



Vague Inquietudes and Uncertain Desires

[Men] have a secret instinct which leads them to look for distractions and occupations elsewhere, which derives from their feelings of constant wretchedness. And they have another secret instinct, remaining from the greatness of our original nature, which tells them that happiness lies only in repose, not frantic activity.¹

—Pascal, *Pensées* (1664)

This secret instinct is the first principle and the necessary foundation of society.²

—Voltaire, *Remarques (premières) sur les Pensées de Pascal*
(1728)

There is in Voltaire's comment a faint and strangely inverted parallel to Pascal's notion of *divertissement*. If man is naturally predisposed to enjoy the amusements of life, is not Pascal's supposed religious impulse a *diversion* from the instinct's primary and sexual purpose? As Voltaire quips a sentence later: "I do not know what our first parents did in paradise, but if each of them had made their own person the sole object of their respective thoughts, the propagation of mankind would have been seriously jeopardized."³ Pascal—the "sublime misanthrope" as Voltaire called him—may have been the moral and intellectual foil to the Epicurean enlightenment.⁴ In this regard, however, he was also its obverse mirror image.

For Pascal, as for Christians in general, human life is the field of finite illusion and the real is the City of God, man's original and eternal abode.

The virtue of man is to fix his sight and thoughts on the heavenly thereafter that lies in store and to pray with unflinching and undistracted devotion, lest his yearning be diverted and corrupted from its celestial journey. In this view of the world, Christ the Lord is also Christ the Healer and through him alone, says St. Augustine, could the patient soul recover from its fallen alienation.⁵ Over the course of the eighteenth century, the figure of the *médecin philosophe* will not only take the place of the *Christus Medicus*, he will also give diversion and alienation a whole new physiological meaning. Under the new medical gaze, religious inquietude went from being the expression of man's need for divine grace to becoming a perverted sexual instinct that strayed from the path prescribed to it by nature. Likewise, the chaste and fervid believer, once a model of righteous zeal, became perceived as "un fou à *retento semine*";⁶ a repressed prude who consoles the starved and disquieted body through the delusions of a hysteric imagination. Such is the case, says the Baron d'Holbach, of all the pious vestals who "give to their God, whom they depict with the most charming traits, the affection which they are not allowed to offer to fellow human beings."⁷ Unlike the mystic who seeks deliverance from the deceptions of the flesh, redemption, for the *médecin philosophe*, consists in releasing the body from the bondage of delusive idolatry. The cure entailed shifting the gaze from the transcendental to the mundane. It also meant inverting the theological dichotomy between the illusory and the real, between the way of error and the way of truth.

Ironically enough, however, no one depicted this metaphysical diversion of the senses more lucidly and more consistently than the man who would emerge as the Enlightenment's own sublime misanthrope—Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Ever since his Pauline illumination on the road to Vincennes, Rousseau experienced a moral and intellectual revelation that would eventually lead to his break with Diderot and the circle of free-thinkers he acquainted at d'Holbach's coterie, and to his self-imposed exile from what he deemed the corrupting effects of society. From the standpoint of the *philosophes*, Rousseau seemed to be yet another disgruntled hermit reciting a tired litany against the depravity of the world. He lamented the corruption of manners that prevailed in Paris, inveighed against the immorality of theater and actors, and like a prophet on a mountaintop, endeavored to set people back on the path of a lost virtue. The author of the *Confessions*, however, was not exactly a reincarnated St. Augustine. The elitist and mocking atheism he encountered in the coterie may have pushed him to take up the cause of moral uprightness and sever

all ties with his former associates, but Rousseau did not cease for this reason to continue speaking their language, and the kind of moral refuge he sought and proposed was less the promise of divine salvation than the chimerical illusions of deviated sensuality. “There are people,” he writes, “to whom everything great appears chimerical, and who in their base and vile reasoning will never know what effect even a mania for virtue can have upon the human passions” (*E*, 402; *OC IV*, 527).

As we shall see in this chapter, it is precisely this demystifying knowledge, proper to the medical gaze of the enlightened philosopher, that separates the Christian devotee from the masochist. Although they both submit to the same moral conduct of self-denial and self-sacrifice, they do so on opposite ledges of an unbridgeable epistemological chasm. The disciple of Christ justifies his self-denial on the divine ends it serves, the masochist, on the other hand, grounds his in the sensationist episteme of Enlightenment (and post-Enlightenment) culture. It is by exploring this shift that we can understand the seeming paradox of Rousseau’s “sensitive morality” or that dualistic admixture of sensuality and virtue that he terms, among other things, “the voluptuousness of an angel.” If this paradox is a clue to Rousseau’s self-portrait in *Le Persifleur* as a protean who is at times “austere and devout” and others “frank libertine,”⁸ it is also, as we shall see, what makes the *Confessions* read like a heterogeneous narrative, a hybrid cross of St. Augustine and *Thérèse Philosophe*.

BETWEEN DEVOTION AND LUST

Of all the libertine novels of the eighteenth century, the kind—to quote Rousseau—that were “read with only one hand,” *Thérèse Philosophe* is arguably the most infamous.⁹ Published anonymously in 1748 and attributed to Boyer d’Argens ever since Sade’s *Histoire de Juliette*, *Thérèse* is presented as the memoir of the eponymous nun who witnessed the “inside story” of the notorious 1731 scandal involving Catherine Cadière, a devout penitent from Toulon, and Father Girard, the Jesuit rector accused of exploiting his role as spiritual director to sexually seduce her. By exposing, in intricate detail, the sexual indiscretions of confessor and confessee (presented in the text through the anagrams of Dirrag and Éradice), *Thérèse Philosophe* follows the footsteps of the anonymous *L’Histoire de Dom Bougre, portier des Chartreux* (1741), Meusnier de Querlon’s *Histoire galante de la tourière des carmélites* (1745), and La Morlière’s *Les Lauriers*

ecclésiastiques (1747), libertine novels that combined erotic and religious imagery in the aim of sexually arousing the reader as well as unmasking the hypocrisy of the clergy's repressive attitude toward sex. Unlike its predecessors, however, *Thérèse Philosophe's* irreligion goes beyond the anticlerical critique. If the Marquis de Sade notes his approval of Boyer's novel and distinguishes it as "the sole work to have agreeably combined lust with impiety," it is because beyond the motif of clerical lubricity or duplicity, *Thérèse Philosophe* proposes to unveil the very sexual instinct that lies behind religious passion.¹⁰

It is precisely this realization that sets Thérèse on the path to becoming *philosophe*. Thanks to the mentorship and education of Madame C . . . and l'Abbé T . . . , two enlightened figures who save her from Dirrag's influence, Thérèse learns that the zealous feelings she and Éradice had devoted to God were but the sublimation of a repressed natural impulse. Recalling the secretly watched "spiritual exercises" through which the confessor's flagellations and penetrations moved the penitent but ecstatic Éradice closer to the heavens, Thérèse writes:

I can only remember that at least twenty times I was about to throw myself at the feet of my spiritual director and beg him to treat me as he was treating my friend. Was I moved by devotion? Or was it a movement of lust? It is still impossible for me to tell which it is.¹¹

Although the question remains coyly unanswered, Thérèse's *mise à nu* of the "mystical scenes" leaves no doubt as what the force driving her desire may have been. Thérèse may have sought to emulate her sister's virtue and receive in turn the same kind of treatment, but as her description of these "spiritual exercises" makes clear, things at the convent are not always what they seem. The cord of Saint Francis with which Dirrag flagellates and penetrates Éradice is, of course, nothing else but his erect penis, and the ecstatic self-annihilation before God proves to be but her metaphysical rendering of sexual plenitude: "You have seen how our good director introduced it into me. Well, I can assure you that I felt it penetrate into my very heart. If my devotion were any more perfect, I would have forever passed into the kingdom of heaven [*je passais à jamais dans le séjour des Bienheureux*]."¹²

If Éradice cannot recognize an orgasm even while experiencing one, it is because her obsession to reach a purely spiritual existence renders

her oblivious to the desires of her body. Following the confessor's dictum that "it is by forgetting the flesh that we can unite with God," Eradice confuses her lustful needs with a spiritual hunger and facilitates, thus, her manipulation and abuse by the libidinous priest.¹³ Set against this foggy backdrop of corruptive ignorance, Thérèse's eventual enlightenment becomes, ironically enough, a story of salvation. In the beginning of her memoirs, Thérèse writes that at the precocious age of nine, she felt "an uneasiness, longings whose object I did not know";¹⁴ and after being caught masturbating in her sleep and sent to the convent by her alarmed mother, she too came to regard the nascent impulses of puberty as the awakening of an ardent faith in God.¹⁵ Unlike Eradice, however, the fortunate and timely intervention of Madame C . . . and l'Abbé T . . . saves Thérèse from Dirrag's clutches, and the education she receives from them soon disabuses her of her error. Under their philosophical guidance as well as the wise and exemplary demeanor of their sexual relationship, she learns to identify the source of her uncertain longings and to embrace sexual pleasure as a natural need no different than thirst or hunger. In the midst of another secretly observed erotic scene which parallels and contrasts with the one watched in the convent, the dialogue on which she eavesdrops this time is of a completely different order. Here, metaphysical concerns and aspirations are brushed off as ridiculous chimeras good only to keep the credulous populace in check, and since the transparent discourse of her enlightened protectors does not resort to obscure metaphors or euphemisms (the penis, for example is no longer a malicious serpent as Thérèse had learned from her first confessor), the body's pleasures are presented to her in their concrete reality. By dissipating thus the veil of ignorance that characterizes religious jargon and explaining instead the "mysteries" of sexual pleasure through a rational analysis of the mechanisms and springs of the body, Madame C . . . and l'Abbé T . . . teach Thérèse to understand the desires of her body and as such, in the spirit of Kant's *Aufklärung*, to start thinking for herself: "je commençais peut-être à penser pour la première fois de ma vie" (*TP*, 129).¹⁶

THE GAZE OF THE PHYSICIAN-PHILOSOPHER

By defining sexual desire as first and foremost a physiological disposition, *Thérèse Philosophe* adopts and restates in novelistic form the kind of mechanical materialism advocated by immediate predecessors such as

Julien Offray de La Mettrie. In *L'Homme-Machine*, published a year earlier in 1747, La Mettrie posited that matter was capable of self-movement and affirmed consequently that life could be maintained without the need for mysterious forces or spirits. According to this view, the human body is “a machine which winds itself up,”¹⁷ and the soul is a mere fiction, a grand word like “spirituality” or “immateriality” fabricated by metaphysicians to denote the very physical faculty of the brain’s imagination.¹⁸ If the true philosopher, according to La Mettrie, ought also to be a physician, it is because he relied on material empiricism alone. Whereas the metaphysicians’ and the theologians’ investigations are based on a priori and unsubstantiated beliefs, the physicians, he writes, are guided instead by experience and observation:

Physicians have explored and thrown light on the labyrinth of man; they alone have revealed the springs hidden under coverings [*les ressorts cachés sous des enveloppes*] which keep so many marvels from our gaze. They alone, calmly contemplating our soul, have caught it a thousand times unawares, in its misery and its grandeur, without either despising it in one state or admiring it in the other. Once again, these are the only natural philosophers who have the right to speak on this subject. What could the others, in particular the theologians, tell us? Is it not ridiculous to hear them shamelessly pronouncing on a subject they are incapable of understanding, from which, on the contrary, they have been deflected by obscure studies that have led them into a thousand prejudices and, in a word, fanaticism, which adds to their ignorance of the mechanism of our bodies?¹⁹

Behind the external integument (the *enveloppes*), one is not bound to find another-worldly (and fictional) *primum motum* but rather the automatisms of our own corporeal matter.²⁰ Taking up the same metaphor to talk about her education under Madame C . . . and l’Abbé T . . . , Thérèse says:

Oh, how example and precept are great instructors in forging the heart and the mind! If it is true that they give us nothing and that each one of us has within him the seed of all of which he is capable, it is nevertheless certain that they serve to develop these seeds and to make us perceive the ideas and sentiments

to which we are susceptible, and which, without the examples, without the lessons, would remain buried and shackled under their coverings.²¹

Whereas the image of the stripped fruit calls to mind the erotic unveiling of Thérèse's own body, it is also a metaphor for her own philosophical self-germination.²² To *disenvelop* is to develop. It is the ability to self-reflexively master the matter where the divine soul was once thought to reside.

It is, in fact, through the eyes of La Mettrie's physician-philosopher that Thérèse recounts the events she had seen and the feelings she had experienced in the convent. "Through the ironic distance of the disabused narrator," notes Florence Lotterie in her introduction to the novel, "Thérèse analyses Dirrag's manoeuvres and sexual machinations in the greatest detail. She unveils a fundamental duplicity and, in doing so, affirms the demystifying power of the philosophical gaze."²³ What she thought was the "mystère" of Dirrag and Éradice's ceremony is henceforth elucidated through a purely mechanical diagnosis. Stripped of its theological dimension, the penitential flagellation becomes an erotic supplement to excite the director's worn-out erectile nerve ("un restaurant . . . propre à réveiller l'élasticité usée de son nerf érecteur" [*TP*, 99]) and the feeling of divine ecstasy is unmasked as nothing else but the enrapturing pleasures of the flesh. Regarding her own self-discipline, consisting of fasting, meditation, and wearing the hair shirt, the enlightened Thérèse is able to look back and perceive that far from healing her, the spiritual remedies she followed cost her her health. Recalling the diagnosis of the "habile médecin" who consulted her, Thérèse observes that the languishing effects of privation ended up throwing her machine out of gear:

That divine liquor which provides us with pure physical pleasure, the kind that can be tasted without bitterness; that liquor, I say, whose flow is as necessary to certain temperaments as the flow of the foods which nourish us, had ebbed unnaturally out of its proper vessels and thrown the whole machine into disorder.²⁴

By suggesting that her longing desire for the divine may have just been seminal fluid unnaturally retained and forced into unfamiliar vessels, Thérèse literally gives substance to what she (and Éradice) had mistaken for pure heavenly delight. In this view, which reverses the Christian

doctrine of divine immaterialism and which anticipates the modern psychological concept of sublimation, it is matter that lies at the origin; it is the flesh that becomes word.

THE MAD BRIDES OF CHRIST

A similar view of Christian ecstasy as unconscious and sublimated sexual desire is found in Denis Diderot's *La Religieuse*, a less bawdy (yet erotically charged) novel written around 1760.²⁵ Presented as the memoir of Suzanne Simonin, a young innocent nun who rebels against the convent life into which she was forced, *La Religieuse* offers a subtle but sustained critique of the religious manifestations taken by sexual desire when the latter is denied and repressed. In a passage in which Diderot jocosely plays with the semantic overlap between religious and erotic passion, he has the naive Suzanne describe the prayers held by the benevolent Madame de Moni at her first convent as both divinely inspired and seductive, oscillating between a spiritual desire for God and another that doesn't dare, or rather that doesn't know how to speak its name:

She would prostrate herself and pray out loud, but with such unction, eloquence, gentleness, elevation, and strength that she seemed to be inspired by the spirit of God. Her thoughts, her expressions, and her images went straight to the heart. At first you would listen to her, but little by little you were swept away along, you found yourself becoming one with her, your soul thrilling as you shared her ecstasy. Her aim was not to seduce, but that was certainly the result. You would leave her room with your heart on fire, joy and ecstasy radiating from your face, and weeping such sweet tears. (*TN*, 26; *LR*, 80)

Although the physical effects of the theo-aesthetic desire leave Suzanne perplexed as to their cause—"But what does any of that mean, if it has nothing to do with vocation?" ("Mais qu'est-ce que cela signifie, quand la vocation n'y est pas?") (*TN*, 47; *LR*, 111)—the longing desire sparked by Madame de Moni's devotion seems to be an answer in itself. In recounting the effect of the Mother Superior's prayers on her fellow nuns, Suzanne says that "[s]ome of them have told me that they felt growing within them the need to be consoled like the need for a great pleasure, and I think

that I too might have reached such a state if I had become more used to the experience" (*TN*, 26; *LR*, 80). The need for consolation may be the Christian's hope to heal the wounds of his fallen nature and regain once more the feeling of plenitude that the Deity alone can offer. As inferred by Diderot, however, the need to be consoled is the need to be sexually satisfied. Pascal may have had God in mind when he wrote that "this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite, immutable object." Through the philosopher's gaze, however, this transcendent agape becomes perceived as nothing more than a spiritualized perversion of what is essentially a sexual need.

How does one go about, then, satisfying an immense desire devoted to a cosmic and timeless being? Suzanne finds out, albeit unknowingly, at the hands of the lesbian Mother Superior of Sainte-Eutrope. Believing that their mutual compliments, kisses, and caresses were but marks of sisterly commiseration, the naive Suzanne experiences an orgasm which she fails to recognize and imagines instead that she had been struck by some sort of contagious disease.²⁶ Unlike *Thérèse Philosophe's* Père Dirrag (or even Madame de Moni), the seductive advances of Sainte-Eutrope's Mother Superior are not hypocritically disguised in celestial ideals, but she herself becomes a victim of sexual mystification when her confessor discovers and condemns her erotic consolations as acts of sin. Since then, Suzanne writes, "[t]he Mother Superior, whom I could neither help nor stop myself from pitying [*que je ne pouvais ni soulager ni m'empêcher de plaindre*], passed successively from melancholy to piety and from piety to delirium" (*TN*, 136; *LR*, 243). She had in fact succumbed to the kind of behavior for which the *convulsionnaires* of Saint-Médard had become notoriously famous, and resorted to acts of self-humiliation in order to gratify a sexual desire henceforth rendered taboo. She begged to be walked over and trampled on, and, in her delirious pleas, she confused her ardor for Suzanne with her passion for Christ:

"I'd prefer it if someone read me the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. Read it. . . . I'm starting to breathe again. . . . Just one drop of this blood is all that's needed to purify me. . . . Look, it's gushing forth from his side. . . . Hold that sacred wound over my head. . . . His blood is flowing onto me but passing straight over. . . . I'm lost! . . . Take that crucifix away. . . . Bring it back." It was brought back. She held it tightly in her arms, kissed it

all over, and then added: “These are her eyes; this is her mouth. When shall I see her again?” (*TN*, 146–47; *LR*, 259)

In *La Religieuse*, Diderot denounces convents as inhuman institutions where young girls, oftentimes imprisoned against their will, became socially and mentally sequestered from reality. Pushed to the extreme, however, this mental alienation becomes in itself a source of truth. As the passage from the *his* to the *her* suggests, the Superior’s final delirium serves if anything to unveil the sexual truth incubating within the brides of Christ.

It is perhaps through M. Manouri, the lawyer who represents Suzanne in her quest for liberty, that Diderot’s denunciation of the inhumanity of monastic institutions is the most poignant. Describing religious vows in his plaidoyer as an immoral affront against nature, M. Manouri calls into question the necessity of sacrificing so many mad virgins to Christ (“Quel besoin a l’époux de tant de vierges folles?”) or, for that matter, the belief that monastic life can suspend their animal instincts (“suspendent-elles les fonctions animales?”). In exposing the cruelty of religious vows, Manouri’s aim is also to draw attention to their unnaturalness. As he points out, vows of such a sort can be truly observed only by “a few abnormal creatures in whom the seeds of passion have withered and whom we should rightly consider as monsters” (*TN*, 74; *LR*, 151). If in her reading of this passage, Catherine Cusset, ponders whether this means that Suzanne is a monster, it is because, naiveté and inexperience apart, the heroine of *La Religieuse* is indeed presented by Diderot as someone who is impervious to sexual desire.²⁷ To the inquisitory Mother Sainte-Christine who suspects that an “esprit séducteur” lies behind Suzanne’s wish for freedom, she swears that “my heart is innocent and that it never harbored any shameful feelings” (*TN*, 51; *LR*, 117). And to the chagrin of the lesbian Mother Superior at Sainte-Eutrope, Suzanne declares bluntly: “I have no desires, and I don’t want to seek any which I couldn’t satisfy” (*TN*, 113; *LR*, 209). By granting his principal character this “monstrous” characteristic, Diderot’s point is that in depriving women of their first inalienable right—liberty—the convent remains unnatural even for those who would seem most apt. Despite loathing her religious state, Suzanne, in fact, carries her responsibilities with exactitude and is told that “nobody fulfills their duties better than you do” (*TN*, 51; *LR*, 118). But it is paradoxically for this same reason—for lacking any sort of desire—that Suzanne is not cut out to be a nun. Madame de Moni

tells Suzanne that “the good nun is the one who brings with her into the cloister some great sin to expiate” (*TN*, 56; *LR*, 125). This, of course, is not Suzanne’s case: born out of wedlock, she is forced to the convent to expiate her mother’s guilt. Madame de Moni’s injunction, however, is less about guilt than about the necessity for desire in religious passion. As she observes earlier in the same passage:

Out of all these creatures you see around me, so docile, so innocent, and so gentle, well, my child, there is scarcely one, scarcely a single one that I could not turn into a wild animal; a strange metamorphosis to which one is all the more susceptible the younger one enters religion and the less one knows of life in society. (*TN*, 56; *LR*, 125)

Outside the moderating dynamics of society, what Diderot called the “economy of affections” or the “fair balance between the passions,” there is only one step between celestial docility and animalistic indulgence.²⁸ If Madame de Moni is not able to perform the same kind of metamorphosis on Suzanne, it is because the necessary initial desire susceptible to be tamed does not exist.²⁹ After the “seductive” prayer lead by Madame de Moni, Suzanne seems to share her transports but it is rather out of duty than anything else. Other than that, she states, “I feel nothing of that sweet joy, that quivering, that melancholy, that sweet anxiety [*douce inquiétude*] that I’ve sometimes noticed in those in my position” (*TN*, 28; *LR*, 83). The expression “*douce inquiétude*” lies astride a semantic divide that marks the eighteenth century’s shift toward secular interpretations of religious experience. At face value, the term may refer to the soul’s restless yet ecstatic quest for eternal rest in God—St. Augustine’s *inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te*. On the other hand, considering the *Encyclopédie*’s definition of desire as “a kind of disquiet in the soul, which we feel for the absence of an object which would procure us pleasure were it present,” the expression can also take, for Diderot’s complicit readers at least, the tone of an inside joke.³⁰ Thus, when Madame de Moni says that she has never seen anyone enter religion “sans inquiétude,”³¹ she conjures an image of the convent that is akin to the description Manouri gives in his memoir: a place where passions are “nurtured in silence” (“*couvées dans le silence*”) (*TN*, 75; *LR*, 152).

Suzanne’s main reason for wanting to leave the convent, she says repeatedly, is her lack of vocation. Just as she feels no desire, she also

feels no passion, no calling for religious life. For Diderot, this is not just analogy but equivalence. Reduced to its biomechanical dimension, religious passion is nothing else but a “depraved affection” (“affection déréglée”); it is the path taken by the general penchant of nature when a “constraint deflects it” (“une contrainte la détourne”) (*TN*, 141; *LR*, 251). This notion of religious calling as hijacked sexual desire is also present in *Jacques le Fataliste*. Speaking through the voice of the Marquis d’Arcis this time, Diderot imputes this sensual diversion to the failure of pubescent boys and girls to apprehend the first stirrings of a natural instinct:

There comes a moment when almost every girl or boy falls into melancholy; they are tormented by a vague inquietude that affects everything and finds nothing to calm it. They seek solitude; they weep; the silence of the cloisters moves them; the image of peace that seems to reign in religious houses seduces them. They take the first manifestations of a developing sexuality for the voice of God calling to them; and it is precisely when nature is inciting them that they embrace a way of life contrary to nature’s wishes.³²

In *Eléments de physiologie*, Diderot was even more explicit in tracing the physical origins of metaphysical desire. Focusing once more on that defining stage that is puberty, he writes:

The dreams of young people in the state of innocence arise from the extremities of strands that initially contain obscure desires, vague inquietudes, a melancholy whose cause they ignore; they do not know what they want and, lacking any experience, they mistake this state for an inspired disposition, an inclination for solitude, spiritual retreat or monastic life.³³

What these two passages seek to reveal is the nature that underlies the pseudo-spiritual sentiment of inquietude. Unmasked, St. Augustine’s *inquietum* becomes nothing more than the indistinct ebullitions of a nascent sexual desire that confuses its myopia for the celestial infinite.³⁴

A CHASTE, LIBERTINE NOVEL

Rousseau depicts himself in the *Confessions* as having been sexually ignorant well into his teenage years.³⁵ Devoured with vague and uncertain

desires that demanded “an enjoyment whose object I could not even imagine,” Rousseau notes that at the age of sixteen, he was still “crying without any reason, sighing without knowing what for” (*C*, 34–35; *OC I*, 41). Shedding tears without knowing why, desiring without knowing what, did the boy who would eventually characterize religious devotion as an “opium to the soul” (*J*, 572; *OC II*, 697) confuse his “vague inquietude” for a divine calling?

“Poor little one, you must go where God calls you” (*C*, 45; *OCI*, 53), says Madame de Warens to Jean-Jacques during their first brief encounter in Annecy; and before leaving with the Sabrans for Turin, to enter a hospice of catechumens wherein he would abjure his Protestant faith for Roman Catholicism, Rousseau points out that “of religion I had all that a child of my age could have. I even had more of it” (*C*, 52; *OC I*, 62).³⁶ These little details on Rousseau’s faith contrast with the little he saw of it at the hospice. His intention in leaving for Turin may have been, as Madame de Warens states, to answer God’s call, but what he found there was anything but godly. His fellow male converts, for the most part Slavonians who called themselves Jews and Moors, were shameless bandits who looked more like “Devil’s bodyguards than aspirants for making themselves into children of God” (*C*, 50; *OC I*, 60); and as an example of their impiety and his disgust, Rousseau recounts how one of the self-styled Moors took a fancy in him and attempted to abuse his sexual innocence. Taking the kisses and caresses for signs of friendly affection initially, the naive Jean-Jacques became suspicious of the accoster’s intentions only after seeing him masturbate frenetically and ejaculate what he describes as “something sticky and whitish that turned my stomach” (“je ne sais quoi de gluant et de blanchâtre qui me fit soulever le cœur”) (*C*, 56; *OC I*, 67). Rousseau was no less acrimonious in his depiction of the female converts present at the hospice. For the most part, he says, “They were certainly the greatest sluts and the nastiest looking trollops who had ever infected the Lord’s fold” (*C*, 51; *OC I*, 60). The only exception to the rule was a young pretty girl with whom he had exchanged a few glances. He tried to make her acquaintance but quickly realized that her busy schedule rendered any tête-à-tête hopeless:

[I]t was absolutely impossible for me to approach her; she was so guarded by our old wardress and plagued by the Holy missionary who worked on her conversion with more zeal than speed. She must have been extremely stupid, although she did not have the

air of being so; for never were instructions so long. (C, 51; OC I, 61)

The suspiciously obsessive interest given the pretty girl by the zealous Missionary signaled that wanton promiscuity at the hospice was not limited to the students. After recounting the Moor's actions to the old *intendante*, she bid him to hold his tongue; and to make things worse, one of the hospice governors rebuked Jean-Jacques for making a fuss about a trifle and hinted that he might have enjoyed it. Rousseau's experience in what was supposedly the Lord's house was by all measures a source of religious disillusionment. In the brief autobiographical passage that precedes the Vicar's Profession of Faith, he notes that it was following his stay at the hospice, after being treated as a criminal for not yielding to the crime, that he learned to see religion as a man-made imposture. "Religion," he writes, "served only as the mask of interest and sacred worship only as the safeguard of hypocrisy" (E, 263; OC IV, 560).

Whereas the anecdotes from his experiences at the hospice serve to present the young Jean-Jacques as innocent and sexually oblivious, the manner in which they are narrated seems to pastiche, ironically, the anti-clerical, erotic *Bildungsroman*. The episode of the masturbating Moor, for instance, appears to be a re-gendered mirror of the confused touching sessions between Diderot's nun and her lesbian Mother Superior. Not only is the naive Jean-Jacques unable to recognize a sexual act even when engaging in one, but he also takes a page out of Suzanne's medical almanac when trying to make sense of it all: "I could not understand what this wretch had done. I believed he had been seized with epilepsy" (C, 56; OC I, 60). This sort of libertine naiveté is also evident in the manner in which Rousseau narrates the "pastoral" education of the pretty but stupid *catéchumène* who spends suspiciously long hours with the holy minister. Just like Thérèse before the mystical scenes between Éradice and Père Dirrag, Jean-Jacques's candid gaze says as much about his sexual ignorance as it does about the sexual machinations of the clergy. This narrative shifting between childhood nescience and philosophical critique provides Rousseau with a double-edged literary strategy that was all too common in the voyeuristic literature of the eighteenth century. As an ignorant naif, not only can he reveal his most intimate secrets, *se mettre à nu*, so to speak, in a casual and unsuspecting manner, but he can also employ this ingenuous casualness to unmask the metaphysical "zeal" of religious prevaricators. As Jacques Domenech points out, the sarcasm that characterizes the story of

the hospice recalls certain pages written by Rousseau's former philosopher friends: Voltaire and the Diderot of *La Religieuse*.³⁷

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault unsurprisingly seizes upon the talking sexes of Diderot's *Les Bijoux indiscrets* as an allegorical fable of modernity's will to make sex confess and divulge the truth.³⁸ Rousseau's autobiographical aim, we may add, is no different. Although he presents himself as an innocent child who desires without knowing what, the fact that he can look back and analyze his sensuality "in all the truth of nature" (C, 5; OC I, 5) means that, in retrospect at least, his gaze is as lucid as that of Thérèse turned *philosophe*.³⁹ He extricates himself from centuries-old layers of opinion, customs, and prejudices and, through the demystifying gaze of La Mettrie's philosopher-physician, he retraces the "chain of secret affections" (C, 586; OC I, 1149) to an original point which, he says, "determined my tastes, my desires, my passions, myself for the rest of my life" (C, 13; OC I, 15). Yet, if sex speaks in the *Confessions*, it is only to invest itself with a quasi-religious virtue. This paradox explains why Pascal Pia decided to include Rousseau's autobiography in his *Dictionnaire des œuvres érotiques* despite describing Rousseau's sexual life as "quasi-inexistent";⁴⁰ or why Jacques Domenech described Rousseau's retrospective analysis as both following and subverting the genre of the fictional libertine memoir.⁴¹ Rousseau may have viewed the senses as the only valid source of self-knowledge and rejected, as such, the fraudulent illusions fomented by religious hypocrisy. His libertine lucidity, however, did not stop him from embracing these illusions all the same.

"I HAD OFTEN TRAVESTIED RELIGION IN MY OWN FASHION"

To understand this incongruity, let us take a few steps back and consider again Rousseau's voyage to Italy. After he was enjoined by Madame de Warens to follow God's call, Rousseau notes that on the road to Turin, his aimless and uncertain *inquietude* seemed to have finally found its object: "My sweet restlessness [*Ma douce inquiétude*] had an object that rendered it less wandering and settled my imagination." In the sentence immediately following, however, he makes clear that the object in question was not precisely the Lord of Lords: "I looked at myself as the product, student, friend, almost the lover of Mme de Warens" (C, 48; OC I, 58). Whereas this passage reveals Rousseau's lucidity on the nature

of his desire—to paraphrase Thérèse, he is able to distinguish between the “movement of devotion” and the “movement of lust”—the manner in which he speaks of his chaste love for the divinized woman he calls *maman* recalls nonetheless the devotee’s passion for the Divine:

Always present to my heart, her *image* left no room there for any other; for me she was the only woman in the world, and since the extreme sweetness of the feelings she inspired in me did not leave my senses time to awaken for others, it protected me from her and from her whole sex. (*C*, 91; *OC I*, 109)

As a *presque-amant* (almost lover), Rousseau is like the Christian mystic who looks up amorously toward a sacred and unattainable object of desire whose serene fixity protects him from the distractions of concupiscence. To keep the soul pure from sin, writes one of Christianity’s early theologians, “the fixed purpose of our heart is to have God ceaselessly occupy our thoughts.”⁴² In Rousseau’s “travestied religion,” Madame de Warens’s omnipresent image plays a role that is no different. By absorbing all of his affection and *fixing* his imagination, it protects him from the perils of the female sex, hers included. “Mamma,” he writes, “was much more useful to me than all the theologians would have been” (*C*, 192; *OC I*, 228).

In the first pages of the *Confessions*, Rousseau traced his peculiarly “moral” sexuality to the spanking he received from Mlle Lambercier at the precocious age of eight. Following his account of the enjoyable punishment he endured at her hands, Rousseau notes that his desires limited themselves to what he had felt and did not seek anything else. In his erotic furors, he imagined himself in similarly submissive poses, obeying orders and asking for forgiveness at the feet of an imperious mistress; and the more his imagination inflamed his blood, the more he looked like a lover transfixed (“*amant transi*”). Whereas this static manner of loving kept intact the virtue of the object of desire, it also preserved his. Speaking of his peculiar sexuality as if it were a source of pseudo-Christian salvation, Rousseau writes that “what ought to have ruined me still preserved me” (*C*, 15; *OC I*, 17). It goes without saying that this barefaced *entrée en matière* scandalized Rousseau’s contemporaries. For the authors of *l’Année littéraire*, the sexual confession was proof of a deranged mind, enough to discredit his whole philosophical doctrine: “His *Confessions* provided us with the key to all his works. They depict a young debauchee, a libertine.”⁴³ For his former friend, the Comtesse de Boufflers, Rousseau was

“perverted in the most disgusting of ways . . . a filthy animal.”⁴⁴ For better or for worse, what the critics seem to have overlooked is the inherent religiosity of Rousseau’s sexuality. At an age when sexuality, to paraphrase Foucault, filled in the ontological vacuum left by the death of God, Rousseau followed the path traced by the materialists only to put God back in the sexual instinct.⁴⁵ This paradox did not escape the ever-observant Sade. Upon learning that the penitentiary administration had denied his request to receive a copy of the *Confessions*, Sade says, “Rousseau may be a dangerous author for clumsy bigots of your kind, yet become an excellent book for me. Jean-Jacques is for me what an *Imitation of Jesus Christ* is for you.”⁴⁶

THE MASOCHIST’S LUCIDITY

Unlike the pubescent Thérèse, Rousseau never confesses to having confused his nascent sensual desires for some kind of religious passion. A semblance of such a confession does appear, however, in the *Profession de foi du vicaire Savoyard* that Rousseau embedded in Book IV of *Émile*.⁴⁷ In a passage that seems to echo the Marquis d’Arcis’s account in *Jacques le fataliste*, the Vicar provides an account of his own puberty and describes this crucial moment as “an age when the heart is still free, but ardent, restless, avid for the happiness it does not know; it seeks it with a curiosity born of incertitude and, deceived by the senses, finally settles on a vain image of happiness and believes it has found it where it is not” (*E*, 293; *OC* IV, 604). Although for the likes of Diderot or d’Argens, this kind of philosophical perspicacity meant the ability to see and embrace the ardent inquietude as a natural desire of the body, the Vicar’s lucidity does not entail a change of behavior. He is able to perceive the sensual underpinnings of his “transcendent” illusions, yet submits to them all the same:

These illusions have lasted too long for me. Alas, I recognized them too late and have been unable to destroy them completely. They will last as long as this mortal body which causes them. At least, although they may very well seduce me, they no longer deceive me. I know them for what they are; in following them, I despise them. Far from seeing them as the object of my happiness, I see them as its obstacle. I aspire to the moment when, after being delivered from the shackles of the body, I shall be *me*

without contradiction or division and shall need only myself in order to be happy. While waiting, I am already happy in this life because I take little account of all its ills, because I regard it as almost foreign to my being, and because all the true good that I can get out of it depends on me. (*E*, 293; *OC IV*, 604–605)

In concluding the paragraph by saying that all the true good he can get depends on him, the Vicar presents his relation to the illusion as self-reflexive and self-sufficient, independent of God's inaccessible grace. "The illusion deceiving me," he writes, "may very well come from myself; it is He alone who can cure me of it. I have done what I could to attain the truth, but its source is too elevated. . . . It is up to the truth to come nearer" (*E*, 294; *OC IV*, 605–606). Short of divine intervention, in other words, the substitutive illusion, God's phantom surrogate, will have to do.

The lucidity with which the Vicar describes the sensual source of metaphysical desire is precisely what separates the masochist from the Christian mystic. Whereas the latter disciplines his carnal body to obey a divine power, the masochist, as René Girard points out in *Mensonge romanesque et vérité romantique*, is in essence too modern and too rational to know that what generates the transcendental sacred is desire itself:

The masochist is at once more lucid, and more blind than other victims of metaphysical desire. He is more lucid in that lucidity, increasingly prevalent in our time, which permits him alone among all desiring subjects to perceive the connection between internal mediation and the obstacle; he is more blind because, instead of following out the implications of this awareness to their necessary conclusions, instead of giving up misdirected transcendency, he tries paradoxically to satisfy his desire by rushing toward the obstacle, thus making his destiny one of misery and failure.⁴⁸

Put simply, the masochist is fully conscious that it is the obstacle interposed between the desiring subject and the object of desire that renders the latter desirable. This lucidity, however, does not stop him from blindly clinging to it. It is precisely in this sense, that we should understand the Vicar's own use of the term. Although the sentence "Far from seeing them as the object of my happiness, I see them as its obstacle," may be understood as the Vicar's wish to transcend sensuality and reach the

perfect plenitude of divine grace, the Vicar's point is more ambiguous than it may first appear. Absolute happiness for Rousseau is always an elusive state. It is impossible in the religious sense: "God alone enjoys an absolute happiness," he writes in Book IV of *Émile* (*E*, 221; *OC* IV, 503); but it can also take on the meaning of a Freudian Thanatos when considered sexually. Threatened by the prospect of possessing Madame de Warens, Rousseau writes that he was dreading what he desired, "seriously looking in my head for some decent means of avoiding being happy" (*C*, 163; *OC* I, 194). Since contentment is death, happiness is meant to be desired rather than consumed. Thus, if the Vicar can already make himself "heureux" without having to reach the "Séjour des Bienheureux," it is because, although sensually inspired, the vain illusions that he pursues have kept him free from any impurities. Far from being negative, they take on the conservative and inhibitive role traditionally played by God. They represent the invincible and fixed obstacle that lies between the *presque-amant* and the unthinkable.⁴⁹

Like Girard, Gilles Deleuze underscores the paradoxical lucidity that characterizes masochism and argues, as such, that it would be erroneous to base it on a hypothetical psychological repression. The masochist's blindness, he notes in *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch*, should be considered instead as a form of *verleugnung* or disavowal, a defensive fetishization whereby "knowledge of the situation as it is persists, but in a suspended, neutralized form."⁵⁰ It is, to paraphrase Freud, a simultaneous registration and repudiation of reality, or to quote Žižek, an internal "feigning or an as if which suspends reality."⁵¹ What is striking about the Vicar's confession is not that it fits this diagnosis but rather that it is in itself an *avant-l'heure* account of masochistic disavowal. The Vicar may have been lucid enough to see that the transcendent guide he has chosen to follow is a mere illusion inspired by the senses, but more importantly, this lucidity also enables him to formulate a cogent analysis of disavowal's uncanny oscillation between knowing and unknowing. In this state the subject knows the illusions for what they are but pursues them nonetheless as if he didn't know any better.

The fact that the Vicar can sound and phrase like a materialist *philosophe* suggests that the voice speaking through the obscure *curé* was, in part at least, none other than Rousseau's.⁵² Although there is no explicit mention of God in the *Confessions*, the psychological self-examination Rousseau undertakes in Book I echoes what he wrote a decade earlier beneath the cassock of the Savoyard priest. Not only does Rousseau reveal a similar

awareness of the illusory nature of his objects of desire—his passion, he writes, is a “love of imaginary objects” (*C*, 34; *OC I*, 41)—like the Vicar, he also retraces his disavowal of the real to an early substitutive confusion. When recounting the effects of the spanking he received from Mlle Lambercier, Rousseau states that “At the same time that my senses were inflamed, my desires were so well put off the track, that—being limited to what I had experienced—they did not venture to look for anything else” (“En même temps que mes sens furent allumés, mes désirs prirent si bien le change, que, bornés, à ce que j’avais éprouvé ils ne s’avisèrent point de chercher autre chose”) (*C*, 14; *OC I*, 15–16). According to Pierre Richelet’s *Dictionnaire Français* (1680), the expression “prendre le change” or “donner le change,” is used to denote a ruse by which one person is led to take one thing for another: “It is used figuratively and means beguilement when a person is skillfully fooled into mistaking something for another or someone for another” (“Il se dit au figuré et veut dire tromperie, qui se fait lorsqu’on oblige adroitement une personne à prendre une chose pour une autre, ou quelqu’un pour un autre”).⁵³ As it is used by Rousseau, however, the expression takes on a psychological significance. It is, for lack of a better terminology, Rousseau’s way of describing what the psychologist Alfred Binet would eventually coin as sexual fetishism in 1887. Whereas religious fetishism consists in the adoration of a material object to which the fetishist attributes a mysterious power, sexual fetishism, writes Binet, is one where religious adoration is replaced by a sexual appetite.⁵⁴ In his book, Binet describes Rousseau’s “voluptuousness of pain” as a fetishism of a psychic quality, in other words, fetishism for the imaginary. For Binet, however, Rousseau is as much an object of study as he is a worthy predecessor. After citing extensively from the first pages of the *Confessions*, Binet notes: “These are admirable pages of psychology. Never has a subject described a mental illness with more finesse and penetration. . . . The great merit of this observation is that it is complete; nothing is left in the shadows; everything is clear, everything holds together, everything is logical.”⁵⁵

“Is Jean-Jacques’ posterior,” asked Cocteau, “the rising sun of Freud?”⁵⁶ With the *Confessions*, Rousseau may have indeed paved the path for the psychological theories that would emerge in the late nineteenth century, but we can also argue that he is ironically more modern. By linking the pleasure induced by Mlle Lambercier’s spanking to a mental self-deception, Rousseau seems to anticipate Gilles Deleuze’s definition of masochism as a self-protective strategy by which the subject seeks to suspend the