them. Linguet argued that this intellectual prostitution had partially to do with the “philosophes économistes” having a wrong understanding of economic and intellectual value. The philosophes had replaced contentment with unbridled growth, and confused personal fulfillment with an infinite accumulation of riches. The truth of quality had been sacrificed to the power of quantity. Therefore, personal integrity was lost and both the writers and their patrons were subject to reification, to being treated as means for a material end. The philosophes had replaced aristocratic dilletantism with mercenary expertise. And philosophe groveling in front of the rich was more harmful to society than aristocratic dilletantism because the philosophes tried to rationalize their servile, self-interested judgments in a way which an aristocrat would reject. An aristocrat could be eccentric or arbitrary in his tastes, but his failings did not affect the whole system of values. The philosophes, on the other hand, depended upon reciprocally reinforcing and confirming their judgments and expertise. The philosophes defined themselves by this intellectual expertise in a way in which the nobles did not. Therefore, whereas a noble erred in intellectual matters as an individual, the philosophes had to err as a class. They had to lie collectively, to foster widespread approval for their misleading judgments. In doing this, they were bound to falsify the whole axiological system and to force everybody to praise their false idols.\textsuperscript{1083}

\textsuperscript{1083} “Je n’entends les économistes parler que d’augmenter les jouissances, d’accumuler les richesses: pleins d’une vénération très peu philosophique pour quiconque a une grosse bourse, ils se mettent à genoux devant
The critics, instead of signalling to the public opinion and to the rich the real talents of the day, functioned as mere power brokers in the borderland between the literary and the political world. The commision of these powerbrokers was, Linguet found, very steep. The new social division of intellectual labour according to which critics consecrated and rich people rewarded value, left the writers at the mercy neither of the market nor of the high and mighty, but of the ideological sect that happened to be in power. Thus, d’Alembert’s and Diderot’s “society of men of letters” became for Linguet a “sect” dedicated to “secret revenges” (“vengeances secrètes”) and “shady dealings” (“manoeuvres clandestines”) while manifestly preaching the unity of all men of letters. In an open “Letter to d’Alembert,” Linguet declared himself suprised at the “withering excommunication” (“une excommunication flétrissante”) fulminated by the philosophes against him for merely daring to take at face value their words about toleration and rational debate and therefore voicing his objections to some of their ideas. Facing these “fanatical conventicles” (“conventicules fanatiques”) and these “shameful intrigues” (“cabales déshonorantes”), Linguet declared that he would cling even harder to his solitude and his decision to avoid frequenting the literary world: “There are not ten men of letters who know me personally [...] Nobody stumbled upon me on his road to fame or fortune.” This lack of assiduity in frequenting the literary world and in polishing the doorknobs of the salons indicated Linguet’s lack of ambition:

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1086 “Il n’y a pas dix gens de lettres qui connoissent ma figure [...] Aucun ne m’a trouvé sur son chemin dans la carrière de la gloire ou de la fortune” (“Lettre à M. d’Alembert,” in Réponse aux docteurs modernes, 2: 239).
“I do not want pensions, positions, or access to the right circles.” Linguet signalled thus that the philosophes had helped socialize not merely knowledge, but the man of letters as well, that despite claims to the contrary, value was not objectively recognized. Like Goldoni’s famous character, the men of letters served not one master, the nobility, but two: the aristocracy of birth or money, and a class of literary upstarts whose unwarranted airs of superiority were more annoying than those of the aristocrats since they were illegitimate. The philosophes or the “critics” depended on and were legitimated in the end by the aristocrats, even though they proclaimed themselves free citizens of the world, inhabitants of the republic of letters, and claimed to speak in the name of the entire humanity. In a way, Linguet judged the “philosophes” from a perspective similar to Tocqueville’s later insight that one of the factors rotting the Old Regime was its multiplication of meaningless distinctions. The distinctions denounced by Tocqueville were fostered by the state for fiscal reasons, while the distinctions denounced by Linguet were designed by private “societies of men of letters” looking for intellectual elbowroom and a steady income. Yet, Linguet made it clear that this operation could not take place without the connivence of the establishment, which rewarded “stupidity” and “docility.”

One such instance was the control that by 1771, the date of this letter, the “party” of the philosophes had gained and was exercising over a state institution like the French Academy, transformed into a display case of the Parisian salon culture.

\footnote{1087 "Je ne veux ni pensions, ni places, ni accueil dans les cercles" ("Lettre à M d'Alembert," in Réponse aux docteurs modernes, 2: 239).}


\footnote{1089 Linguet, "Lettre à M. d'Alembert," in Réponse aux docteurs modernes, 2: 242.}

\footnote{1090 Linguet, "Lettre à M. d'Alembert," in Réponse aux docteurs modernes, 2: 246.}

\footnote{1091 Keith Baker, Condorcet: From Natural Philosophy to Social Mathematics (Chicago: Chicago University}
Linguet protested that the admission into the French Academy was controlled by d’Alembert and Duclos, the two “saint Peters of that small paradise”: “You open the door only to those branded with the sign of the beast.” Although aware that the philosophes and their patrons controlled the elections to the French Academy, Linguet flatly refused to do anything to ingratiate himself with the academic gatekeepers. If the philosophes argued that being a Christian had nothing to do with dogma and ritual, but only with being a virtuous person and a respectable citizen, Linguet inquired why in order to become a member of the Academy it was not enough to be “firm, just, and disinterested,” but one had to adhere to certain a sect’s creed. Purged from religion, the adiaphora returned in cultural matters as philosophe pieties and genuflections. Linguet was puzzled that the philosophes required of him to intervene in matters that he considered to be indifferent from a political point of view, for the same party abstained from asking crucial questions. Linguet declared himself unable to fathom the reason compelling the philosophes to spend so much time arguing over matters of Christian dogma while failing to take under consideration the failings, the “prejudices,” and the “absurdities” plaguing the daily functioning of European governments. According to Linguet, “le gouvernement” influenced more lives than religion. Moreover, governments came in different shapes and could be reformed, improved, rationalized. Religion, on the other side, was by definition “stable and sturdy” (“stable et solide par essence”). Therefore it was not susceptible to much “rational probing” (“des recherches de la


1092 “Vous n’en ouvrez la porte qu’à ceux qui sont marqués du signe de la bête” (Linguet, “Lettre à M. d’Alembert,” in Réponse aux docteurs modernes, 2: 246).

1093 “Je sais bien que j’y renonce de bon cœur, s’il faut absolument se charger d’un sceau particulier de probation, s’il faut faire autre chose qu’être ferme, droit et naïf, respecter ce qui est respectable, mépriser ce qui est méprisable, remplir ses devoirs avec scrupule, dédaigner les sectes et leur fanatisme, et enfin montrer sans cesse ce que l’on a dans le cœur, mais aussi n’y avoir que ce que l’on montre” (Linguet, “Lettre à M. d’Alembert,” in Réponse aux docteurs modernes, 2: 249).
raison”) or, if it was, the results of religious reforms would be meager (“les réformes sont pour le moins indifférentes”). In other words, if the Enlightenment was defined by its “epistemological modesty,” then this claim squared badly with the philosophical attempt to take on the most abstruse Christian dogmas. Linguet maintained that, confining themselves to an empiricism, the philosophes should avoid any engagement with what is, by definition, beyond the reach of empirical reason. It was precisely the line of defense embraced by d’Alembert and Voltaire in their dealings with Dom Deschamps, whose metaphysical system they had refused to discuss for the stated reason that it did not fall under the reach of their modest, empiric epistemological tools. Christian dogmas, reiterated Linguet, were both indifferent for practical political matters and impossible to discuss on purely rational terms. Thus, they lay by their very nature outside the boundaries of rational tinkering. Addressing D’Alembert, Linguet exclaimed that it was absurd for anybody over thirty years old to spend much time arguing against the catechism: “Between us, is it not a revolting charlatanry all this theoretical aggressiveness against dogmas that bother us so little in practical matters?”

Linguet made clear that he wrote not as a Christian believer, but as an enlightened intellectual who considered religion to have a purely social value and who, bound by an empirical epistemology, declared it impossible to judge the mysteries of religion and hard to deny the social benefits of country priests caring for the poor. Acknowledging that religion was important for the good functioning of the political machine, Linguet prompted the philosophes to accommodate themselves to what might be

1094 “Là est vrai que je n’ai point attaqué la révélation. Je n’ai point donné à mes nouveautés le vernis encyclopédique [...] Mais, Monsieur, ce n’est pas là un grand forfait. Entre nous, n’est-ce pas un charlatanerie révoltante, que cet acharnement théorique contre des dogmes qui gênent aussi peu dans la pratique? Est-il permis à un homme raisonnable, qui a passé trente ans, de mettre seulement en question s’il croira à son catéchisme?” (“Lettre à M. d’Alembert,” in Réponse aux docteurs modernes, 2: 244).
called a Machiavellian/Hobbesian attitude toward religion consisting in “inner freedom, outer silence and respect” (“liberté dans l’intérieur, silence et respect à l’extérieur”).

As long as the philosophes were not able to replace the “curés” in teaching, consoling and tending to the peasants, Linguet warned that the “true philosophes” would better exert themselves to buttress the authority of the country priest instead of ridiculing it, especially since, as Linguet argued together with many Catholic apologists of Pelagian-Jesuit inspiration, the Church had never been as purified, as rational, as enlightened as in the eighteenth century. And, asked Linguet, if the philosophes protested in the name of tolerance against the “dévots” who hated the philosophes (“because they suspect, wrongly of course, that you do not believe in the Gospel”/“parce qu’ils vous soupçonnent, injustement sans doute, de ne pas croire à l’évangile”), why did the philosophes “execrate” Linguet for what they alleged to be his “secret esteem” (“estime secrète”) for the Muslims (“les sectateurs de l’alcoran”). It was, Linguet contended, because of the peculiar “fanaticism” of the philosophes.

Linguet’s anti-philosophic stance had deeper roots than merely the frustration of a writer finding that the French Academy was inaccessible to him without the support of

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1095 Linguet, “Lettre à M. d’Alembert,” in Réponse aux docteurs modernes, 2: 244.
the philosophes and their patrons. In *L'Aveu sincère ou lettre à une mère sur les dangers que court la jeunesse en se livrant à un goût trop vif pour la Littérature* (London, Paris, 1758), a one hundred and twenty page open letter to his sister for the benefit of his nephews, Linguet already engaged in the type of Rousseauist cultural criticism that flavoured his anti-physiocratic writings of the late 1760s and 1770s. The timing of this pamphlet is intriguing, since it appeared in a year marked by the emergence of Léonard Thomas as winner of the French Academy’s eloquence prize. This prize inaugurated an official cult of great men in France, an academic cult ideologically and financially appropriated by the philosophes, who saw in it an opportunity for the glorification of the “men of letters,” that is of themselves. Linguet’s manifest intention was to warn “ingenuous” souls against the lure of becoming a famous writer by pointing out the divorce between the "high enlightenment" ideal and earlier opportunities of the philosophes and the "low life" realities awaiting the latecomers, the provincials flocking to Paris in search of literary renown and financial rewards. Unpacking the “costs” of

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“glory,”

Linguet took on the whole educational system in France, the schools as well as the private tutors, which he held responsible for fostering a purely rhetorical culture.

“The taste for reasoning precedes the age of reason,” warned Linguet pointing out that the school’s mission should be to strive to match the power to reason to the desire to argue. Instead of this match, the schools had turned into “nest[s] of child authors” ("pépinière d’auteurs enfants") producing novels, histories, tragedies and cranking out discourses about anything and everything.

This culture was dangerous not merely because it produced a nation of potentially subversive, classically trained republican speech-makers.

As I will show in the next chapter, as a defender of the guilds Linguet also warned about the discrepancy between the high ideals of the free market and the “low life” realities of a deregulated economy. Linguet argued that Turgot’s dissolution of the jurandes destroyed the standards of quality and encouraged a multitude of peasants turned shoddy “craftsmen” to abandon their farms hoping to open shops in the cities. The result would be a market saturated with low quality manufactured goods, and a society torn apart by the misery, and ultimately the revolts of the jobless, broken, low skilled, half baked “craftsmen.”

With a keen sense of the way in which political and symbolical economy communicated, Linguet advanced in L’Aveu sincère the idea that the rhetorical culture of French schools produced people accustomed to live in debt, on borrowed money as well as on borrowed

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1101 Linguet, L’Aveu sincère, xii, xiv-xv.

1102 Linguet, L’Aveu sincère, v.

ideas. The graduates of these schools were ideologically and financially promiscuous. For Lingueut, a libertine society was a bankrupt society. A truly enlightened society would be one in which the power to reason mastered the desire to reason and allowed citizens to do so on their own, solid, grounds. Moral and economic autonomy was not the result of desires unhindered by reason, but of reason unhindered by desires. Unfortunately, Lingueut observed, salons functioned as did some sorts of banks, circulating false intellectual currency, encouraging the inflation of a “mousse de bel esprit” masking the “natural sterility” underneath it, and encouraging unrealistic dreams of intellectual glory and financial riches. Once this bubble burst, once the enthusiasm and the support that were the privilege of young age vanished, an author was facing bankruptcy and hunger. Unable to support himself, since he dedicated his early years to “mastering bagatelles” instead of learning some useful trade, the writer was forced to spend the rest of his life in “misery” and “desperation,” as an intellectual proletarian.

Lingueut disparaged not culture as such, but the presumption of culture. If he looked upon physiocratic “liberty” as worse than slavery since the master did not invest anything in the proletarian and therefore had no stake in sustaining the wageworker’s life beyond its utility or in developing a personal relationship with him, Lingueut argued that the presumption of culture was worse than ignorance. Ignorance could still foster respect for culture, while a veneer of culture led to arrogant self-sufficiency. Lingueut’s argument aimed to encourage the poor to learn a useful trade instead of dreaming about an easy way out of their station in life. Lingueut also aimed at the rich, trying to drive

1104 “Les lambeaux des bons auteurs anciens et modernes dont ils ont encore la tête remplie, aident à favoriser leur erreur [...] Ils s’en approprient l’usage, et s’en font honneur; comme ces libertins qui, après avoir dérobé leurs parens, soutiennent pendant quelque temps une dépense brillante avec l’argent qu’il en ont tiré” (Lingueut, L’Aveu sincère, vi).
1105 Lingueut, L’Aveu sincère, vi.
1106 Lingueut, L’Aveu sincère, vii-viii.
home the fact that being humane depended upon being less presumptuous, as indicated by the example of king Henri IV, a “great man” snatched by Linguet right out of the philosophe pantheon and reworked into a “great ignorant man,” whose lack of schooling prompted him to be humble, to understand the value of working hard, therefore to naturally connect with the people.\textsuperscript{1107} The presumption and a varnish of culture fostered inhumanity by allowing those in power to justify their evil deeds by sophisms. Half assimilated culture had on the elites the same impact as half digested craftmanship had on the poor venturing to become “masters” in a deregulated economy: it made them unable to stand on their own feet.\textsuperscript{1108} Linguet suggested that if the unskilled poor abandoning their land for the hope of prospering as urban artisans in a deregulated market ended up being at the mercy of big landowners and industrialists, the half educated elites depended upon their minions who became their masters’ masters. Linguet’s dialectics here met with Rousseau’s, whose intuitions would be later read back into the Marxist Hegelian tradition by Alexandre Kojève as the “master-slave” theory.\textsuperscript{1109}

For Rousseau, the three enemies of liberty were “slavery, illusion, and prestige,” all rooted in “self love” (“amour propre”) that made people want to appear more than they were and thus to be what they appear to be instead of appearing what they were.\textsuperscript{1110}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{1107} “S’ils étaient nourris dans l’ignorance comme Henry IV, au moment de leur élévation, du moins ils cherchereraient probablement à s’instruire comme lui. Pénétrés de leur foiblesses, ils ne marcheraient qu’avec circonspection [...] Leurs cœurs seraient encore susceptibles d’être émus par les gemissemens de leurs pareils, dont aucun sophisme n’affaiblirait l’impression. Avec moins de connaissance, ils auraient plus d’humanité; éprouvant la nécessité du travail, ils en prendraient le goût; ils ne seraient dans la dépendance, ni de leurs commis, ni de leurs secrétaires, ni de subalternes en tout genre.” (Linguet, \textit{L’Aveu sincère}, ix-x).

\textsuperscript{1108} Linguet, \textit{L’Aveu sincère}, x.


\textsuperscript{1110} David Gauthier, \textit{Rousseau: The Sentiment of Existence} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,}
Linguet also, this gap between reality and its representation, ignorance in the form of false or bad knowledge was a breeding ground for slavery, for dependence: it left the poor at the mercy of others, and it created a weak, “frivolous,” “thoughtless,”111 self-conceited ruling elite accustomed to dependence on underlings and to inhumanity toward those living outside their sycophantically sealed circle. Linguet believed the philosophes betrayed their inhumanity by using of “a cruel mockery that dishonors them,”1112 as well as by their effrontery, despotism, and anger when confronted with a different point of view.1113 Linguet ironically admited that his lines were meant for the “bourgeois,” for the common people without any importance (“roturiers sans conséquence”), for the “masses” (“masse de la société”). He was not presumptious enough to dare to give advice to the rarefied ruling classes whose main concern was to teach their children the difficult art of "drying up butterflies" ("dessécher des papillons") and other such “profound sciences.”1114

Trying to prevent the objection, first raised against Rousseau1115 - which Linguet acknowleded as the “illustre Citoyen de Genève” -, that he himself was a writer and as such pursued an activity that he advised others not to undertake, Linguet struck a peculiarly anti-philosophic chord. Even if not everybody went as far as Diderot or La Mettrie in embracing the moral relativism resulting from reducing everything to matter in motion, for the philosophes there was a close connection between nature and morals,

2006), 16-18.

111 Linguet, L'Aveu sincère, xi.
1112 “Un persiflage cruel, qui les déshonore” (Linguet, L'Aveu sincère, xi).
1113 “Ils deviennent insolens, injustes, despotiques, furieux à la seule apparence d'une contradiction, incapables de la moindre démarche sensée, et plus encore de réparer leurs folies” (Linguet, L'Aveu sincère, xiii).
1114 Linguet, L'Aveu sincère, XV.
natural instincts being considered more moral than the “supernatural” commandments of revealed religion. Since morals and virtues were naturalized and virtues were socialized, there remained really no autonomous ground on which reason could ask someone to doubt his natural desires or inclinations, such as the desire to write. Reason was instrumental in increasing pleasure, that is happiness, not in hindering the fulfillment of natural desires and inclinations leading to happiness. However, Linguet disparaged the “instincts” in the name of an existential consistency that refused to instrumentalize reason and allowed its autonomy and its capacity to stand witness to a happiness that was not easily reducible to the pleasure of the senses or to wish fulfillment: “Cultivating the letters while admitting openly that they can produce only fatal fruits means being just, not inconsistent. Sometimes nature gives us imperious tastes, which become irresistible when our habits strengthen them. Is this then a good reason for applauding ourselves? [...] A gambler who spends all his life between the convulsions of hope and the alienation of despair [...] would then be obliged, for the sake of his honour, to praise his passion for gambling?” Like Rousseau, Linguet intended to assume public responsibility, not only for his work, but for his profession as well. Linguet refused to reason his way out of his alienation, avoided the deployment of sophisms to make intellectually whole what was existentially in tension. Instead of using words to gloss over the facts of the matter, or to recreate at a discursive level the harmony lacking in reality, Linguet used literature, words, to present his case, to represent reality. Linguet’s conflict with the philosophes and the physiocrats was partly rooted precisely in this refusal to recreate at a rhetorical level the polished surfaces and the smooth connections that were lacking in reality. Refusing nominalism, Linguet had to start, like

Descartes, with his own truth. Except that Linguet’s truth was not spiritual and un-historical like the Cartesian one. Like Rousseau, Linguet represented and staged himself: all of himself. It was an existential, historical, contextual truth, the truth of a situation. The writer redeemed himself by representing for the use of others what he did by inclination. Representation forced the writer to deal with his compulsion and helped him sublimate it by practicing his craft. The art of working his folly into a coherent, deep, and engaging representation helped him transform his passion into a truth, conveyed to his readers. Comparing the literary compulsion to opium or tobacco addiction, Linguet hoped to do penance for his addiction by preventing others to become hooked on writing, by telling his sad, cautionary, “humiliating” story. If Rousseau complained in his First Discourse that in the eighteenth century nobody asked “if a man has integrity, but rather if he has talent,” Linguet tried to show the way in which a writer could prove his integrity by confronting rather than by embellishing his failures.

Anyone wishing to embrace the writing career, wrote Linguet in stark contrast with the elevated ideas about the “gens de lettres” popularized by Duclos or by d’Alembert at the beginning of the 1750s, had to accept "being persecuted or being ashamed of himself.” Try ing to prove his point, Linguet recalled the fate of Homer and of Socrates: the first a wandering poet, blind and poor, forced to beg in the streets for his daily bread, while the other died a violent death under the inimical gaze and by

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1117 “Cultiver les lettres et avouer franchement qu’elles ne produisent que des fruits funestes, c’est être juste, et non pas inconséquent. La nature nous donne quelquefois des goûts impérieux, qui deviennent irrésistibles, quand l’habitude les a fortifiés. Est-ce donc une raison pour s’en applaudir? [...] Un joueur qui passe sa vie entre les convulsions de l’espérance et l’aliénation du désespoir [...] serait-il donc obligé, pour son honneur, de faire l’éloge de sa passion? [...] Serait-il blâmable [...] de dire aux spectateurs, apprenez par mon exemple à ne pas m’imiter” (Linguet, L’Aveu sincère, xviii-xx).

1118 Linguet, L’Aveu sincère, xx.


1120 “A être persécuté, ou a rougir à ses propres yeux” (Linguet, L’Aveu sincère, 25).
order of his own concitizens whom he had try to “enlighten.” Arguing that posthumous glory did not make up for a life of misery, a point that was after all very attuned to the Enlightenment preoccupation for the improvement of this life rather than for the afterlife rewards promised by Christianity, Linguet drew up a literary “great men” martyrologue citing Lucanus, Seneca, Abélard, or Ramus “murdered by his own pupils, to whom he had been more like a father than a master.” Descartes himself, wrote Linguet thinking at the strange fate of Cartesian metaphysics and physics, was “persecuted throughout Europe” for his truths, only to be celebrated afterwards for his errors. Linguet also remembered the Jansenist Antoine Arnauld, and the poet Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, exiled and persecuted up to their deaths. As for the successful writers, such as Virgil or Horace, Linguet read them against the grain, in the revisionist manner used later, in his Histoire des révolutions de l'Empire romain, pour servir de suite à celle des révolutions de la République (1766). According to Linguet, Horace and Virgil managed to escape the universal persecution reserved to writers only by resigning themselves to become propagandists (“les décorateurs de la tyrannie”), by using their talents to adorn and hide the “deformed object” of Octavian Augustus’s “tyrannic” destruction of Roman liberty. Linguet thought that Horace and Virgiled managed to avoid persecution only by being ashamed of themselves and of their debasement, trembling with fear, striving to avoid Ovid’s fate and to outmanoeurver the poisonous literary adversaries envying them. And yet, a young writer should not flatter himself with gaining such notoriety, since the chance of a succès de scandale such as Jean-

1124 Linguet, L’Aveu sincère, 30.
Jacques Rousseau’s or of a career built on winning flatteries such as Horace’s came once every few centuries, while most of the literary crimes or merits remained unknown and mediocre. Striving for literary distinction could therefore drive almost anyone into miserly anonymity, with no consolation prize such as fame, even posthumous, in sight. Even at the pinnacle of one’s literary glory, an author would be subject to the ill-effects of writing, which tended to instil tedium (“l’ennui”) that illness of “delicate temperaments” and “cultivated spirits.”

If Linguet published his *L’Aveu sincère* anonymously, it was not because he feared the official censors, but the philosophes. Linguet confessed that he did not much fear the official censors, as long as they applied the laws consistently (“générales et exécutées sans distinction”) or with benign intent, that is reviewing the manuscript with an eye for upholding the public order, and looking for suggestions to improve the work under consideration. Indeed, Linguet published his anonymous *Aveu sincère* under the “reign” of Chrétien-Guillaume de Lamoignon de Malesherbes who, between 1750 and 1763, acted as the very liberal “directeur de librairie.” Malesherbes trusted the “public opinion” to be a more impartial judge than the official censors on any matter that did not have to do with theology, the monarchy, or morality, and therefore granted tacit permissions of publication to many controversial writers.

Linguet argued meekly that

the censorship laws could not be discussed, since their goal was precisely to hinder such discussion.\textsuperscript{1128}

In Linguet’s opinion, more dangerous than censorship was the transformation of literature into a merchandise and an object of speculation (“un véritable objet de finance”). The public sphere was a market for commodified ideas, whose market value lost any connection to their worth.\textsuperscript{1129} More than official censorship, what irked Linguet were the brutal interventions meant to improve the marketability of a literary work. These interventions, undertaken by dramatic companies or by booksellers, gave an “ignoble” air to any literary pursuit.\textsuperscript{1130} Linguet deplored writing according to a certain recipe, as well as the demeaning advertising rituals to which a writer had to submit himself. Linguet described how, after publishing his work, in order not to see it enjoying the “obscure honour of a single edition,”\textsuperscript{1131} an author had to ingratiate himself with the salon hostesses, veritable literary agents and literary power brokers who “toyed” with the authors, reduced to the role of pets.\textsuperscript{1132} More dangerous than political tyranny was the despotism of “la mode,” the fashion of dictating the success or the failure of an author. In

\textsuperscript{1128} Linguet, \textit{L’Aveu sincère}, 37.

\textsuperscript{1129} “C’est un courtage perpétuel: on n’y parle que de vente et revente; c’est une place de commerce, ou l’on fait bien plus usage du calcul que du génie” (Linguet, \textit{L’Aveu sincère}, 37-38).

\textsuperscript{1130} Linguet, \textit{L’Aveu sincère}, 40.

\textsuperscript{1131} Linguet, \textit{L’Aveu sincère}, 44.

\textsuperscript{1132} “Ces femmes qui se chargent en personne du débit d’un livre, qui vont quêter de maison en maison de l’argent et des suffrages pour la médiocrité qu’elles ont vu ramper à leurs toilettes; ces protectrices zélées d’un poème sans goût, ou d’une traduction insipide, se sont long-temps divertis des grimaces du jeune poète, ou de la plate physionomie du vieux traducteur […] Qui croirait pourtant que ces singeries bouffonnes deviennent le fondement solide d’une réputation?” (Linguet, \textit{L’Aveu sincère}, 46-47).
Linguet’s description, the salons became sorts of intellectual “stock exchanges” manipulating the market. This manner of socializing literature did not allow for the success of any lone wolf, whose “moody pride” (“sombre fierté”) would keep potential patrons and thus salon-based promotion at bay.\footnote{Linguet, \textit{L’Aveu sincère}, 47.} Any author aiming at success would have to be either dead or mummyfied by his admirers, reduced to a cliché, to an image easy to handle and tag. The public, wrote Linguet, hated any “living” author, and in the context of these passages, living also meant being able to resist the embalming procedures applied in the salons.\footnote{Linguet, \textit{L’Aveu sincère}, 49-54.} The amiable guise of the salons masked, and thus allowed to operate, certain unequal power relationships between writers and the establishment. It was a worldly game, Linguet warned, that the shrewed, consumate aristocrats played better than the naive writers, usually freshly arrived on the social scene. The “grands” rewarded only those flattering them and writers labouring under the illusion of somehow tricking the rich - those authors trying to play “ivy” to an aristocrat’s “oak” - would be dissapointed: the aristocrats were consummate con men, and the spoils of sycophancy were meager.\footnote{“Ils sont trop durs, pour que nous y puissions prendre racine; et quand nous parviendrons à nous y fixer, la nourriture que l’on en tire ne vaut pas les peines qu’elle coûte” (Linguet, \textit{L’Aveu sincère}, 55).}

The flippancy of the public, the frivolity of the salons, the ungratefulness of the “grands” gave to the literary career a “debasing” beginning, a “dispiriting” middle, and a “dishonouring” end that made of anyone still dedicating his life to writing good books an image of “true heroism”.\footnote{Linguet, \textit{L’Aveu sincère}, 56.} And Linguet deemed that “good books” were only those “teaching people something else than mere words” (“autre chose que des mots”), those “containing some useful and well rounded moral” ideas, those exhorting people to live in
But if writing literature fostered “ennui,” it followed that its practitioners were prone to fanaticism, since “ennui” was a dangerous languor of the passions, not their virtuous extinction. This kind of “ennui” was in many ways similar to the Romantic restlessness and existential anxiety depicted in the works of Rousseau, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Étienne Pivert de Senancour, Ugo Foscolo, François René de Chateaubriand, Benjamin Constant, Alphonse de Lamartine, Alfred de Musset. For the Romantics, this “ennui” had to do with political, religious, or amorous disenchantments, with the fate of the individual and of his nation in an age of failed revolutions or restorations. For Linguet also, this “ennui” was not Christian world-weariness, distaste (“dégoût”) for all secular “passions” (“les désirs”), but a form of yearning. The “ennui” had the potential to actually inflame and stir the passions, and thus fanaticism.  

The true fountain of “peace, liberty and virtue,” contended Linguet, was “ignorance,” that is simplicity, an industrious humility at peace with itself (“soutenue par la pauvreté et l’amour d’un travail grossier”). This kind of tranquility rested upon a sort of domestic industriousness. People preoccupied with the thing at hand lacked the time to be bored, while the rich and the lazy were always ready to look for an escape from boredom in the dubious amusements of fanatical ideas and subversive systems. “Philosophy” was, for Linguet, merely the result of “luxury” and of “laziness,” and as such it was a “rotten” thing, debasing first the arts, and then the morals of a nation. Stirring the common people and corrupting the elites, philosophy worked at dissolving all social ties and encouraged the disregard of the common good and of reciprocal duties. By

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1137 Linguet, L’Aveu sincère, 57.
1138 “L’ennui, bien loin d’être un frein propre à les modérer, devient un aiguillon qui les rend furieuses et indomptables” (Linguet, L’Aveu sincère, 62).
1139 Linguet, L’Aveu sincère, 63.
1140 Linguet, L’Aveu sincère, 66.
encouraging servility and a lack of axiological criteria, philosophy opened the way to despotism. Linget described “philosophy” as self-generating, as a viral proliferation of infinity – an infinity of desires, whims, impulses, ideas – amidst day to day tranquility. Philosophy was, for Linguet, the name of infinity as the inimical “other,” an infinity meant to crush and destroy human liberty and happiness. Rejecting the ethics and economics of infinity, Linguet came here close to Deschamps’ political ontology. Deschamps founded his state/stage of morals not on the ethics of infinity, but on those of unity. For Linguet, liberty and happiness depended on the civic republican and ultimately Augustinian ideas of natural limitations and human imperfections, on rejecting the lure of unlimited personal or collective growth, or what Carl Schmitt identified as the “subjective occasionalism” afflicting the Romantics. Linguet was not arguing against the right and the capacity of poor men to think or to become educated. He merely deplored that philosophy, that is eighteenth century mainstream arts and sciences, accustomed people to think outside their context, to think almost on the run, trying to

1141 “Production funeste, qui, se bornant d’abord à dégrader les arts, passe bientôt jusqu’aux mœurs, qui énervant le peuple et corrompant les grands d’un nation, y fait germer avec rapidité la bassesse, l’oubli des devoirs réciproques, et enfin la despotisme [...] C’est un insecte rongeur qui éclôt, comme je le ferai voir, de même que les vers, au milieu de la corruption, et qui comme eux s’en nourrit en l’augmentant” (Linguet, L’Aveu sincère, 64-65).

1142 “Elles [science and letters, that is philosophie] corrompent la prospérité par les nouveaux désirs qu’elles font connaître aux riches. Elles rendent leur opulence inutile, par la foule de nouveaux besoins dont elles accablent. Elles aggravent le malheur, par les regrets qu’elles inspirent à l’indigent. Elles déchirent son cœur, par la faculté funeste de réfléchir, qu’elles y développent. Elles le tourmentent, par les moyens qu’elles lui suggèrent pour changer sa situation. Enfin, quiconque voudra bien approfondir leurs effets, plutôt que leur nature, conviendra que si elles peuvent devenir avantageuses à des êtres parfaits, elles sont pour des êtres imparfaits tels que nous, le plus redoutables de tous les fléaux. Il n’y a personne qui, après les avoir bien examinées, ne s’écrie, avec le sage Salomon: c’est la plus mauvaise des occupations que Dieu ait donnée aux enfans des hommes” (Linguet, L’Aveu sincère, 97-98). See Carl Schmitt, Political Romanticism (Boston: MIT Press, 1991). Linguet’s almost “Schmittian” understanding of the philosophes highlights the continuities between the philosophes and the Romantics, that is between the Enlightenment and the Counter-Enlightenment also. It also helps elucidating the vexing question of “pre-Romanticism.”
keep up with the continuous flood of ideas and sensations that chipped away at the relationship between reality and its representation. Linguet warned that philosophy created its own reality, that it was a nominalist triumph of representation over reality, that appearing was becoming more important and “real” than being. And the only way “philosophy” could do this was by self-generation, by becoming a close, sui-generis form of infinity: an ideology feeding upon humankind’s infinite desires, whims, and dreams. Linguet therefore strongly advised his sister to keep her children away from any “contagion” with the “poisonous seed” of philosophy, capable of multiplying itself ad infinitum, an infinity that Dom Deschamps would also discard as a valid source for the ethics informing his stage of morals.¹¹⁴³

Since philosophy depended on luxury and fostered it, Linguet felt justified in drawing a connection between the literary “philosophes” and the “philosophes économistes,” between ideological-axiological infinity and relativism and infinite economic growth. Linguet reworked, developed and published the last third of his Aveu six years after, under the more pointed title Le Fanatisme des Philosophes.¹¹⁴⁴ In this last pamphlet, Linguet made even clearer the complicity between the philosophes and the rich people exploiting the poor: “Let us imagine one of those public works called corvées: two hundred unhappy peasants work hard to smooth or raise up the level of a certain piece of land. A magnificently dressed engineer comes to make the peasants work harder. Some of those peasants approach him with hats in their hands and a humble demeanor. They flatter him; they entertain him. But while doing this they abandon their spades, and start making observations on the defective ways in which the others, still working, are handling theirs. Behold the people, the men in power, and the philosophes. The first

¹¹⁴³ “Le moindre germe qui pourrait échapper à vos recherches, s’y provignerait bientôt de lui-même à l’infini” (Linguet, L’Aveu sincère, 98-99).
¹¹⁴⁴ Linguet, Le Fanatisme des Philosophes, Londres [Abbéville], 1764.
work, the second relax, and the third have the mania of talking about how the first work, and to share with the second their careless relaxation.” What Linguet shrewdly pointed out by this parable was not merely that the “philosophes” had a “manie babillarde” impossible to cure. He implied that the philosophes had an interest in having this chatting mania, since it was their way out of their social class. The philosophes were, in Linguet’s view, common people making their way up in the world by betraying their own social class. The philosophes were not really interested in improving the fate of the people, but merely in distinguishing themselves out of the popular ranks by virtue of their capacity to fake patriotism, interest for the common good, and philanthropy.

In fact, Linguet maintained, what motivated the philosophes was their own interest and their own glory, since “philosophy” was founded on the “most incurable disease of the human spirit, on prideful self-love.” If self-love was, in the neo-Augustinian tradition still alive in Rousseau, a “sin” or a “vice” that still had some social usefulness since it prompted people to form communities in order to gain the admiration

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1146 For the debate between Jean-Paul Sartre, who saw the philosophes as alienated parasites of a parasitical class, intellectuals kowtowing to the aristocracy instead of embracing their own bourgeois identity, and Paul Bénichou, who found perfectly sensible and intrinsically consistent the position of the philosophes, who wisely refused to embrace the bourgeois way of life, prosaic and unable to inspire any reform movement, see Paul Bénichou, The Consecration of the Writer, 1750-1830 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 24-25. Bénichou argued that the philosophes were searching not merely for a “rational” way of life, but for a new way of life, and this justified what the ideologically stern Sartre considered to be their aristocratic lapses.

1147 On the “plus incurable de toutes les maladies de l’esprit humain, sur un amour propre orgueilleux” (Linguet, Le Fanatisme des Philosophes, 9).
of other people, Linguet’s “arrogant self-love,” that is non-reasonable self-love, prompted people not to create societies, but sects, or societies of mutual admiration. This self-love did not unite people, but separated them, since it was a self-love that did not seek for the admiration of everybody, of society at large. Linguet arrived at this conclusion by a sort of Jansenist-moralist reading of the philosophes, whose “imposture” he unmasked with a relish similar to that of the philosophes’ “unmasking” of revealed religions. Discussing the hieroglyphics and the allegorical, anagogical tradition initiated by Pythagoras, Linguet argued, like William Warburton, that the obscurity of philosophy was due not to the philosophes’s fear of persecution, as the philosophes claimed, but to their desire to keep the people ignorant and reverent. If the philosophes were the new clergy, then they could be unmasked for ulterior, devious intentions like any other clergy. And they could be accused of fanaticism like any other clergy.

The Swiss mystical Protestant painter and writer Béat-Louis de Muralt wrote, in a book disparaging sciences and theology which would have a big impact on Rousseau, that fanaticism was a desire to utter those “uncomfortable truths” that everybody would

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1149 Warburton, a supporter of the alliance between the Church and State and an adversary of Voltaire, who vilified him repeatedly, shared with Linguet this “enlightened conservative” criticism of the abuse of words. See the French translation of William Warburton’s, Essai sur les Hieroglyphes des Egyptiens (1744).

like to avoid facing or thinking too seriously about. Yet, for the enlightened but antinominalist Linguet, “fanaticism” was not a determined movement toward but away from reality, an impulse that shunned any “reflection,” any true representation of reality. Fanaticism did not have anything to do with the truth beside distorting it. Religious fanaticism, that is "the love of religion pushed too far" ("l’amour de la religion poussé trop loin") was indeed harmful, but Linguet warned that fanaticism came in all shapes and forms, and that the name applied to any passion that takes control over our lives ("toutes les passions qui remplissent et subjuguent le coeur humain").

According to Muralt’s criteria, Linguet was a “fanatic” but according to Linguet’s own criteria, he was not, while the philosophes were, since they were ready to sacrifice reality for appearance’s sake. The philosophes were guilty of being addicts of the “public sphere,” of being drunk on fame, ready to sacrifice everything to their “hotheaded pursuit of fame” ("ardeur fanatique de la réputation"). Philosophic fanaticism had the same consequences as any other fanaticism: it fostered effrontery and gullibility ("l’audace qu’il inspire, et la credulité qu’il recommande"). Linguet denounced it, as did Hume, as an utterly unreasonable attempt to make reason the arbiter of everything, to expose, probe into, study through a magnifying glass and finally make the autopsy of any social organism. Exposing the innermost workings of society, dragging into public

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1152 Linguet, Le Fanatisme des Philosophes, 5.

1153 Linguet, Le Fanatisme des Philosophes, 7.

1154 Linguet, Le Fanatisme des Philosophes, 10.

1155 Linguet, Le Fanatisme des Philosophes, 10, 11.

debate the most delicate processes of the social metabolism, the philosophes withered away any societal bonds thriving on implicit assumptions and organic developments. Therefore, if the operation was a success, the social patient turned out to be dead, resulting only in the metastatic growth of a conceptual apparatus, developing at the expense of society.¹⁵⁷

What irked Linguet more than anything was the philosophes’ ambiguous relationship with power. As Didier Masseau argued, in an eighteenth-century France in which the philosophes worked their way up into position of power and influence in the state by paying the price of institutionalization and of a subservient relationship with the establishment, Linguet tried to forge a career outside any institution. Linguet defended the Church without being a member of the clergy, as were thirty-two percent of the eighteenth-century French writers,¹⁵⁸ and attacked both the Parlements and the physiocrats simultaneously, that is both judicial-administrative monopolies and economic-administrative deregulation. Finally, Linguet defended the people by way of an apology of “despotism” while pleading forcefully and consistently for protecting the smallholders and the poor of France. Similarly to Louis Sébastien Mercier, Linguet tried to gain an audience not by courting, but by berating the establishment in the name of the public. Yet, by his continuous appeals to the “public,” invoked as arbiter of the contentious issues of the day, Linguet contributed to the development of that “public sphere” that he criticized for being so easily malleable in the hands of the philosophes.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ “Des mains habiles mettent au jour les plus secrets liens de la Société. Elles pénètrent tout le jeu du corps politique: mais ce corps devient bientôt pareil aux squelettes, ou les Anatomistes ne peuvent chercher les organes de la vie, qu’en les detruisant. Ses muscles, ses ressorts ainsi désassemblé, dépouilles des voiles favorables, qui en entretenoient la souplesse et l’union, n’offrent plus que l’image de la mort, avec un appareil de science aussi fastueux qu’inutile” (Linguet, Le Fanatisme des Philosophes, 17).
¹⁵⁸ Didier Masseau, L’invention de l’intellectuel, 95.
If public opinion did not become the competing authority that Linguet had hoped for, an authority and a market that could also secure his livelihood, Linguet’s career could be used to expose the limits of the Republic of Letters, and of authorial independence. Linguet noted that, although Rousseau was the first to write on these topics, the sharpness of his *Discours on the Sciences and Arts* was muffled by Rousseau’s connection with the philosophes at the time of its writing, as well as by the academic nature of that piece. Plus, Rousseau himself was partially guilty of perpetuating the philosophic mindset, since he argued his case against the arts and science “by reasoning more than by facts” (“par des raisonnemens, plus que par des faits”). However, Linguet considered that Rousseau had succeeded in defeating his philosophic enemies even without appealing to historic arguments, which Linguet proposed to do.

If Tocqueville would later argue that the philosophes, because isolated from real politics, nurtured radical, utopian ideas that fomented the revolutionary upheavals of 1789-1794, Linguet argued that precisely when isolated from politics the philosophes tried to ingratiate themselves with the people in power. The philosophes were not revolutionary, but corrupting, that is they did not challenge the establishment, but tried to please it in ways that would harm France in the long run. The philosophes were not dangerous in opposition, but in power, since their influence was not merely theoretical, but practical, as mercenaries supporting any status-quo, even an utterly corrupt one.

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1162 “Ils caressent les Princes. Ils tachent d’apprivoiser les Puissances. Ils leur dédient des Livres. Ils louent leurs vertus, leur goût pour les Arts, et surtout leur libéralité (...) Ils annoncent une parfaite indifférence pour les honneurs et l’esclavage de la Cour. Mais si la barrière qui leur en défendait l’entrée vient a se lever,
Not unlike Rousseau in the *First Discourse*, what Linguet condemned here was not the utopian opposition of the philosophes, but on the contrary their conformism, their mercenary meddling into factional politics, their readiness to defend rich people’s interests. Far from condemning the philosophes’ radicalism, Linguet raised his voice against a sort of eighteenth-century “trahison des clercs”: the philosophes were not too little, but too much involved in real politics, that is in the administration of power and in the accumulation of huge wealth. Instead of pitting reason against injustice, the philosophes rationalized injustice, and expertly crafted learned arguments supporting their sponsors’ interests and policies. Reason justified goals and thus ways of life alien to it. Existential imposture hid behind sophisms. The philosophes were remarkably good at mass-producing disjointed signs, signifiers without any reference in reality because they were generated by intellectuals whose writings lacked any adherence to the reality of their own lives. Intellectual consistency and intellectual integrity were different things, and while sophisms could make everything look coherent (for example, writing treatises on the poor on gold encrusted tables), they failed to make anything new. The truth coherence of the philosophes was defined as such by its consistency with an increasingly smaller set of, self-interested, economic, political, and cultural statements. Hence the danger of despotism, of rearranging society so as to make it coherent with the musings of a few fanatics, that is of people who under the spur of passions such as greed and pride drifted away from reality.

Linguet thought it was difficult to discern this disjunction because the philosophes were extremely good at faking disinterest in worldly power and political

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influence. He argued that in fact the philosophes were always recruiting, were continuously spreading their influence. Religious fanatics recruited by persuading feeble-minded people (“esprits grossiers et les âmes foibles”) to embrace some dogma. In order to accomplish his proselytising task, the religious fanatic would use miracles, visions and would pretend to possess a revealed truth. But if religious fanatics asked for complete obedience, and Linguet argued that they could obtain this kind of subjection only from poor, uneducated people, the philosophe was more dangerous since he offered “independence.”

The philosophes, argued Linguet, based their influence on “pride” (“l’orgueil”), raising expectations hard to meet and, by devious, flattering discourses, inflaming the “perverse hearts” and “indocile spirits.” Where religious fanaticism forged baseless scruples and burdened people with “embarrassing duties,” philosophic fanaticism enslaved people by allegedly breaking all the chains. Linguet estimated that, as social pathology, philosophic fanaticism was more dangerous than religious fanaticism, since the religious strain could at least give the people “the force to march on,” and inspired in them some strength (“vigueur”) that could help them advance on the “path to virtue.” Philosophical fanaticism was colder than the religious one, and as such worked as a sort of disenchantment of the world: instead of being burned at the stake, people would be consumed by the private fires of their own irritated passions and vices.

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1165 “Et quoiqu’il sache en forger d’une autre espèce, pour s’assurer de ses captifs, c’est toujours en prenant la liberté pour devise, qu’il les traîne à sa suite, vaincus et subjugués” (Linguet, *Le Fanatisme des Philosophes*, 14).

1166 “Il n’égorge pas les hommes au nom de Dieu; mais il les empoisonne, il les fait périr par l’abus du luxe. Ce n’est pas si l’on veut à des arguments Théologiques qu’il les immole; c’est à des passions secrètes et honteuses” (Linguet, *Le Fanatisme des Philosophes*, 16).
Linguet was convinced that, if it were to raise its head, “despotism” would appear in philosophical and not in religious garb. The philosophes were the new, “cowardly impostors” (“ces lâches imposteurs”). Since religious fanaticism was mostly a thing of the past, and since France and Europe were living in an enlightened age, the new despotism would appear under an enlightened guise, as “enlightened” conformism. It would be, Linguet predicted, taking a stand against the kind of social mathematics elaborated in France by a philosophe such as the marquis de Condorcet, a “utilitarian” despotism. Common decency would be sacrificed not for the sake of Heavens, but for the sake of the here and now. The mathematization of human sciences, coupled with the sensualist teachings of the philosophes, would produce axiological systems based on the arithmetics of pleasure, whose influence on the political life would be disastrous, leading to despotism. Therefore, Linguet argued that, instead of subverting the establishment in the name of radical, utopian freedoms, the philosophes subverted the liberty of the people in the name of a false emancipation that, by way of a sensualist utilitarianism, fostered cowardice and a lack of concern for the common good and thus delivered the people to the whims of despotism: “Soon, despotism, emboldened by the general cowardice, is on the rise, supported by the Philosophical Treatises. From those treatises it borrows the art of covering everything under an appealing varnish; from there

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1167 Linguet, Le Fanatisme des Philosophes, 18.
1169 Rousseau also complained that: “The political philosophers of the ancient world talked incessantly about morality and virtue; today they speak only about business and money.” And he added, rather prophetically: “According to them, a man is worth no more to the State than the value of his consumption” ("Discourse on the Sciences and Arts," in Rousseau, The Social Contract and The First and Second Discourses, 58).
it learns to despise the people, to consider human being as tools, as means to serve his passions and whims. The pleasures and the Arts become despotism’s safest allies.”

With the aid of mercenary philosophes, the despot managed to create a parallel “reality,” a discursive reality made of “lies,” and counting as society. But, Linguet argued, if the main title to glory of philosophy and of economic liberalism was to spread sociability, then “barbarians” such as “les Tartares, les Calmouks, les Bedouins,” although without academies, microscopes or anatomists, were more “philosophical” because they lived in societies with a higher degree of social conscience, where the nation cared for the elders, the poor, and the feeble. In the civilized nations, these categories were hopeless: “The only thing three quarters of the Nation can hope for is to die on a pile of manure of the first serious disease caused by the excess of work and misery.” The so-called “barbarians” then knew a "secret which escapes our politeness, that of living happy, free, and healthy" (“un secret qui échappe à notre politesse, celui de vivre heureux, libres et sains”). The connection between metaphysics and despotism was confirmed for Linguet by the appearance of the first metaphysical systems in India, country of an “unhappy fecundity.” Sparta never managed to produce something similar, since: “We abandon

1170 “Bientôt le despotisme, enhardi par la lâcheté commune, s’élève appuyé sur des Traites Philosophiques. Il y puise l’art trompeur de tout couvrir d’un vernis séduisant; il y apprend à mépriser les hommes, à les regarder comme des instruments utiles, faits pour servir ses passions ou ses caprices. Les plaisirs et les Arts deviennent ses plus surs Satellites” (Linguet, Le Fanatisme des Philosophes, 18). Compare with Rousseau, who cautioned that: “Today, as more subtle study and more refined taste have reduced the art of pleasing to a system, there prevails in our manners a loathsome and deceptive conformity: all minds seem to have been cast in the same mold. Incessantly politeness makes demands, decorum issues orders. Incessantly we obey rituals, never our own intuition. We no longer dare to appear as we really are, and under this perpetual restraint, people who form the herd known as society, finding themselves in these same circumstances, will all behave in exactly the same ways, unless more powerful motives prevent them from doing so. We never know therefore with whom we are dealing: in order to know one’s friend, one must wait for some critical occasion, that is, wait until it is too late” (Rousseau, Discourse on the Sciences and Arts, 50).

1171 “L’unique espérance des trois quarts de la Nation, est de périr sur un fumier, aux premières maladies causées par l’excès du travail et de la misère” (Linguet, Le Fanatisme des Philosophes, 29).
ourselves to luxury only because we are rich. We start to philosophize only because we have grown rich and lazy.” 1172

Since they had the same cause, wealth, luxury and philosophy were bound to have the same consequences, argued Linguet. And the main consequence was moral corruption. Accepting the Enlightenment’s sensualist epistemology and environmental determinism, Linguet argued that a thought which did not grow as part of a virtuous way of life was harmful. If ideas arose from the senses, and were socially and environmentally conditioned, then any thought divorced from a virtuous life, from work, from action, accustomed the citizens with lifeless thoughts, with phantasmagoric ideas and illusory hopes. In the end, by encouraging people to dream, desire, and dabble in ambitious evasionism, by divorcing thought from its environment, the philosophes allowed thinking to become more important than living, and ideas more real than people. Philosophical egoism morphed into solipsism, and getting accustomed to think everything solely in egotistical terms led to cruelty. If philosophy, as Descartes re-founded it, had to start by discarding all the received, that is socially informed, ideas and reflexes, then philosophy was not conducive to sociability but to egoism, and in denouncing the ideological temptations of philosophy, Linguet took the same path as did David Hume. Linguet argued that there was a connection between philosophy and cruelty, between starting from scratch and reducing real people to a scratch of an idea.1173

In words that in hindsight gain a more ominous resonance, Linguet cautioned about the uniquely debasing role of what might be called ideologies: “The Philosophical fanaticism is not merely destructive, but also coward and timorous. It is not satisfied with

1172 “On ne se livre au luxe qu’ parce qu’on est riche. On ne devient philosophe, que parce qu’on a commencé par être riche et oisif” (Linguet, Le Fanatisme des Philosophes, 31, 33-34).

1173 Linguet, Le Fanatisme des Philosophes, 35.
persecuting people, with making them perish, it has to degrade them.”

This uniquely degrading effect of the “philosophie” had to do with the disappearance of truth at the hands of the “philosophes.”

Linguet observed that whereas religious fanatics such as Luther exuded “a noble boldness” (“une noble hardiesse”) in preaching what they believed to be true, and in assuming and announcing the truth of what they preached, the philosophical fanatics went about it in more crooked ways, refusing to preach, that is to openly defend and personally stand by their ideas, but writing and acting with a mixture of “guilty effrontery” (“audace coupable”) and “degrading cowardice” (“lâcheté avilissante”).

The philosophes’ printed anonymous attacks on the Catholic Church managed to compromise it, but not to demolish it in the name of something new. The emergence of the printing press made it possible to attack everything and stand for nothing, and as such it favoured the emergence of a mainly corrosive public sphere, populated with voices without any supporting presence. It was the personal presence, the sermon, and not the printing press, that ensured Luther’s victory against Rome, argued Linguet.

Linguet’s enthusiasm for sermons and oratory was fueled by his concern that his philosophe enemies distorted the reception of his works by distorting his public image, that is they severed the connection between an author and his work in order to falsify

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1174 “Le fanatisme Philosophique n’est pas seulement destructeur: il est encore lâche et timide. Il ne se contente pas d’opprimer, de faire périr les hommes, il les dégrade” (Linguet, Le Fanatisme des Philosophes, 36).

1175 Linguet, Le Fanatisme des Philosophes, 36.

1176 “Croit-on que ce soit par ses livres que Luther est parvenu a porter un coup mortel à la puissance papale? Non, sans doute. ces ouvrages grossiers n’auraient jamais fait d’enthusiastes, s’ils n’avoient été secondés par des sermons. C’est l’orateur, et non l’écrivain, qui a ruiné Rome. Assurément les philosophes de nos jours ont un plus grand mérite que Luther; ils ont même un plus grand parti. Cependant, parce qu’ils ne prêchent pas, parce qu’ils se contentent d’écrire, ils ne renversent pas Rome, ils la rendent méprisable, et ne l’empêchent pas de subsister,” in Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linguet, Essai philosophique sur le monachisme (Paris, 1776), 157-58.
both. An orator, Linguet believed, could not be reduced to a fake effigy, he was one with his words, which he had to embody: “The persona is separated from the work [...] This will never happen to an orator. His glory is essentially connected to his persona [...] everything in him is indivisible.”¹¹⁷⁷ The philosophes ganged up on anyone who pretended to proclaim the truth, they took the airs and gave the impression of someone who actually knew the truth, but, Linguet pointed out, they refused to disclose that truth: “They have the baseness to disguise it.”¹¹⁷⁸ Since they socialized the criticism and privatized the affirmation, the philosophes destroyed that wholesomeness that stood at the basis of public peace and tranquility. The philosophes vented in public what should have stayed private – all kinds of idle thoughts and minute criticisms -, while withholding the truth for their private consumption. In doing this, the philosophes hindered the functioning of society by neither allowing it to run according to its own received, revealed or socially constructed “truths,” nor proclaiming a new one. By keeping their truth private, the philosophes did not allow that truth to become a way of life, and to be judged accordingly. The only way to judge it was according to abstract, shifty criteria that could be spinned any which way any skeptic wished to.¹¹⁷⁹

The philosophes’ “truth” could also be judged or intimated by their way of life, and here the record was, Linguet noted with a lawyer's pointedness, not spotless. Thinking perhaps also at Jansenists, whose vocal, organized and often open opposition the philosophes were sometimes piggybacking, Linguet pointed out how the religious fanatics of earlier ages braved inquisitions and persecutions, and lived or died by their truth. In contrast, the philosophe sowed anonymous doubts, fostered hidden conflicts, "Les sages déclament contre ceux qui prétendent leur annoncer la vérité. Ils publient qu'eux seuls en ont le secret: mais ils ont la bassesse de la déguiser" (Linguet, Le Fanatisme des Philosophes, 36).

¹¹⁷⁸  "Les sages déclament contre ceux qui prétendent leur annoncer la vérité. Ils publient qu'eux seuls en ont le secret: mais ils ont la bassesse de la déguiser" (Linguet, Le Fanatisme des Philosophes, 36).
¹¹⁷⁹ Linguet, Le Fanatisme des Philosophes, 38.
“abused” language, hypocritically kneeled in temples he aimed to destroy, and
treacherously embraced causes he and his party wanted to subvert: “Relegating to
posterity his shame and his disgrace, he publicizes the discovery of this inner doctrine
consisting in saying other things than you think, and in doing other things than you say.
He hides his true feelings behind obscure expressions. His discourses become a
perpetual allegory, whose key he circulates in secret. Speaking the language of the
People, he actually says something different, and abusing the words [...] he exposes to
error both the People that according to him are not supposed to understand him, and the
sages who often cannot.” Like the physiocratic despotism of economic freedom, the
despotism of the philosophes was made excessively oppressive by the fact that the
philosophes did not share the same reality, did not share their source of power, authority
and legitimacy with the people. Linguet had argued that “Oriental despotism” was mild,
and benign because both the sultan and his subjects were owners and Muslims, both
enjoying their properties and sharing a common religious language. Therefore, a people
and its leaders got to enjoy the property of the same language. Property of language
guaranteed the property of political process and of sociability. In their attempt to push
toward new ideas, the philosophes destroyed the ancient certitudes and alienated
language from the people. If the Enlightenment meant disembedding language from
reality, expropriating it from the people in order to allow the philosophes and their rich

1180 “Vil hypocrite, il se met à genoux dans les temples du Dieu qu’il apprend a mépriser. Traître dangereux, il
se presse autour des enseignes du parti qu’il brûle de combattre. Il se vante même de ce lâche subterfuge.
Consignant à la postérité sa honte et son déshonneur, il publie la découverte de cette doctrine intérieure, qui
consiste à parler autrement qu’on ne pense, à agir autrement qu’on ne parle. Il enveloppe ses sentiments sous
des expressions obscures. Ses discours deviennent une perpétuelle allégorie, dont il fait sous la main courir
la clef. En parlant la langue du Peuple, il tient un langage tout différent, et faisant de la parole un abus qu’on
ne peut pardonner qu’aux esclaves de la fortune, il expose à la fois à l’erreur, et le vulgaire qui selon lui ne
doît pas le comprendre, et les Sages qui souvent ne le peuvent pas” (Linguet, Le Fanatisme des Philosophes,
37).
masters absolute control over the production of reality, then, Linguet concluded: “It is never useful to enlighten the people, and it is often dangerous to enlighten them too much.”

As a representation of these ideas, Linguet published a tragedy about Socrates’ trial. Neglected by modern scholarship, *Socrate* (Amsterdam, 1764) fully displayed Linguet’s rejection of the philosophes’ version of the Enlightenment. *Socrate*, dedicated to Louise-Catherine de Clermont-Tonnerre, countess d’Humbecque, was intended by Linguet as a manifesto in both form and content. Linguet argued that his play had the merit of “simplicity,” of avoiding encumbering the action with “accidents,” “soliloquies,” “dreams,” “stories” and unbelievable characters, in other words with images and ideas not referring to any reality. All these defaults, he thought, plagued English and Spanish dramaturgies, and in both cases they were the outward, literary manifestation of a political failure that made of both England and Spain countries lacking in true liberty. Based on his first-hand experience of Spanish theatrical productions in Madrid, where he went as an aid de camp of the duc de Beauvau in the Spanish and Portugal campaign of 1762-63, Linguet argued that Lope de Vega and Shakespeare had both mixed the “riches of the most sublime genius” with the “absurdities of the thickest ignorance,” thus proving that dogmatism and licence lead to the same results. The English Parliament had the same unhappy cultural consequences as the Spanish Inquisition, thought Linguet, and both these institutions, one spreading anarchy, the other terror,

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1181 “Il n’est jamais utile d’éclairer les hommes, et il est toujours dangereux de les éclairer trop” (Linguet, *Le Fanatisime des Philosophes*, 41).
1182 Linguet, *Socrate*, Amsterdam, Marc-Michel Rey, 1764, v.
1184 “La scène est encore à peu près au même état chez ces deux nations, quoique les mœurs et le gouvernement s’y ressemblent si peu, quoique l’Inquisition a fait pousser dans l’une le respect pour le culte jusqu’à l’esclavage, quoique dans l’autre la liberté aille jusqu’à la licence” (Linguet, *Socrate*, ix).
accommodated themselves with the same kind of shapeless, monstrous, irrational culture, such as a dramatic culture missing that dimension of classical “realism” known as “vraisemblance.” Linguet defended the merits of “simplicity” as a national French characteristic. Simplicity was patriotic and it fostered true, because reasonable, liberty. The dramatic reasonableness of “vraisemblance” corresponded to political reasonableness, and both rejected religious dogmatism as well as political and religious licence as “barbarous.” Racine and Corneille managed to deal successfully with the “contorted mazes” (“labirinthes embarrassés”) of their plays because they were geniuses. But lacking in genius, Linguet’s contemporaries would do better to follow the example of Voltaire, himself an Anglophile in many things except in theatre.\textsuperscript{1185} At least that was what Linguet himself acknowledged having done.

Therefore, the only purpose of his play, Linguet proclaimed, was to show a man, Socrates, willing to die rather than “to betray even for a moment the truth that he had taught all his life.”\textsuperscript{1186} As such, the tragedy became a manifesto, if not against the parlements, at least against corrupt judges, targeted by another of Linguet’s publications in 1764, on the \textit{Nécessité d’une reforme dans l’administration de la justice et dans les loix civiles en France, avec la réfutation de quelques passages de l’Esprit des Loix} (Amsterdam, 1764). \textit{Nécessité d’une reforme} treated in the manner of a historically informed dissertation the subject of rationalizing and simplifying the enormous and confusing tangle of laws (“ces recueils effroyables d’Arrêts, de Règlements, d’Ordonnances, toutes indépendantes, et presque toutes contradictoires”) that allowed corrupt judges to avoid imparting true royal justice. \textit{Socrate} aimed to present the public with the very image of the victim of the abuses discussed in the theoretical treatise, and

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{1185} Linguet, \textit{Socrate}, xvi-xvii.
\textsuperscript{1186} Linguet, \textit{Socrate}, xix.
\end{flushleft}
thus to inspire “horror” for the “prevaricating judges” able to unjustly sentence a man to death. Linguet skilfully played on the conventions of French classical tragedy which forbade depicting the actual murder of a character on stage. Such evil deeds were supposed to take place off stage, in the wings, and then become the object of long on-stage discourses. By pushing the death sentencing of Socrates off the stage, Linguet implicitly assimilated the feats of corrupt judges with murder, too foul to be presented on stage, despite the contention of Anitus, the great priest and main persecutor of Socrates, that he cannot be made to account for the ways in which he chose to defend the interests of religion: “When I act here defending the interests of Heavens,/ I can be suspect, but never criminal.” Socrates’ daughter, the innocent Aglaé, attacks the Athenian “Senate” in terms that are very close to Linguet’s depiction of the courts of justice in Nécessité d’une reforme, in which Linguet deplored the chaos and corruption reigning in the legal world, and argued that injustice will thrive as long as justice was distributed by a medieval web of parlements, seigneurial, presidial and bailiwick courts, all staffed with people who bought their positions and who accordingly had a vested interest in defending a certain meaning of justice that was favorable to property owners. In Socrate, Aglaé denounces the Senate as a den of venal people, signing Socrates’ death warrant either with cynicism or by cowardness.

1187 “Cet horrible triomphe du crime sur la vertu, autorisé par les organes des Loix, est une de ces choses qu’il faut éloigner le plus qu’on peut des yeux et de l’imagination des Spectateurs. S’il est conforme à la vérité historique, il blesse les mœurs: il ferait presque rougir d’être homme [...] Mais il ne faut pas multiplier les exemples d’une faiblessé, ou d’une malignité si effrayante. Pour inspirer de l’horreur contre les Juges prévaricateurs, c’est assez bien de montrer l’Innocent mis à mort par leur ordre. Il n’est pas nécessaire de leur faire prononcer sur le Théâtre l’Arrêt qui le condamne” (Linguet, Socrate, xxii).

1188 “Quand je soutiens ici les intérêts du Ciel,/ Je puis être suspect, et jamais criminel” (Linguet, Socrate, 14, 1: II).

1189 Linguet, Neccesité d’une reforme, 6-9.

1190 “Ce Sénat n’est rempli que d’âmes corrompues,/ Au crime, à l’intérêt de tous les temps vendues”
The direct confrontation between Socrates and his persecutor Anitus comes only in the fourth act, but their conflict is played out in a series of proxy debates. Chief among the characters engaging in these confrontations are Socrates’ daughter, Aglaé, and Anitus’s son, Criton. Criton is Socrates’ disciple as well as Aglaé’s lover. Anitus, while the villain of the play, is far from lacking in good lines or in good reasons to condemn Socrates. As such, Anitus is an embodiment of the philosophes, of the power of reason to justify anything and to serve the egoism of those in power. Anitus condemns Socrates as a sophist whose wrong questions and right answers incite people to revolt or to question the official religion. But the official religion, Anitus’s religion, is a political religion, a Straussian “noble lie,” different from the Platonic “noble lie” in that it is fundamentally false, not fundamentally true. Anitus is conscious of his fundamental imposture, for he himself believes that the gods do not exist, that they are a mere political device, vested by tradition with the role and power of sanctioning public morality. For Anitus, the wise man is somebody who, though aware of the vacancy of Heavens, keeps this fact wrapped in silence and in mystery, so as not to disturb the moral and political consensus of a nation. In fact, Anitus himself is a sophist, since like the Sophists he aims to persuade, to enchain the people by playing on their emotions, not to help them find the truth. Anitus is not disinterested, he aims to sell what has purchase. Both Anitus and the Sophists believe in nothing: only Anitus chooses to use his persuading power in a politically conservative way. Socrates, on the other hand, appears as an enlightened believer in a divine Providence and his discourses resemble the Sermon on the Mountain.

(Linguet, Socrate, 17, 1: II).

Anitus starts by wearily admitting that Athens had always been swarming with sophists.\textsuperscript{1192} Socrates, Anitus admits, is different, since instead of amusing himself and others with the subtleties of his verbal craft, he proposed to reform abuses in the spirit of truth. Instead of toying with some superficially complex ideas able to maintain the soul in a state of smug stupor, flattering self-love and showmanship, Socrates dared to come up with plans for virtuous action that could replace the paralysis-inducing self-loving sophisms. Socrates proclaimed the truth as goal, reason as guide, and devotion to duty and to virtue as means.\textsuperscript{1193} Simplicity of faith prompted Socrates to condemn the corruption of the priests who lived off people’s misery and credulity, and Anitus summarized Socrates’ ideas in a way that brought to mind the conflicts between Jesuits and Jansenists, between the “merits” of mechanical piety and the proponents of contrition such as Socrates.\textsuperscript{1194} Facing Socrates’ “Jansenist” calls for true repentance as a condition for the expiation of sins, Anitus’s friend Melitus, a priest and senator, concludes in “Jesuit” fashion that Socrates’ calls for inner change and his disregard for outward acts of piety combined with his praise of virtue were meant to destroy the “temple.”\textsuperscript{1195} Anitus would like to bring the “proud” (“orgueilleux”) Socrates to his knees,

\textsuperscript{1192} “On a vu de tout temps s’élérer dans nos murs/ Des sophistes sans noms, des raisonneurs obscurs,/ Qui faisoient à grand bruit retentir leurs écoles/ De vaines questions et d’argumens frivoles” (Linguet, \textit{Socrate}, 4, 1: I).

\textsuperscript{1193} “Il osa proposer à son cœur intrépide,/ La vérité pour but, et la raison pour guide./ Il ne recommandait aux hommes corrompus/ Que l’amour des devoirs et celui des vertus” (Linguet, \textit{Socrate}, 4, 1: I).

\textsuperscript{1194} “Attaquant les abus qui soutiennent nos Temples,/ Et coupant les canaux qui portent aux autels/ Les vœux et les presens des crédules mortels,/ Arrêtez, disait-il, est-ce une vaine offrande,/ Est-ce un stérile vœu que le Ciel vous demande? Le Pontife accablé de vos nombreux présens,/ Les charge sur l’autel sans vous rendre innocens;/ Et ce Dieu qui du monde est le souverain maître,/ N’a point donné ses loix pour enrichir un Prêtre./ Croyez-moi, pour lui plaire, abjurez vos erreurs,/ Et que le repentir habite dans vos cœurs;/ C’est le repentir seul qui répare les crimes” (Linguet, \textit{Socrate}, 5, 1: I).

\textsuperscript{1195} “En laissant affermir ces funestes maximes,/ On aurait vu bientôt dans son Temple désert/ Gémir auprès du Dieu, le Prêtre qui le sert,/ Et les hommes parés du vain titre de Sages,/ A la seule vertu prodiguer leurs hommages” (Linguet, \textit{Socrate}, 5, 1: I).
praying and burning incense at the same altars as everybody else. Anitus’s civic religion stresses the importance of ritual and of homogeneity. Public, outward piety, far from fostering hypocrisy, actually discourages it. It is only the accent on “inner” virtue, a virtue that escapes public appraisal, that leads to hypocrisy and to the flourishing of imposture. Piety keeps society together in ways inaccessible to inner virtue. Therefore, for Anitus, virtue has to be public if it is to be useful. Piety is the only way in which inner devotion to gods becomes a civic religion, bonding citizen together. Relying only on inner virtue could in fact mask impiety and lead to a cult of great men instead of the cult of God.

In order to stop Socrates’ teachings from awakening the people from their ritualistic slumber, Anitus confesses to having paid “a vile writer” (“un vil écrivain”), Aristophanes, to “ridicule” Socrates in the eyes of the “gullible people” (“peuple crédule”). Linget hints thus at the alliance between the rich “Athenian” politico-religious establishment such as priests and senators, and the mercenary writers or sophists against the true enlighteners of the people. Beside attacking the wise Socrates in public, Anitus spies on him in private. In lines that remind us now of Rousseau’s “paranoia” and of Linget’s own later claims in Réponse aux docteurs modernes (1771) that the philosophes discretely controlled and manipulated public opinion, Anitus boasts that he has surrounded Socrate with “spies” and has isolated him by frightening all the philosopher’s friends into deserting him.

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1196 Linget, Socrate, 21, 2: II.
1197 Rousseau talked about the fact that Christianity, while a good “inner” religion, was insufficient as civic religion.
1198 Linget, Socrate, 5, 1: I.
1199 “De Socrate avec soin éclairant tous les pas,/ L’entourant d’espions qu’il ne redoutoit pas,/ Détachant en tous lieux de secrets émissaires,/ Dont mon or m’assurait les secours mercenaires,/ J’ai prépare de loin des armes contre lui [...] Tout m’assure en ce jour un succès favorable:/ La crainte a dispersé les amis du
But Anitus is not to be entirely confused with the “Jesuit/philosophe” alliance since he uses some Augustinian/Jansenist, and Linguetian as well, lines of attack against the wise Socrates. Thus, Anitus claims that philosophy is mere pride: “That foolish pride that he calls love of wisdom.” Anitus also denounces the cult of great men in moralist-Augustinian terms, always looking for the vain, ulterior reasons of generosity, virtue, or compassion. But Anitus does not question the appearances of virtue in order to find an authentic virtue, stripped of any worldly ambition, lust or lure. Anitus, the persecutor of true philosophy, responds to his son, Criton’s tearjerking appeals to conscience, to his “sensible soul” (“âme sensible”), and to virtue by stating clearly that he does not care about “that empty word of ‘virtue’” (“ce vain nom de vertu”). The only thing that counts for Anitus is to see people cowering under his power. The love of “pomp,” “honours,” the sight of so many “rich offerings” (“riches offrandes”), the image of people looking timidly at him and waiting for the superb priest to speak with God’s voice - these are what Anitus revels in. Anitus questions Socrates’ virtue because he considers him a more skilfull impostor than himself. Since Anitus clothes in religious garb his own ambition, pride, self-love, and luxury, he is sure that Socrates hides under a virtuous cloak his own true aims. Like the philosophes denounced by Linguet in his Fanatisme des philosophes, Anitus has no truth to offer, but he is eager to question the claim of “fanatics” like...
Socrates to have found a truth and to translate that truth in a moral life. Anitus displays all the symptoms of “philosophic” fanaticism.

Linguet thought that political and social life were based not on “natural laws,” but on power relationships. He maintained that there was no “natural right” of property, but merely an original theft. By way of prescription, that primeval theft gained the legitimacy of a vested interest in a certain social order shaped by certain historic (property) and natural (right to live) rights based on the possession and exercise of economic, military, financial and political power. Anitus was the perfect embodiment of that idea. His “humanism” was ontologically sealed on itself, and in making Anitus the villain of the piece, Linguet managed to denounce not “religious fanaticism,” but “philosophical fanaticism” posing as religious fanaticism. As Linguet argued in his _Fanatisme des philosophes_, while the religious fanatic believes what he preaches and surrenders his will at the threshold of his dogma, the philosophical fanatic is above all defined by pride, by egotism, by self-love, by his lust for power and self-assertion. Anitus perfectly fits this description, and if Voltaire would use _Mahomet_ (1741) to attack Christianity pretending to attack Islam, Linguet attacked the philosophes and what he considered to be their ego-driven teachings under the guise of attacking religious fanaticism. If Anitus is an evil character, he is evil not because he believes in something, but because he believes in nothing. During his fourth-act confrontation with Socrates, Anitus comes off as a Hobbesian, unwilling to debate points of dogma, but ready to use religion - that is people’s faith in something that might very well not exist - for political purposes. While Anitus finds something useful in “religion,” he finds nothing useful in truth. Thus, he declares to Socrates that while it might very well not be true that there are such beings as gods, people believe in them, and it is useful to harness this belief.
Like the “impostors” denounced in the Lucretian/pseudo-Spinozist literature flooding Western Europe between the middle of the seventeenth century and the end of the eighteenth-century, Anitus argues that even if gods are just “sacred lies” born out of human “weakness” and "imposture," they are politically useful since they have a grip on people's imagination, even if merely as old prejudices, as habits of the mind. A truly great man would therefore use these myths instead of exposing their hollowness and thus enlightening the people.\textsuperscript{1203} Linguet himself, in his polemics with the philosophes, would use this line of reasoning, arguing that while religion might not be ontologically true, it certainly was phenomenologically true: the people’s Christianity was a fact of life that the philosophes should not attempt to displace since this would entail getting rid of a very important element of the societal glue. Where Linguet differed from Anitus is that while Linguet acknowledged both property rights and religion as matters of fact, he refused to allow the rich to use them against the people. If Linguet refused to accept the place reserved for the “people” in the state built on the physiocratic “natural” principle of the sacredness of private property, Linguet also refused to instrumentalize people in the name of religion. Religion and private property were, for Linguet, important as foundational, popular bulwarks against the despotism of the rich. Religion and private property were, for Linguet, resources against economic, political, and cultural abuses. They were valid as popular facts, but not as establishment theories, or as myths to be used against the people in the way in which Anitus exploited religion. For Linguet, religion was legitimate as the people's way of coping with the life's hardships, but he

\textsuperscript{1203} “Pourquoi mettre au creuset les rêves de nos pères?/ Au-lieu de travailler a les décréder,/ Au lieu de les combattre, il faut en profiter,/ C’est la l’unique but, le triomphe du Sage./ De la triste raison l’erreur est le partage,/ Et le vulgaire aveugle en sa simplicité,/ Ne connaît point de borne à sa crédulité:/ Soit. Mais sans affecter un mépris inutile,/ Saisissant les ressorts qui le rendent docile,/ Un esprit male et ferme à son gré le conduit,/ Il appuie avec art une erreur qui séduit;/ Et bien loin d’en tirer un pressage sinistre,/ Il l’accrédite encor, et s’en fait le Ministre” (Linguet, \textit{Socrate}, 45-47, 4: I).
denounced the attempt by the elite to use people’s beliefs for the elite’s own benefit as parasitical as the physiocratic grain speculation in the name of economic liberalism.

In rejecting Anitus, the philosophes, and the physiocrats, Linguet rejected a morally unhinged reason, a sophistic reason smoothing things over, and justifying injustices in the name of modernization. In fact, in Linguet’s support of the monarchy we have to see his support of the unity of the three royal discourses - of justice, reason and will - against the discourse of reason deployed by the philosophes and the physiocrats. Anitus contends that the people have to be despised, manipulated and kept in the dark because “believe me, they are not born to think” (“crois-moi, pour penser le peuple n’est pas né”). In order to be “happy,” the people need to shy away from “reason’s useless light,” and live peacefully and contently toiling the land (“des fruits qu’il arrache à la terre”). Therefore, Anitus contends, both the establishment and the philosophes share an interest and therefore a mission, that of ruling the people by keeping it contentedly in the dark. The “priest” does this by “sowing errors” in people’s hearts, while the philosophes gain control by pretending to clear away the priestly “errors.” Both the philosophes and the priests control the people by controlling and making appeal to its emotions, by rhetoric. Both the priests and the philosophes, that is those who aim at domination by religious fanaticism and those who aim at domination by philosophical fanaticism, should make a pact whose benefits are laid out by Anitus in enticing terms, when he describes to Socrates the benefits they both could reap if only

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1205 “Le Philosophe altier qui détruit les erreurs,/ le Prêtre dont la voix les seme dans les cœurs,/ Ont les mêmes desseins et de pareilles vues./ Tous les deux voulant régner sur les âmes émues” (Linguet, Socrate, 47-48, 4: 1).
Socrates would kneel behind the altars tended by Anitus: strengthening Anitus's prestige, Socrates could share its benefits.\footnote{“Affermis mes honneurs, et viens les partager. / Feins que tes yeux se sont ouverts à la lumière [...] / Assis près de ces Dieux que ta fierté dédaigne, / Viens posséder le Temple et l’Autel ou je règne. / Sois Dieu toi-même, et vois les hommes effrayés / te prodiguer leur vœux et tomber à tes pieds” (Linguet, Socrate, 49, 4: 1).}

This scene could help clarify Linguet’s claims, in the *Avis à une mère* and in the *Fanatisme des philosophes*, that it is better for people to remain ignorant and obscurely productive. Beside the fact that, as I pointed out, Linguet merely wanted to oppose the false learning, the multiplication of words, ideas and opinions without any substance, it is clear after reading these passages that Linguet indeed regarded ignorance as the best way of life in the best possible world. His appeals to the felicities of ignorance are to be read in the context of his despair with the then current political and economic situation. If there was a true and a false learning, there was also a good and a bad “ignorance.” The bad learning as well as the bad ignorance led to slavery: slavery to one own’s passions or vices, to somebody else’s whims, to wage slavery. Real learning and good “ignorance,” similarly to Ivan Illich’s countercultural “deschooling,” had to do with one’s capacity to preserve one own’s freedom, to act according to his conscience, to preserve, even in the obscurity of poverty, an enlightened circle of personal autonomy. Linguet’s apology for ignorance was therefore partly an indictment of Old Regime France as well as of the forces that Linguet saw as subverting that Old Regime in the name of a false learning. Anitus represented therefore not only the establishment, but also the inverse image of this establishment as embodied by the philosophes opposition to it. Anitus represented the false dilemma that, Linguet believed, had torn France from the inside: that of an opposition and in fact complicity between a corrupt, fanatical or atheist establishment - at least thinking at the “high priests” of the official, Catholic, religion - and a corrupt,
philosophically, that is egotistically fanatical sect of intellectuals. The first preached total obedience, the second preached universal deliverance. Linguet denounced both groups as fundamentally immoral.

Linguet’s Socrates, philosopher and craftsman, was precisely an example of this simplicity, of this virtuous “ignorance,” of a character developing in the silence of his own artisanal workshop, of a conscience rooted in the freedom that only the power to live in obscurity allows. Accusing Anitus of “imposture” for pretending to be the voice of God asking for the death of Socrates, Aglaé points out that in fact Socrates was the true prophet, inspired by Gods. Anitus’s imposture proves successful in swaying the people from Socrate, and Anitus’s money and power help making Socrates’ friends desert him. But Anitus cannot have any influence on Socratic disciples such as Anitus’ son, Criton. Criton defies his father showing him that, despite Anitus’s cruel and unjust acts, he remains a good and obedient son only because of Socrates and his precepts.

Socrates appeared in Linguet’s play as a sort of “third party” figure, caught between fanatical and cowardly believers, the people, and fanatical and egomaniacal unbelievers represented by Anitus, manipulating a people derelict of responsibility, and reduced to a crowd. Compared to them, Socrates is depicted as “a friend of true

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1207 “Dans un vil atelier, lorsque dès ma jeunesse,/ J’osai me dévouer à chercher la sagesse;/ Et lorsqu’après vingt ans, devenu moins obscur,/ Je formai le projet, dans un age plus mûr,/ De publier le fruit de mes travaux pénibles,/ De rendre à la vertu tous les hommes sensibles,/ J’ai vu combien un jour il pourrait m’en coûter:/ Je l’ai vu d’un oeil ferme, et sans m’épouvanter [...] S’il faut de la vertu que je sois la victime,/ Mon unique regret c’est qu’il t’en coûte un crime” (Linguet, Socrate, 51, 4: I).

1208 Linguet, Socrate, 13-14, 1: II.

1209 Linguet, Socrate, 25, 2: III.

1210 Linguet, Socrate, 34-35, 3: I. Also Aglaé cautioned Cremes that his name and his betrayal of Socrates would be known, despite his confidence that his responsibility was lesser because he acted in conformity with the crowd, that he did not stand out: “Vous cherchez à couvrir votre peu de courage,/ Croyant que votre nom à l’opprobre arrache,/ Se perdra dans la foule, et restera caché./ Ne vous en flatez pas...” (Linguet, Socrate, 39, 3: III).
justice/just balance” (“ami de la juste équité”), “tender, modest, sincere, and full of humanity,/ Defying prejudices” (“tendre, simple, sincère et plein d’humanité,/ Bravant les préjugés”) but practising the virtues that Anitus only talked about. In Linguet’s play, Socrates becomes a Christlike figure tortured by the “Great Inquisitor,” a representation of truth persecuted in the name of a useful lie. Socrates answers Anitus’ cynicism by unceasingly preaching love, and mutual forbearance. Socrates’ appeals to that typically enlightened idea of “bienfaisance” even toward one’s enemies was supported by his optimistic theodicy. Thus, when Criton asks why his God allows the existence of evil, Socrates answers in typically enlightened Jesuit tones that God wants to reward the virtuous, but in order to do so they have “to merit” this reward. Therefore God, a personal god, maker of nature (“l’auteur de la nature”) watches over people, guides them, supports them, while also allowing them to be tempted.

While Anitus’ conscience is lost in politico-theological raciotinations, Socrates’ character emerges very clearly in his affirmation of the existence of God, of a personal god, maker of the whole nature, intervening providentially in people’s lives, rewarding the just and punishing the unjust. Socrates lives according to his faith, while Anitus merely uses the belief of others for the benefit of his own opulence. The character of Socrates allowed thus Linguet to denounce once more the disconnect between the multiplication of signs (words, ideas, gestures) and reality in a philosophe culture dominated by hermeneutical and economic middle-men. The politics of discourse, this

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1211 Linguet, Socrate, 36, 3: I.
1212 “Je dirai aux mortels; soyez doux, bienfaisans,/ Du Dieu qui vous créa montrez-vous les enfants;/ En aiment les humains ressemblez à leur père./ L’amour est le lien de la nature entière./ Aimez-vous, souffrez-vous, même avec vos défauts” (Linguet, Socrate, 52, 4: I).
1213 Linguet, Socrate, 68, 5: II.
1214 “Dieu lui tend les bras;/ Il l’appelle, il l’excite, et sa bonté suprême,/ Dans son sein veut un jour la couronner lui-même./ Mais le prix, sans combat, ne doit point s'emporter,/ Et pour y parvenir il faut le mériter” (Linguet, Socrate, 63-64, 5: I.
discursive take over reality could happen in both old-fashioned and new fangled ways: as a defense of an entrenched system masking injustice as tradition or as “sacred,” or as a call to a “liberation” that would lead right into the hands of either old established interests or of new “sects” and venal interests.

If it was true that the institutional, economic, and cultural framework of France had to be reformed, and that new realities required new concepts, Linguet rejected what he perceived to be the philosophes’ attempt to disenfranchise large sectors of the French society by way of a particular combination of nominalism and elitism that would make it impossible for common people or professional and intellectual elites outside the confines of the philosophe party to participate in the process of defining the meaning of their own lives, and the common good.
CONCLUSION

My dissertation has shown that the conflict between Gresset, Deschamps and Linguet on the one hand, and the philosophes on the other, can be understood as a conflict between realism and nominalism complicated by a clash between truth as correspondence and truth as coherence. The nominalism of the philosophes consisted in what Gresset regarded as their haphazard redefinition and multiplication of words and axiological criteria, that is to say of those values structuring a society. For Deschamps, that nominalism consisted in the philosophes’ refusal to struggle with the ontological problem, content merely to redefine certain ethical values and laws as "natural," and "natural" as "good," without looking beyond mere contextual convenience and political expediency. For Linguet, this nominalism consisted in the philosophes’ tactic of talking about the benefits of "culture," of "education," of "freedom," or of "free trade," and of the evils of "despotism," and of the guilds, without looking at the hard facts. If Gresset, in the 1740s, still assumed that the philosophes were naive, and if Deschamps accused them of actually being not very strong philosophers, Linguet openly cast them as the malevolent subversive enemies of both the monarchy and the common people. From the cultural and metaphysical debates of Gresset and Deschamps in the 1740s-1760s, to Linguet’s political, economic, and literary attacks in the 1760s-1770s, the philosophes went from cultural to political targets. During that time span, the philosophes became institutionalized, taking control over the French Academy, from whence they were able to inspire and support government policies such as Turgot’s deregulating decrees. It was precisely the conjunction between their nominalism and their conception of truth as
coherence that made Gresset, Deschamps, and Linguet consider the philosophes dangerous as policy makers.

Combining a theory of truth as consistency with a set of propositions manipulated by "society," or by the salons, the nominalism of the philosophes had the potential to give rise to a powerful sect, or faction. Gresset argued that a "deregulated" language, a language exposed to the fluctuations of fashion and contorted to serve the interests of the day, would lead to despotism, since it would make sociability, and thus solidarity and justice, impossible. In other words, removing control of language from the nation and the state, represented by the French Academy, in order to place it in the hands of the salons, would place the premises, the initial set of propositions and definitions according to which the philosophes could spin out their truth as coherence, into the hands of a faction. That faction could then control or at least ravage the whole of French society. Deschamps argued that neglecting the ontological problem led the philosophes to relativism and to cynicism, both of which predisposed them to serve tyranny. Coherent with certain premises while neglecting to be in concordance with reality, the philosophes' ideas could have harmful social consequences. For Linguet, nominalism and truth as coherence were combined in the philosophes' proclamation of certain laws or principles as "natural." But, Linguet argued, that which was "natural" was consistent only with the interests of those in power, not of the whole society. Cultural, metaphysical, and social realism combined therefore in different degrees for Gresset, Deschamps, and Linguet, who argued that the philosophes were not able, or refused, to account for what happened in reality.

Last but not least, by delving deeply into the mechanics of intellectual power and by using primary sources such as memoirs, correspondence, and documents of the French Academy, this study showed that, however high-powered and abstract, these
ideological conflicts among intellectuals did not remain immune from or uninfluenced by certain factional interests that bound the philosophers and their enemies to influential networks of patronage in old regime France. All three intellectuals analyzed in these pages thus serve as a useful tool to explore the consistency and the limits of the French philosophes’ Enlightenment. Far from being embittered relics of an obscurantist past, as conventional historiography depicts them, these “enemies of the philosophes” proved to be more radical in their quest for “liberty, equality and fraternity” than the philosophes themselves.

The payoff of my approach, the dissertation argues, is a better understanding not only of the Enlightenment, but of modernity as a whole, and of the French Revolution as the prototypical modern world-historical event. It is true that “modernity” can be understood as opposed to tradition, but it is no less true that there exists a “modern tradition,” and Jean Baudrillard defined “modernity” as the “canonical morals of changing.”1215 There is a stable modernity, and there are merely fashionable, perishable “traditions.” Modernity was described by a literary historian as a “phenomenon” merging “rationalization, alienation, urbanization, and accelerated movement (both historical and physical); an emphasis on communication and information [...] on individualism and self-invention [...], on contractual or transactional human relations.”1216 Bearing all this in mind, I understand “modernity” as that age when people had to learn to live in a world mediated on an industrial scale. Representative democracy, the rise of mass media, the standardized education systems, the emergence of new forms of political integration (civic, that is democratic, or political, that is totalitarian, religions), the regularization of

everyday life, the new economic instruments and institutions based on and operating with increasingly volatile standards of value, all these depended upon the creation of valid because widely accepted and, ideally, because truthful mediations.

I would argue therefore that Gresset’s, Deschamps’, and Linguet’s early probing of the ways in which factional interests could craft discourses that were capable of gravely distorting or totally obscuring public interest, together with their – and Rousseau’s – denunciation of the guilty relationship between financial and political power and certain segments of the intellectual establishment, are essential for understanding the way in which knowledge would be generated and thus reality mediated in a modern age that usually claims the Enlightenment as its direct forebear. Gresset’s, Deschamps’, and Linguet’s story seems to confirm French anthropologist Georges Balandier’s take on modernity. Balandier argued that modernity could not be reduced to a simple, and perpetual quest for a “new ‘novelty’”: “Modernity can be neither the flag of those cultivating originality with any price (those obsessed by the new look or the new wave), nor an alibi sheltering the mediocrities, nor a refuge for those looking to ensconce themselves in institutions opportunistically repainted [...] Modernity’s form and voice comes from what is happening deep under the surface, with what is moving at the bottom of things, with the works of a society and of a culture.”

Balandier’s understanding of the emergence and workings of modernity is, in fact, of a piece with Gresset’s, Deschamps’, and Linguet’s criticism of what, they argued, were the fashion-obsessed, sometimes mediocre, and surely opportunistic philosophes, whose epitome was, for all three of them, d’Alembert. All three of the figures studied here argued that the modernization of France was impossible without paying attention to the deeper mechanisms of sociability, endangered by unmoored concepts, to the inner workings of

law and economics, springing less from ideal “natural laws” and influenced more by power relationships, and to the need to ground any system of ethics in a general theory of being. Ironically, the French Revolution and the history of modern France would confirm these enemies of the philosophes’ insights.

If Gresset, Deschamps, and Linguet argued against the threat posed to sociability by vacuous, self-propelling language, modern historians saw in the French Revolution a classic instance of discourses taking off and over, perpetuating themselves and creating their own “reality,” populated with people executed for being suspect of being suspect.1218 Among those who denounced in the 1790s the French Revolution as the bloody result of a nominalist frenzy were the abbé Morellet and La Harpe, once young disciples of the philosophes and of the physiocrats, and enemies of Linguet and Gresset.1219 The revival of learning and the foundation of the “grandes écoles” – the École Normale Supérieure, the École Polytechnique, the Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers, the École Supérieure de Commerce de Paris, and so on – starting in 1794 and continuing all throughout the nineteenth century confirmed Gresset’s appeals for the preservation or the creation of institutions capable to protect standards of knowledge.

But the French Revolution did not serve only as a cautionary story about the destructive potential of unhinged language serving as a “charismatic” source of legitimacy. Robespierre, one of the most skilled practitioners of precisely such fiery language, sought to consolidate his power by tapping into other sources of legitimacy,

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such as a social contract with a nation of small farmers benefiting from the sale of “national goods” (biens nationaux). The history of France in the nineteenth and at least the first half of the twentieth centuries would be shaped by the very Linguetian social contract between a strong French state and the small landholders, a contract consecrated by the French Revolution and renewed by all French governments ever since (even, to much British chagrin, in the legal and financial context of the European Union’s “Common Agricultural Policy”).

Starting with the abbé Gregoire and bishop Antoine Lamouretette during the French Revolution, continuing with Joseph de Maistre, Louis Gabriel Ambroise de Bonald, or Pierre-Simon Ballanche under the Restoration, continuing with Victor Cousin, Robert Félicite de Lammenais, passing through French socialists such as Charles Fourier, Victor Considérant, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, through Ernest Renan, Charles-Bernard Renouvier, up to the modern French socialism embodied by Émile Durkheim, Jean Jaurès, Charles Péguy, or Marcel Mauss, from Robespierre’s cult of the Supreme Being, through Napoleon III and the Third Republic, and up to Charles de Gaulle’s intelligentsia, the engine of French reformism would be not dogmatic, monist materialism, but a religious humanism, that is a French version of “spiritualism” or idealism, a French brand of dialectic philosophy (easy to spot from Saint-Simon to Vladimir Jankélévitch, or Jean Wahl) that would make French progressive thinking immune to the harsher class-struggle appeals of orthodox, materialist Marxism. After all, the ethical systems accepted as part of the public orthodoxy of modern France would

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1221 For insights on this vast topic, see John Milbank, Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 51-75, 206-255.
be rooted in a dualist ontology more akin to Deschamps’ system, than to his enemies’ monist relativism. But that is of course another century's story.


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