



*Bohemians  
Before Bohemianism*

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# Bohemians Before Bohemianism

I am honoured and delighted to give the KB Lecture for 2006. The KB Fellowship, attached to the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study (NIAS), gave me the opportunity to roam through the Library's collections of French books and pamphlets while completing a book about slanderous literature in eighteenth-century France. Nearly all countries had an underground literature of this kind, one that attacked the private lives of public figures. Political slander existed in antiquity, and it spread throughout Europe from the courts of Renaissance Italy. But the "*libelles*" that flourished under the Ancien Régime in France had a peculiar flavour. They suited the taste of readers who were beginning to constitute a general public. Many of them became best sellers, and they horrified the government, which became increasingly worried about its standing before the public on the eve of the Revolution.

The most damaging libels from the 1770s and 1780s were produced by French expatriates in London – "at a hundred leagues from the Bastille", as they put it on the title pages of their tracts. Not only did they slander everyone of any importance in Versailles, but they also grafted a blackmail operation onto their literary speculations. The French government responded by sending a series of secret agents to assassinate, kidnap, or buy off the London *libellistes*. Their adventures and misadventures provide a rocambolesque tale which leads directly into the French Revolution. The same genre, developed by many of the same authors, fuelled polemics right through the Terror, but its substance changed, while its form remained the same. The literature of libel therefore shows how an

ideological current eroded authority under the Ancien Régime and became absorbed in a new political culture, one that reached its extreme point under Robespierre but that drew on ingredients from the world of Grub Street under Louis XV.

The most important of the French libelers in London was an extraordinary adventurer named Anne Gédéon Lafitte, marquis de Pelleport. While writing the general study of libels, I became increasingly fascinated by him. And while trying to reconstruct his biography, I uncovered one of his most fascinating books – not a libel but a novel, written in the Bastille, which tells the story of his life and of the hack writers that he encountered. Pelleport wrote it while another marquis in a neighbouring cell was writing another novel: *Les 120 Journées de Sodome*. Pelleport and Sade almost certainly got to know each other during the four years that they spent together in the Bastille. They may have had an important influence on each other's way of writing. Pelleport's book, *Les Bohémiens*, was as obscene as Sade's in places, but (in my opinion), it was far better written. Yet it has completely disappeared from the history of literature, just as Pelleport himself has vanished from the history of France. I have been able to locate only six copies scattered in six different countries. Thanks to the KB Fellowship, I have been able to study Pelleport and *Les Bohémiens* in detail, while completing my more general book. This Lecture covers most of my findings. I offer it with profound gratitude to the Koninklijke Bibliotheek and to the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study for providing me with three months of research and writing surrounded by rare books in an ideal setting.



Bohemianism belongs to the Belle Epoque. Puccini set it to music and fixed it firmly in late nineteenth-century Paris. But *La Bohème*, first performed in 1896, looked back to an earlier era, the pre-Hausmann Paris of Henry Murger's *Scènes de la vie de Bohème*, first published in 1848. Murger drew on themes that echoed from the Paris of Balzac's *Illusions perdues* (first part published in 1837), and Balzac's imagination stretched back to the Ancien Régime, where it all began. But how did it begin? The earliest bohemians inhabited a rich cultural landscape, which has never been explored.

In the eighteenth century, the term *Bohémiens* generally referred to the inhabitants of Bohemia or, by extension, to Gypsies (Romany), but it had begun to acquire a

figurative meaning, which denoted drifters who lived by their wits.<sup>1</sup> Many pretended to be men of letters.<sup>2</sup> In fact, by 1789, France had developed an enormous population of indigent authors – 672 poets alone, according to one contemporary estimate.<sup>3</sup> Most of them lived down and out in Paris, surviving as best they could by hack work and scraps of patronage. Although they crossed paths with grisettes like Manon Lescaut, there was nothing romantic or operatic about their lives. They lived like Rameau's nephew, not Rameau. Their world was bounded by Grub Street.

Of course, Grub Street, both as an expression and as a milieu, refers to London. The street itself, which ran through the miserable, crime-infested ward of Cripplegate, had attracted hack writers since Elizabethan times. By the eighteenth century, the hacks had moved to other addresses, most of them closer to the book shops, coffee houses, and theaters of St. Paul's Churchyard, Fleet Street, Drury Lane, and Covent Garden. But the *Grub-Street Journal* (1730-1737) perpetuated a mythical version of the milieu, and the myth continued to spread through works like Alexander Pope's *The Dunciad*, John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, Jonathan Swift's *A Tale of a Tub*, and Samuel Johnson's *Life of Mr Richard Savage*. Did nothing comparable exist in Paris? Certainly: Paris had an even larger population of scribblers, but they were scattered in garrets throughout the city, not in any distinct neighbourhood, and they never dramatized or satirized their lot in works that captured the imagination of posterity.<sup>4</sup> True, Diderot's *Neveu*

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- 1 The 1762 edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* gave the following definition: "BOHÈME, ou BOHÉMIEN, BOHÉMIENNE. On les nomme aussi Égyptiens. Ces mots ne sont point mis ici pour signaler les peuples de cette partie de l'Allemagne qu'on appelle *Bohème*; mais seulement pour désigner une sorte de vagabonds qui courent le pays, disant la bonne aventure et déroband avec adresse. "Une troupe de Bohémiens." On dit familièrement d'une maison où il n'y a ni ordre ni règle, que "C'est une maison de Bohème." On dit proverbialement "Qu'un homme vit comme un Bohème" pour dire qu'il vit comme un homme qui n'a ni feu ni lieu." Of the many studies of nineteenth-century bohemianism, see especially Jerrold Seigel, *Bohemian Paris. Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1930* (New York, 1986) and Cesar Graña, *Bohemian vs. Bourgeois: French Society and the French Man of Letters in the Nineteenth Century* (New York and London, 1964).
  - 2 In one of the earliest references to literary bohemians, *Le Chroniqueur désœuvré, ou l'espion du boulevard du Temple* (London, 1783), vol. II, p. 22, caustically described a boulevard theater, Les Variétés amusantes, as "cet espèce d'ancre de Bohémiens".
  - 3 Antoine de Rivarol, *Le petit almanach de nos grands hommes* (n.p., 1788).
  - 4 I have tried to develop this argument and to provide statistics about French writers during the eighteenth century in "The Facts of Literary Life in Eighteenth-Century France", in Keith Baker, ed., *The Political Culture of the Old Regime* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 261-291.

*de Rameau*, Voltaire's *Pauvre Diable*, and parts of Rousseau's *Confessions* evoked the life of Grub Street, Paris, and Paris's Scriblerian culture permeates less-known works such as Mercier's *Tableau de Paris*.<sup>5</sup> Yet not before Balzac and Murger did any writer bring *la Bohème* to life – no one, that is, except the forgotten author of a lost masterpiece.

But first, a warning: I may be succumbing here to hyperbole. Having found the book, *Les Bohémiens*, a two-volume novel published in 1790, I *want* to believe it is a masterpiece. A more moderate judgment would rank it as an extraordinary novel, written with wit and brio, but more important for its picture of literary life under the Ancien Régime than for its excellence as a work of art. I also must confess to a case of biographical enthusiasm. Having pieced together the life of its author, I find him one of the most interesting characters I have ever encountered in the archives. Anne Gédéon Lafitte, marquis de Pelleport, was, according to everyone who met him, a scoundrel, a reprobate, a rogue, a thoroughly bad hat. He charmed and seduced wherever he went, and left a trail of misery behind him. He lived miserably himself, because he was disowned by his family and relied on his wits and his pen to escape from destitution. He was an adventurer, who spent most of his life on the road. His itinerary led along the routes that connected Grub Street, Paris with Grub Street, London, and his novel provides a picaresque account of them. So whether or not it qualifies as great literature, it deserves to be studied as a guidebook to a world that lies off the beaten track of socio-cultural history.



Grub Street, Paris had many had exits. They led to Brussels, Amsterdam, Berlin, Stockholm, St. Petersburg, and other cities with Grub-Street cultures of their own. When Parisian writers found their careers blocked, their rent due, or a *lettre de cachet* hanging over their heads, they took to the road and sought their fortune wherever they could exploit the fascination for all things French. They tutored,

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<sup>5</sup> Louis Sébastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, reprint edited by Jean-Claude Bonnet (Paris, 1994), see especially the chapters entitled "Auteurs", "Des demi-auteurs, quarts d'auteur, enfin métis, quarterons, etc.", "Auteurs nés à Paris", "Apologie des gens de lettres", "Trente écrivains en France, pas davantage", "Les cent hommes de lettres de l'*Encyclopédie*", "La littérature du Faubourg Saint-Germain, et celle du faubourg Saint-Honoré", "Misère des auteurs", "Le Musée de Paris", and "Les grands comédiens contre les petits".

translated, peddled pamphlets, directed plays, dabbled in journalism, speculated in publishing, and spread Parisian fashions in everything from bonnets to books.<sup>6</sup> The largest colony of expatriates existed in London. London had welcomed refugees since the persecution of the Huguenots and the adventures of the young Voltaire. It also had developed its own style of mud-slinging journalism, first during the pamphlet wars of the Walpole ministry, then during the press and parliamentary battles provoked by John Wilkes.<sup>7</sup> The French refugees picked up tricks from the British press, but they also perfected a genre of their own: the *libelle*, a scandalous account of private life among the great figures of the court and capital. The term does not get much use in modern French, but it belonged to common parlance in the book trade of the Ancien Régime, and the authors of such works went down in the files of the police as *libellistes*.

The *libellistes* of London learned to survive in the Grub Streets of both capitals. Most of them had received their basic training as hack writers in the literary underground of Paris and crossed the Channel in order to escape the Bastille. After their arrival, they cobbled together a living by teaching, translating, and providing copy for the English presses that tried to satisfy the demand for illegal literature in France. Several expatriates took up journalism, particularly as contributors to *Le Courrier de l'Europe*, a bi-weekly published in London and reprinted in Boulogne-sur-Mer, which provided the fullest reports about the American Revolution and British politics that were available to French readers during the 1770s and 1780s. Others lived from *libelles*. Thanks to information supplied by secret informants in Paris and Versailles, they churned out books and pamphlets that slandered everyone from the king and his ministers down to boulevardiers and actresses. Their works circulated throughout the clandestine book trade in France and sold openly in London, above all in a bookshop in St. James Street operated by a Genevan expatriate named Boissière.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Aleksandr Stroeve, *Les aventuriers des Lumières* (Paris, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> See Rogers, *Grub Street*; John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976); Hannah Barker, *Newspapers, Politics, and Public Opinion in Late Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1998); and Arthur H. Cash, *John Wilkes: The Scandalous Father of Civil Liberty* (New Haven, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> The richest source of information about the French expatriates in London is the archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the Quai d'Orsay: Correspondance politique: Angleterre, especially mss 540-550. The following account is also based on the interrogations of Brissot in the Bastille, which reveal a great deal about Pelleport's activities: Archives Nationales, Fonds Brissot, 446 AP 2. The most important printed sources include the anonymous and tendentious but very

The French reading public had enjoyed revelations about the private lives of public figures for decades without turning against the government, but the *libelles* published after 1770 looked unusually threatening to the authorities, because they appeared at a time of acute political crisis. After crushing the parliaments in 1771, the Maupeou ministry ruled with such arbitrary power that many Frenchmen believed the monarchy had degenerated into a despotism. Calm returned with the accession of Louis XVI in May 1774, but ministerial intrigues and scandals climaxed by the Diamond Necklace Affair of 1785 brought public opinion back to a boil on the eve of the Revolution. Throughout this period, government officials learned to be wary of the power of public opinion – not that they expected anyone to storm the Bastille but because well-placed slander could damage relations within the delicate system of protection and clientage at the heart of politics in Versailles.

A great deal of the slander came from London. One of the first and most notorious *libelles*, *Le Gazetier cuirassé* (1771), was written by the leading *libelliste* in the colony of expatriates, Charles Théveneau de Morande. It took Chancellor Maupeou as its main target and sullied reputations throughout the court and capital with such effect that when Morande announced a sequel, an attack on Mme du Barry entitled *Mémoires secrets d'une femme publique*, the government resorted to extreme measures. At first it attempted to kidnap or assassinate Morande. When that plot failed, it decided to buy him off. It sent Beaumarchais to negotiate; and after a series of baroque intrigues worthy of Figaro, Morande agreed to suppress the entire edition for the princely sum of 32,000 livres and an annuity of 4,800 livres. The other *libellistes* soon followed his example. Instead of merely writing

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revealing *libelle* by Anne Gédéon de Lafitte, marquis de Pelleport, *Le Diable dans un bénitier et la métamorphose du Gazetier cuirassé en mouche...* (London, 1784); the police reports published by Louis-Pierre Manuel, *La Police de Paris dévoilée* (Paris, 1790), 2 vols.; Manuel's edited and paraphrased versions of papers from the Bastille, *La Bastille dévoilée, ou recueil de pièces authentiques pour servir à son histoire* (Paris, 1789-90), 9 "livraisons" or volumes, depending on how they are bound; and the superb collection of documents edited by Gunnar and Mavis von Proschwitz, *Beaumarchais et le Courier de l'Europe* (Oxford, 1990), 2 vols. The most important secondary work is still the thin and inaccurate biography of Charles Théveneau de Morande by Paul Robiquet, *Théveneau de Morande. Etude sur le XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1882), but it will be superseded by the biography of Morande that is now being prepared by Simon Burrows. The following account is based on these sources supplemented by material concerning Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville: J.-P. Brissot. *Mémoires* (Paris, 1910), 2 vols., Claude Perroud, ed.; J.-P. Brissot. *Correspondance et papiers* (Paris, 1912), Claude Perroud, ed.; and Robert Darnton, *J.-P. Brissot: His Career and Correspondence 1779-1787* (Oxford, 2001), which can be consulted online at the website of the Voltaire Foundation: [www.voltaire.ox.ac.uk/](http://www.voltaire.ox.ac.uk/).

to satisfy the demand in France for scandalous literature, they transformed the manufacture of *libelles* into a blackmail operation. Morande retired from the field, taking up an even more lucrative career as a spy for the French government, which gave him an opportunity to denounce his former colleagues.

Morande's main successor was Pelleport, an equally unscrupulous but far more talented writer. Using Boissière as a middle man, he invited the French government to bid on a series of *libelles*, which he promised to destroy if the price were right. They included *Les Passe-temps d'Antoinette*, an account of the queen's sex life; *Les Amours du visir de Vergennes*, a similar attack on the foreign minister; and *Les Petits Soupers et les nuits de l'Hôtel Bouillon*, revelations about orgies conducted by the princesse de Bouillon and her servants with her sometime partner, the marquis de Castries, France's naval minister during the American war. No copy of the first two works has survived, perhaps because Pelleport only invented the titles, intending to compose the texts if the French government came up with enough money. But he ran off an edition of *Les Petits Soupers* and used it as bait in blackmail negotiations with an inspector from the Paris police named Receveur, who arrived in London in 1783 on a secret mission to eradicate *libelles* and, if possible, *libellistes*. With Receveur disguised as a "baron de Livermont" and Pelleport hiding behind Boissière, the bidding got up to 150 louis d'or (3,600 livres, the equivalent of ten years' wages for an unskilled laborer.) But Pelleport held out for 175 (4,200 livres). Receveur was not authorized to go that high; so he finally returned to Paris, confounded by his inability to cope with the tricks of the *libellistes* (they led him on a merry chase through pubs and bookshops) and the customs of the English (they spoke an impossible language and had strange notions such as *habeas corpus*, trial by jury, and freedom of the press). Pelleport then proceeded to market *Les Petits Soupers* and followed it up with a far more damaging work, *Le Diable dans un bénitier*, a *libelle* about the mission to suppress *libelles*. While avoiding names and compromising information, Pelleport celebrated the expatriate writers as champions of liberty and mocked Receveur and his superiors as agents of despotism, who had attempted to establish a secret branch of the Parisian police in London. The cast of villains included the lieutenant general of police in Paris, the most powerful ministers in Versailles, and their main undercover agent in London: Morande.

Morande triumphed in the end, however, because he procured some proofs of *Le Diable dans un bénitier* with corrections in Pelleport's handwriting. He sent them to the French authorities as evidence for the argument that he had advocated as

a secret advisor to Receveur: Pelleport had become the chief of operations among London's *libellistes*; if the government could get its hands on him, while abandoning its policy of agreeing to pay blackmail, it might shut the whole industry down. Using Samuel Swinton, the owner of the *Courrier de l'Europe*, as an intermediary, the police lured Pelleport to Boulogne-sur-Mer and promptly arrested him. They locked him up in the Bastille on July 11, 1784 and on the next day imprisoned his close friend, Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville, the future leader of the Girondists during the French Revolution. Brissot had joined the expatriates in London, where he attempted to found a philosophic club or "Licée" and to support himself by journalism. But his projects threatened to collapse into bankruptcy; and when he travelled to Paris to raise money from some potential backers, the police arrested him on suspicion of collaborating with Pelleport.

Brissot remained in the Bastille for four months, Pelleport for four years and three months, an unusually long term. The few documents that survive from this period in the archives of the Bastille suggest that the police considered Pelleport a big catch, the source of the most outrageous attacks on the French court, and correspondence from the archives of the ministry of foreign affairs confirms this impression. The comte de Vergennes, foreign minister at the time of Pelleport's arrest, intervened actively in the attempts of the Paris police to repress the *libellistes* in London. Despite repeated entreaties, Pelleport had no hope of being released from the Bastille until after Vergennes's death on February 13, 1787. Even then he remained confined for another year and a half, until October 3, 1788, when a new minister with jurisdiction over the Bastille, Laurent de Villedeuil, finally agreed to his release. By that time the campaign against the *libellistes* no longer interested anyone in Versailles, and the public's attention had shifted to the debates about the Estates General.<sup>9</sup>

While Brissot went on to become one of the leaders of the French Revolution, Pelleport disappeared into obscurity. Perhaps he should be permitted to remain there. No scholar has ever devoted even a minor article to him – with one exception. In the *Bulletin du bibliophile* of 1851, Paul Lacroix, an authority on eighteenth-century French literature, wrote a brief notice about Pelleport's last book, a "roman philosophique et satirique, absolument inconnu, dont les exemplaires ont été détruits presque tous par l'imprimeur". Lacroix described it as follows:

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<sup>9</sup> *La Bastille dévoilée*, III, 66; *La Police de Paris dévoilée*, II, 235-6.

Voilà un admirable, voici un abominable livre. Il mérite d'être placé à côté des romans de Voltaire et de Diderot, pour l'esprit, pour la verve, pour le talent prodigieux qu'on est tout étonné d'y rencontrer; il doit aussi avoir sa place à côté des infamies du marquis de Sade et des grossières obscénités de l'abbé Dulaurens. Dès que ce singulier ouvrage aura éveillé la curiosité des amateurs, il sera certainement très recherché.<sup>10</sup>

Despite Lacroix's prediction, no student of French literature has ever taken up this extraordinary work, a kind of "Chef-d'oeuvre d'un inconnu", wittier and wickeder than the book published under that title by Thémiseul de Saint-Hyacinthe in 1714. Like Saint-Hyacinthe, Pelleport satirized pedantry, but his pedants were *philosophes*, and he grouped them with other hack writers under a category that constituted a new literary theme, one proclaimed by the title of his book: *Les Bohémiens*.

Pelleport's Bohemians do not yet have an "ism" attached to them, but they are not simply gypsies or vagabonds, as in the earlier usage of the word. Pelleport plays on that association, because he describes them as a troupe of drifters, who wander across northern France, living off the land – for the most part by stealing chickens from peasants. But his Bohemians are marginal men of letters, the same Grub-Street characters who had collaborated with him in the colony of French expatriates in London. Instead of appearing in a relatively favourable light, as in *Le Diable dans un bénitier*, they now are a pack of rogues. They deliver endless philosophic harangues, one more absurd than the other, bawl and brawl like schoolchildren, and pause only to gobble up whatever they can poach from the barnyards along their route. Pelleport disguises their names and even changes the disguises, so the characters reappear under different pseudonyms as the scene shifts and the narrator leads the reader through a succession of extravagant episodes. The narrator also interrupts the action by stepping out of the story and addressing the reader directly, sometimes with comments on the action, sometimes with digressions, sometimes even with a dialogue in which reader and

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Lacroix, "Les Bohémiens", *Bulletin du bibliophile* (Paris, 1851), pp. 408-9. Lacroix said that the book was printed by Charles-Joseph Panckoucke, who then destroyed most of the copies after discovering that he was slandered in it. A printer named Lavillette produced the title pages that appeared on the surviving copies, according to Lacroix's account, which unfortunately does not mention any sources.

narrator match wits, disagree, quarrel, and make up. The digressions account for more than half the text. They are essays on all sorts of subjects, whatever suits the narrator's fancy – travel, military tactics, poverty, women, and especially the hard lot of authors. The principal author is the narrator himself, an anonymous voice in the first person singular. His last digression turns into a full-fledged autobiography, which gives him an opportunity to insert himself into the action under a disguise of his own – he is a wandering poet just released from the Bastille – and to bring the book to an end, though hardly to closure, by joining the bohemians for a meal in his favourite tavern in the town where he was born.

Full of lively prose, parody, dialogue, double entendre, humour, irreligion, social commentary, outrageous incidents, and obscenity (but no vulgar language), *Les Bohémiens* is a tour de force. It belongs to several genres, for it can be read as a picaresque novel, a roman à clef, a collection of essays, a libertine tract, and an autobiography, all at the same time. In style and tone it evokes *Don Quixote*, which Pelleport cites as a main source of inspiration. But it also bears comparison with *Jacques le fataliste* (which Pelleport could not have read because it was not published until 1796), *Candide*, *Gil Blas*, *Le Compère Matthieu*, and *Tristram Shandy*. That such a work should have no place at all in literary history seems remarkable, but its non-existence in the corpus of French literature may be explained by the circumstances of its publication. It appeared in 1790, anonymously, without the name of a printer, and under an address that might have been false: "A Paris, rue des Poitevins, hôtel Bouthillier".<sup>11</sup> At this time, French readers were devouring so much material related to the Revolution that they had little appetite for anything else. Pelleport's novel contains no allusions to politics or current events. It takes place in a world that seems firmly fixed, not about to explode in a social upheaval. Pelleport must have composed the narrative – a complex, well-wrought text that runs to 451 pages in duodecimo format – during his confinement in the Bastille, when he had plenty of time and an

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<sup>11</sup> The address suggests the publishing house of Charles-Joseph Panckoucke, also in the rue des Poitevins, at the Hôtel de Thou. According to the *Almanach de la librairie* (Paris, 1781), Panckoucke was the only bookseller located in that short street. Pelleport used false addresses as a form of satire in his other works, and he satirized Panckoucke's pretentiousness and his overbearing treatment of authors in *Les Bohémiens* (1790), II, 112-113. As mentioned above, note 6, Paul Lacroix believed Panckoucke originally printed *Les Bohémiens* and then attempted to destroy the entire edition. There is no information relating to the hôtel Bouthillier or *Les Bohémiens* in Suzanne Tucoc-Chala, *Charles-Joseph Panckoucke et la librairie française 1736-1798* (Pau and Paris, 1977).

adequate supply of writing materials. But it was already out of date when it appeared in print. As far as I can tell, no journal mentioned it after its publication, and only six copies of it have survived, in six different countries.<sup>12</sup>



Whether or not *Les Bohémiens* will be recognized for its literary qualities, it deserves to be studied as a source of information about life in Grub Street during the 1780s. To do so, however, requires some familiarity with Pelleport's career and his relations with the other hack writers in London, especially Brissot. A police report, which dates from some time shortly before his arrest in 1784, provides some information about Pelleport's origins:

Il est fils d'un gentilhomme de Monsieur....Il a été renvoyé de deux régiments dans lesquels il a servi, Beauce et l'Isle-de-France, dans l'Inde, a été renfermé d'ordres du roi, à la réquisition de sa famille, quatre ou cinq fois pour des atrocités contre l'honneur. Il s'est marié en Suisse, où il a erré pendant deux ans. C'est dans ce pays qu'il a fait la connaissance de Brissot de Warville. Il est élève de l'Ecole militaire, et ce n'est pas le meilleur qu'elle ait fait: il a deux frères qui y ont été aussi élevés, et qui sont sortis, de même que lui, désagréablement des régiments dans lesquels ils ont été placés.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> It is conceivable that Pelleport wrote the book in 1789, but that seems unlikely, because it is a long and complex text, and Pelleport apparently spent much of that year traveling between Stenay and Paris, trying to put his affairs in order. He was released from the Bastille on October 3, 1788. The only allusion in the book that can be dated is a reference in vol. I, p. 113 to Antoine Rivarol's *Le Petit Almanach de nos grands hommes*, which was published in 1788. A reference in vol. I, p. 98 implies that the narrative takes place in 1788. A footnote in vol. II, p. 22 refers to the principal minister Loménie de Brienne, who was dismissed on August 24, 1788, as if he had recently fallen from power. A few vague allusions to the Third Estate – for example, vol. I, p. 11 – suggest that Pelleport may have been aware of Louis XVI's decision on August 8, 1788 to call the Estates General. But Pelleport mocked the governor of the Bastille, Bernard-René, marquis de Launay, as if he still occupied his position: vol. I, p. 9. *Les Bohémiens* contains many descriptions of monasteries, eigneurial dues, royal taxes, and the social order as if the Old Regime were still firmly in place. Nothing in it suggests a society about to erupt in a revolution or any of the revolutionary changes that occurred after 1788. The six copies of *Les Bohémiens* that I have been able to locate are in the Bibliothèque municipale de Rouen, the Bibliothèque du Château d'Oron, Switzerland, the Library of Congress, the Taylolean Library of Oxford University, the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek of Munich, and the National Library of Sweden in Stockholm.

<sup>13</sup> *La Police de Paris dévoilée*, II, 235-6.

In short, Pelleport was a *déclassé*. Born into an aristocratic family, he had sunk into the ranks of the *libellistes* after an unsuccessful career in the army and enough dishonorable conduct to have done time in prison at the request of his family.

Some additional material culled from other sources fills out the picture. According to a summary of Pelleport's dossier in the archives of the Bastille published in *La Bastille dévoilée* (1789), he was born in Stenay, a small town near Verdun. When he migrated to Switzerland in the late 1770s, he married a chambermaid to the wife of Pierre-Alexandre DuPeyrou, Rousseau's protector in Neuchâtel. They settled in the Jura mountain town of Le Locle, where she bore him at least two children and he found employment as a tutor in the household of a local manufacturer. By 1783, Pelleport had left his family in order to seek his fortune in London. That led to libelling and the four years in the Bastille. During his imprisonment, Pelleport's wife, who had been supported by relatives in Switzerland, came to Paris to plead for his release. She got nowhere, however, and escaped destitution only through the intervention of the chevalier Pawlet, an Irishman involved in educational projects in Paris, who arranged for her and her children to be supported by an orphanage for the sons of military officers. When at last he was freed, Pelleport joined his relatives in Stenay, then returned to Paris just in time to witness his former captors being lynched by the crowd on July 14. He tried to save de Losme, the major of the Bastille who had treated him and the other prisoners kindly, and barely escaped with his life. That exposure to street violence may have deterred Pelleport from throwing his lot in with the revolutionaries. As a radical pamphleteer who had been silenced by the state, he could have taken up a new career as a journalist or politician. Brissot and many others demonstrated that there were endless opportunities for an author with a sharp pen and a reputation as a martyr of despotism. But Pelleport disappeared from view after July 14. Apparently he retired to Stenay, leaving his children in the orphanage; and when he produced something for the press during the next few months, it was a bizarre, anonymous novel, which had no relevance to the great events of 1789.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *La Bastille dévoilée*, II, 66-75. This account was obviously touched up for dramatic effect in some places, but there is no reason to doubt that it provides accurate information from Pelleport's dossier in the Bastille, which has disappeared since then. It agrees with a similar description of Pelleport's early life by Brissot, which includes some additional details about Pelleport's married life in Le Locle (Brissot said he had two children; *La Bastille dévoilée* said he had four) and his activities in London: Brissot, *Mémoires*, I, 303, 346, 318-321, 395-396 and II, 8. Pelleport seems to have been born in

No direct relevance. But *Les Bohémiens* had an anti-hero, Jacques-Pierre Brissot, who appears in the first chapter as its main protagonist: "Bissot" (the "sot" suggesting stupidity), a hare-brained, flea-bitten philosopher. After being mocked throughout the text for his dogmatic absurdities, he reappears at the end as a bone-headed old-clothes dealer in London named "Bissoto de Guerreville" (a pun on Brissot's full name, Brissot de Warville). Having drafted the text during his long stay in the Bastille, Pelleport may have published it in 1790 in order to undercut Brissot's growing power as editor of *Le Patriote français* and a champion of the left. But there is no reason to suspect that Pelleport had any sympathies with the right. The novel had no overtly political message, and it condemned many of the injustices in pre-1789 France. Pelleport probably published it for the same reasons that move other authors – in order to see it in print and to make some money. But why did he harbour so much hostility to Brissot? They had been intimate friends. Their friendship came apart in the Bastille, however, and that experience, as Pelleport brooded on it during his long years in confinement, may help explain the circumstances and even some of the passion behind *Les Bohémiens*.



Pelleport and Brissot could hardly have been more different by temperament and background. Pelleport was a marquis, Brissot the thirteenth child of a pastry cook. Pelleport was dissolute, cynical, and witty; Brissot, serious, hard working, and humorless. While Pelleport served as an officer in India, Brissot laboured as a law clerk. With the help of a small inheritance, he bought a cheap law degree from the University of Rheims (it sold its degrees after giving perfunctory examinations), but he abandoned the law in order to devote himself to writing and, he hoped, a career as a successor to Voltaire and d'Alembert. Although he eventually produced

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Stenay in 1756 and to have died in Paris around 1810. The only information I can find about his career after 1789 comes from a report by the Préfecture de Police dated November 10, 1802, Archives Nationales, F7.3831 and published in Alphonse Aulard, ed., *Paris sous le Consulat. Recueil de documents pour l'histoire de l'esprit public à Paris* (Paris, 1903-1909), III, 386: "Le préfet de police a fait arrêter le nommé Aimé-Gédéon Lafite de Pelleport [sic], prévenu d'avoir tenu des propos contre le gouvernement. Pelleport est âgé de quarante-six ans; il a servi dans les îles; il a été mis à la Bastille, comme prévenu d'avoir fait des libelles contre la Reine. Il a été ensuite employé comme capitaine à la suite de la cavalerie sans être attaché à aucun corps. Il paraît qu'il a servi comme espion sous l'ancien régime et depuis la Révolution. Il convient avoir émigré, se targue de sa noblesse et ne nie point les propos qui lui sont imputés. Il n'est porteur d'aucuns papiers en règle. Ses moyens d'existence ne paraissent pas même assurés." There is a brief notice on Pelleport in *Biographie universelle (Michaud) ancienne et moderne* (Paris, 1843-1865), XXXII, 398.

a shelf-full of tracts on subjects like the injustices of the criminal law system, he began by churning out hack pamphlets and living the life of Grub Street. He had to flee Paris in 1777 in order to escape a *lettre de cachet* that would have sent him to the Bastille for slandering a lady known for her respectable role in a salon. In 1778 he began to work as a journalist by correcting proof for the French edition of the *Courrier de l'Europe* put out in Boulogne-sur-Mer. There he met his future wife, Félicité, and her mother, Marie-Cathérine Dupont née Clery, the widow of a merchant – two persons who also would figure prominently in *Les Bohémiens*. Then Brissot returned to Paris in 1779, Mme Dupont recommended him to a family friend, Edme Mentelle, a professor of geography at the Ecole militaire in Paris. Brissot became a regular member of Mentelle's literary circle, hoping to win recognition as an up-and-coming *philosophe*. Here it was that he crossed paths with Pelleport, a former student of Mentelle's who also was setting out to make his mark in the Republic of Letters. But while the trajectory of Brissot's career seemed at this time to point upward, Pelleport began to drift down through the literary ranks toward a make-shift existence as a hack and an adventurer. He left Paris for Switzerland, where he hoped to find employment with the Société typographique de Neuchâtel. But he managed only to land a job as a tutor in nearby Le Locle and soon found himself overburdened with a family.<sup>15</sup>

Brissot sent Pelleport several letters during the second half of 1779. Under the mistaken impression that his friend had joined the management of the Société typographique, he proposed a whole series of books for it to print. Pelleport passed the proposals on to the publisher, which eventually produced most of Brissot's works before the French Revolution and maintained an extensive correspondence with him. Three of the first letters in Brissot's dossier in its archives are addressed to Pelleport and are written in a familiar manner that would have been unthinkable in the eighteenth century, except in exchanges between intimate friends. Brissot calls Pelleport "mon bel ami", "mon cher", "mio caro", and never uses the customary formal salutation, "votre très humble et obéissant serviteur". On August 31, 1779, he closed his letter as follows: "M. Mentelle et son épouse se portent à merveille et vous assurent de leur amitié. Soyez persuadé que la mienne durera aussi longtemps que ma vie. Adieu, je vous embrasse et vais me coucher. Tout à vous." In a later letter, undated but from 1779, he notes, "La belle

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<sup>15</sup> In addition to the sources cited above, note 4, see Eloise Ellery, *Brissot de Warville: A Study in the History of the French Revolution* (New York, 1915), which is still the best biography.

voisine est toujours charmante. Dans nos petits comités, nous nous rappelons souvent votre souvenir." Brissot was referring to Félicité Dupont, who had left Boulogne in order to pursue her studies in the Mentelle household and would soon become his fiancée.<sup>16</sup>

Five years later, Brissot and Pelleport were occupying separate cells in the Bastille. The surviving evidence, though incomplete, shows how their careers converged and how the Bastille left its mark on lives lived in Grub Street. Brissot told his side of the story in a memoir, probably written in 1785, which reduced a complex set of circumstances to a simple conclusion: He was an innocent victim of despotism, and Pelleport was a dissolute *libelliste*.<sup>17</sup> In justifying his own conduct, Brissot implied that he had only the slightest acquaintance with Pelleport before they met in 1783 and that he avoided the French expatriates in London, because their immorality repelled him. He found Pelleport particularly depraved: "Pelleport avait de l'esprit, l'apparence de la bravoure, un goût effréné pour le plaisir, un mépris profond pour toute espèce de moralité."<sup>18</sup> Brissot acknowledged that he had tried to help Pelleport, hoping to reunite him with the family he had abandoned in Switzerland. In the course of this charitable activity, Brissot had learned about Pelleport's speculations on *libelles*, but he had refused to have anything to do with them – and therefore he was horrified when told by his interrogator in the Bastille that he had been arrested for complicity in the publication of *Le Diable dans un bénitier*.

Here Brissot was stretching the truth. Although he had not helped write the book, he had cooperated in its distribution. While in London, he had received a letter from his agent in Ostend, which acknowledged receipt of a shipment of *Diables*

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<sup>16</sup> Darnton, *J.-P. Brissot*, pp. 63-72. Brissot also indicated his close friendship with Pelleport and his worry about the dangers connected with Pelleport's literary activities in letters that he wrote to the Société typographique de Neuchâtel from London on October 7, November 11 and November 29, 1783: *ibid.*, pp. 279-285.

<sup>17</sup> See Claude Perroud, ed., *J.-P. Brissot. Mémoires (1754-1793)* (Paris, 1910), I, 302-397 and II, 1-27. As Perroud points out in his introduction, pp. xxv-xxvi, it seems likely that Brissot wrote most of this text in the summer of 1785, when he was defending himself against Desforges d'Hurecourt, the financial backer of his London "Licée", who had sued him for misappropriation of the funds. The first editor of the memoirs, François de Montrol, incorporated this and other material in an edition that he passed off as an autobiography written in 1793 while Brissot was a prisoner in the Abbaye awaiting trial before the Revolutionary Tribunal. In fact, only a small part of Brissot's memoirs was composed in such dramatic circumstances, and Perroud did not weed out everything that Montrol had added from extraneous sources.

<sup>18</sup> Brissot, *Mémoires*, I, 319.

that Brissot had sent to him and which mentioned forwarding 125 copies to a bookseller in Brussels and 6 to a bookseller in Bourges.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the police had confiscated a letter from Pelleport to a bookseller in Bar-le-Duc announcing a shipment of 6 *Diables* along with several of Brissot's works,<sup>20</sup> and they had turned up more compromising correspondence between Brissot and his agent in Paris, a Parisian businessman named Larrivée. It showed that aside from the marketing of *libelles*, Brissot's relations with Pelleport involved a murky "liaison d'intérêt".<sup>21</sup>

This information emerged from Brissot's interrogation in the Bastille. The police records of interrogations are dramatic documents, written in the form of a dialogue: questions and answers transcribed by a scribe, each page initialled by the prisoner as testimony to its accuracy. The questions show the police laying traps for their quarry; the answers document the attempts by the prisoners to avoid the traps and to hold back compromising information. Brissot stewed in his cell for 24 days without being informed of the reason for his imprisonment and without knowing that Pelleport had also been arrested. He was interrogated three times by Pierre Chenon, a veteran police officer – first on August 3, then on August 21 (this time for a full day, with a break at two o'clock for dinner), and finally on August 21. He seems to have held up quite well. When accused of collaborating on *Le Diable dans un bénitier*, he proved that the evidence against him had been fabricated.<sup>22</sup> Chenon then attempted to draw him into admitting some connection with eight other *libelles*:

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<sup>19</sup> Vingtain to Brissot, April 3, 1784 in Brissot, *Correspondance et papiers*, 467. See also François Dupont to Brissot, May 14, 1783 in *ibid.*, p. 54. Bruzard de Mauvelain, a close friend of Brissot's who lived from shady dealings in the underground book trade in Troyes, sent two letters to the Société typographique de Neuchâtel (STN) about Brissot's *embastillement*, which he attributed to the compromising connection with Pelleport: "Il a eu un tort de se lier avec un imprudent, et un plus grand encore – celui de se mettre sous la coupe du ministère de France." Bruzard de Mauvelain to STN, August 20, 1784 in Darnton, *J.-P. Brissot*, 349. Mauvelain probably had inside information from Brissot about the production of *libelles* in London, because he asked the STN to supply him with several of the most extreme works, including "6 *Passe-Temps d'Antoinette avec figures*". Mauvelain to STN, February 15, 1784, Bibliothèque publique et universitaire de Neuchâtel, Papers of the STN, ms. 1179.

<sup>20</sup> Interrogation of Brissot in the Bastille, August 21, 1784 in Brissot papers, Archives Nationales, 446 AP2, no foliation.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Morande had sent the police a statement by a London printer certifying that he had received proofs of *Le Diable dans un bénitier* corrected by Brissot and delivered by Brissot's brother, Pierre-Louis Brissot de Thivars, who was serving as his assistant in the Lycée de Londres. Brissot observed that *Le Diable* had been printed before his brother joined him in London, and the Chenon seems to have accepted that argument.

1. *La Naissance du Dauphin*
2. *Les Passetemps d'Antoinette*
3. *Les Rois de France régénérés*
4. *Les Amours du visir de Vergennes*
5. *Les Petits Soupers de l'Hôtel de Bouillon*
6. *Réflexions sur la Bastille*
7. *La Gazette noire*
8. *Les Rois de France jugés au tribunal de la raison.*<sup>23</sup>

Brissot denied having anything to do with them, but in defending himself during his first interrogation he let slip that Pelleport had been involved with some dubious publications and that his own involvement with Pelleport included some entangled financial affairs. Pelleport lived in a rooming house in Chelsea and could barely support himself by giving private lessons in mathematics and French. Brissot tried to help by finding him jobs copying manuscripts, translating English books, and contributing articles to the *Courrier de l'Europe*. But Pelleport kept coming back, asking for loans. Brissot gave him what little money he could spare. At one point, he bailed him out of debtor's prison, even though Brissot himself had been imprisoned earlier for debt. What pained Brissot most was the thought of Pelleport's wife and children (he said there were five of them), abandoned in Switzerland.

Brissot's responses made him appear generous and high-minded, but they also left an impression of two impoverished writers, struggling to keep their heads above water in the harsh environment of literary London. By the time he conducted the second interrogation eighteen days later, Chenon had accumulated a good deal of information about the economic circumstances of the affair. Letters confiscated from Larrivée and Brissot's brother showed that Pelleport's situation had become desperate during the first months of 1784. Chenon informed Brissot that "Pelleport, poursuivi par ses créanciers de Londres et par les marchands de France

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<sup>23</sup> The titles are quoted as they appear in the manuscript of the interrogation. Different versions of them can be found scattered through the correspondence of the comte de Vergennes, who as foreign minister supervised the attempts of the police to root out the *libelle* industry in London: see footnote 4. Most of these books were never published. Their titles were probably invented by the *libellistes* in order to extract blackmail. Pelleport certainly wrote one of the eight, *Les Petits Soupers et les nuits de l'Hôtel Bouill-n* ("à Bouillon", 1784), and he probably wrote another, *La Gazette noire par un homme qui n'est pas blanc* ("Imprimé à cent lieues de la Bastille, à trois cent lieues des Présides, à cinq cent lieues des Cordons, à mille lieues de la Sibérie", 1784).

avec lesquels il avait traité, et par l'état de détresse où il se trouvait, avait formé le projet de s'évader de Londres avec une veuve anglaise nommée Alfraide." Moreover, after Brissot had left for France, Pelleport plotted with his enemy, Swinton, and his financial backer, Desforges d'Hurecourt, to launch a new French newspaper about British affairs. Pelleport would edit it, Swinton would help manage its launching, and Desforges would finance it by withdrawing the funds that he had invested in Brissot's *Licée*. Moreover, this conspiracy followed an attempt by Pelleport to pry funding for another speculation from Brissot's mother-in-law, Mme Dupont, in Boulogne-sur-Mer.

This last episode exposed a great deal about Pelleport's biography. According to evidence gathered by the police, Pelleport's father died in late 1783, and Pelleport travelled to Paris (secretly, in order to avoid arrest) in the hope of collecting an inheritance. Acting as Brissot's friend and Parisian agent, Larrivée gave him a warm reception but then sent reports that he had run into trouble with his stepmother.<sup>24</sup> She had persuaded Pelleport père while he was dying to sell off an office that he owned for 70,000 livres and then transferred the money to the two children she had borne by him. She also employed various manoeuvres to tie up the rest of the estate, and so managed to keep virtually everything out of the hands of the three sons her husband had had by his first wife. He had collaborated in this Balzacian plot, because he had quarrelled with his first set of children – he had had all of them imprisoned at one time or other by *lettre de cachet* – and had lost contact with them after they left home for service in the army and adventures on the road. "Voilà, mon ami, le sort de certains vivants qui ont démérité dans leur jeunesse," Larrivée concluded in one of his letters to Brissot.<sup>25</sup>

Unfortunately, Pelleport had counted on inheriting 20,000 livres and had spent it before he could collect it by speculating on champagne in Reims. One of his projects for striking it rich was a "comestible étranger" or outlet for French luxury

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<sup>24</sup> Twenty of Larrivée's letters to Brissot are in Brissot's papers in the Archives Nationales, 446 AP 1. Writing to Brissot, who was then in London, on November 8, 1783, Larrivée reported that Pelleport and his brothers had recently arrived in Paris, hoping to collect as much as 20,000 livres apiece from their father's estate. Although he would later change his mind, his first impression of Pelleport was favorable: "C'est un bien aimable homme qui paraît avoir l'âme belle....Il me paraît vous être fort attaché."

<sup>25</sup> Larrivée to Brissot, December 15, 1783, *Ibid.* In this letter, Larrivée referred to "...les difficultés que mettent les tuteurs des enfants du second lit qui ont expolié presque tout en faveur de ces derniers, attendu l'absence des premiers enfants et le dégoût de leur père à penser à eux".

goods in London, which he planned to establish with Antoine Joseph de Serres de Latour, the editor of the *Courrier de l'Europe*.<sup>26</sup> Latour realized this speculation was a pipedream in time to get out of it, but Pelleport had contracted about 15,000 livres worth of debts in Reims, and the crates of champagne were travelling to Boulogne-sur-Mer for export to England before he learned that he would inherit nothing. He showed up in Boulogne himself, penniless, sometime in early 1784. What was he to do? He could not even pay for his passage across the Channel. Somehow he persuaded Mme Dupont, Brissot's mother-in-law, who had continued her husband's business as a merchant, to lend him 150 livres for the rest of his journey and to store the wine in her warehouses until he could dispose of it with a London retailer. The result was a financial fiasco, which ended in unpaid letters of exchange and a great deal of bad feeling. In June 1784, Brissot's brother, who was looking after his affairs in London, wrote to him in Paris, warning that Pelleport was a "menteur" and an "imposteur".<sup>27</sup>

This information may appear trivial, but it is worth mentioning, because it all turned up, thinly disguised as fiction, in *Les Bohémiens*. It also shows how interrogations in the Bastille could turn friends into enemies. Chenon probably dangled the evidence of Pelleport's duplicity in front of Brissot in order to provoke Brissot to denounce his former friend. For his part, Brissot was convinced that Pelleport had denounced him – a reasonable assumption in view of the fact that he had gone about his business undisturbed in Paris until the day after Pelleport's arrest.<sup>28</sup> The police often elicited denunciations by playing prisoners off against each other through a technique known as "confrontation". When they captured two suspects, they commonly grilled them separately, then brought them together and read the transcripts of the interrogations to both of them. Because each prisoner had usually attempted to shift the blame onto the other, this device often triggered mutual accusations, which led to further arrests or a fuller understanding of the case. Whether Pelleport and Brissot turned on each other in this manner cannot be determined, owing to gaps in the archives.<sup>29</sup> But Brissot's

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<sup>26</sup> Larrivière mentioned this project in his letter to Brissot of November 16, 1783 and Chenon described it in the interrogation of August 21, 1784.

<sup>27</sup> Those were the terms used in a furious letter to Brissot from his brother dated June 11, 1784, according to Chenon's description of the affair in the interrogation of August 22, 1784.

<sup>28</sup> *Mémoires*, II, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Full records of interrogations and confrontations for this period are missing from the papers of the Bastille. In one scrap that survived, dated July 20, 1784, an official of the prison noted: "Le

papers contain a denunciation of Pelleport that he wrote in the Bastille in order to exculpate himself.

Entitled “Mémoire pour le sieur Brissot de Warville”, it began with a sketch of Pelleport’s character: “tempérament vigoureux”, “esprit très agréable”, but: “Il a aimé les femmes et les plaisirs avec fureur, ce qui l’a perdu”.<sup>30</sup> Next, it outlined his checkered career in the army, as a drifter “réduit” aux expédients”, and as a feckless husband and father in Switzerland. It provided damning details about Pelleport’s libeling in London – his blackmail negotiations over *Les Passe-temps d’Antoinette*, his authorship of *Le Diable dans un bénitier*, and even his plans to produce an underground newspaper full of “anecdotes piquantes”, including an attack on the finance minister, Etienne de Calonne. Brissot’s wife Félicité considered Pelleport such a blackguard that she would not permit him to enter the house – and so earned his undying hatred (another theme that would turn up in *Les Bohémiens*). But, the memoir explained, Brissot continued to help him and even bailed him out of jail shortly before leaving for Paris. As soon as Brissot had left, Pelleport began plotting against him in other get-rich-quick schemes, including the speculation on the champagne, which turned into a swindle aimed at Latour. According to the last letter that Brissot received from London, Pelleport was about to run off to America with “une dame Alfred”. “Et voilà le monster qui contribute aujourd’hui à faire arrêter son bienfaiteur”, the memoir concluded. Everything suggests that Pelleport felt just as angry. He must have realized that Brissot had provided evidence against him and must have resented it, for he

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commissaire Chenon a travaillé avec le sieur de Pelleport et a emporté son [illegible word]. Il a travaillé ensuite avec le sieur Brissot d’Warville ce même jour.” Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, Bastille Papers, ms. 12 517. Confrontations are mentioned fairly often in records from earlier periods, as if they were a standard procedure. In one of the rare dossiers from the 1780s, Pelleport disputed some testimony about his activity as a *libelliste* that had been made by another prisoner, Hypolite de Chamoran, in 1785: “Je demande de nouveau qu’il soit entendu et confronté avec moi.” Undated letter, probably to the governor of the Bastille, Bastille papers, ms. 12 454.

<sup>30</sup> The memoir is a nine-page document, unsigned but written in Brissot’s hand: Archives nationales, 446 AP/2, dossier 6. It noted that after leaving the army, Pelleport set off for Switzerland “sans argent et sans aucun espoir”. He did all sorts of odd jobs, it claimed, “jusqu’à se louer pour cultiver la terre”. Eventually he found a position as a tutor in Lausanne, where he developed a liaison with the woman who had been a chambermaid to Mme Du Peyrou in Neuchâtel. “Et comme la plupart des Suissesses lisent *L’Héloïse*, et ont l’esprit romaneque, elle [a] cru avoir trouvé un St. Preux. Mais elle voulait le mariage.” M. Du Peyrou, “un des hommes les plus philosophes et les plus obligeants qui existent”, opposed the marriage but finally agreed to countenance it and got Pelleport his tutoring position in Le Locle, where he lived with his wife and two or three children for a year before deserting them.

remained shut up in the Bastille for more than four years, while Brissot was released after only four months.<sup>31</sup>



It is possible to form some idea of Pelleport's state of mind during his long imprisonment by consulting the few original papers from his dossier that have survived in the archives of the Bastille. He was granted permission to take occasional walks inside the prison yard in 1784 and to breathe the air from its towers once a week in 1788. He requested shipments of books, including Voltaire's *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, a work on Prussian military tactics, and a treatise on the harpsichord. There is no complete record of what he read, but he wrote a synopsis of "les épisodes philosophiques" in Raynal's *Histoire philosophique de l'établissement et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*.<sup>32</sup> He also wrote letters, mainly to his wife. As already mentioned, she had tried but failed to win his release and had escaped destitution only through the charitable intervention of the chevalier Pawlet. While she continued to solicit for Pelleport, he petitioned the

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<sup>31</sup> After the storming of the Bastille, Pierre Manuel, a radical member of the Paris Commune sifted through its papers and published excerpts from them in two anthologies of documents, *La Bastille dévoilée, ou recueil de pièces authentiques pour servir à son histoire* (Paris, 1789) and *La Police de Paris dévoilée* (Paris, 1790). Both contain information about the London *libellistes*. In the latter, volume II, p. 28, Manuel wrote a biographical sketch of Pelleport, comparing him with Brissot: "Brissot de Warville, dont le défaut est celui du sévère Caton, la passion de la vertu, ... ne devait pas être mis sur la même ligne que le marquis de Pelleport, qui avec autant d'esprit et de tempérament n'aima que les femmes et les plaisirs." That testimony should not be taken at face value, however, because Manuel was a close friend and political ally of Brissot's. Instead of printing Brissot's police file along with the others in *La Bastille dévoilée*, he turned it over to Brissot and invited him to write his own account of his imprisonment. Brissot obliged with an article that disavowed any connection with the *libellistes*: "La vraie cause de ma détention a été le zèle avec lequel j'ai de tout temps, et dans tous mes écrits, défendu les principes qui triomphent aujourd'hui": *La Bastille dévoilée*, III, 78. See also Brissot, *Mémoires*, II, 23. Pelleport received very different treatment. In summarizing the case against him in *La Bastille dévoilée*, Manuel made him out to be the chief of all the *libellistes* in London: "Les divers interrogatoires qu'on lui a fait subir pourraient tenir lieu du catalogue de tous les pamphlets qui ont paru depuis six ans. Il était soupçonné de les avoir tous composés": *La Bastille dévoilée*, III, 66. *La Police dévoilée* went further. It reproduced a police report that described Pelleport as an immoral adventurer and concluded, "Ce La Fitte de Pelleport est l'auteur des *Petits Soupers de l'Hôtel de Bouillon, des Amusements d'Antoinette* [evidently a reference to *Les Passetemps d'Antoinette*, a libelle that may never have been published], du *Diable dans un bénitier*, enfin de toutes les horreurs de ce genre": *La Police de Paris dévoilée*, II, 236.

<sup>32</sup> Undated note by Pelleport among various letters and messages that he asked the administrators of the Bastille to transmit and that they confiscated instead: Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Bastille papers, ms. 12 454.

governor of the Bastille to permit her to visit him. The Bastille records show that they met three times in 1784, nine times in 1785, twice in 1787 and twice in 1788.<sup>33</sup> Permission for these one-hour meetings was withdrawn in 1786, evidently because Pelleport had misbehaved in some manner. Judging from a note to a friend named Lambert that his guards captured, he had attempted to escape:

J'ai jeté la corde hier au soir chaque fois que vous êtes venu, apparemment qu'elle n'est pas arrivée jusques à terre. Je compte beaucoup que Pierre me laissera la porte ouverte pendant la nuit....Patientez un peu, mon cher Lambert, et attendez-mois. J'ai autant d'envie d'être de [sic] Londres que vous.<sup>34</sup>

Whatever the reason for the cancellation of his wife's visits, Pelleport begged to have them continued at the end of 1786, citing the military record of his family, "qui a servi l'Etat et nos rois durant six siècles" and his own misery: "trois ans d'expiation et de douleurs les plus horribles".<sup>35</sup>

After the visits resumed, Pelleport's relations with his wife deteriorated. Somehow she had managed to persuade the authorities to allot her a meagre pension of 25 livres a month from the budget of the Bastille, but she found it difficult to survive: "Ma position est affreuse", she lamented in a letter to the Bastille's major, the chevalier de l'Osme.<sup>36</sup> For his part, Pelleport complained in his own correspondence with the administrators of the Bastille that his wife refused to go to Versailles in order to lobby on his behalf. He suspected her of conspiring with his enemies to keep him in jail and perhaps of having become the mistress of her benefactor, the chevalier Pawlet:

Je ne suis pas encore décidé sur le parti que je prendrai, si j'attendrai le moment de demander justice des abus d'autorité du sieur de Breteuil [the minister in charge of the Bastille] ou si je

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<sup>33</sup> Records of these visits and other details about Pelleport's confinement appear in the administrative correspondence of the Bastille's officers: Bastille papers, ms. 12 517.

<sup>34</sup> Undated note, Bastille papers, ms. 12 454.

<sup>35</sup> Pelleport to the baron de Breteuil, December 16, 1786 in Bastille papers, ms. 12 454.

<sup>36</sup> Mme Pelleport to de l'Osme, April 1 [probably 1788]: Bastille papers, ms. 12 454. One of de l'Osme's relatives had served with Pelleport's brothers in the army, and de l'Osme treated Pelleport in a friendly manner. Pelleport remained grateful to him and tried unsuccessfully to save him from lynching after the storming of the Bastille: *La Bastille dévoilée*, III, 69-70.

mettrai un terme prompt à ma vie....Tout ce que je demande, c'est qu'on ne me tire pas violemment de ce cachot, qui probablement sera mon tombeau....Je n'aurais jamais cru que M. le chevalier de Pawlet mît pour prix aux bontés qu'il a pour les miens mon déshonneur et la perte de ma liberté et de ma vie....Que le sort d'un homme est malheureux lorsque, vil jouet de tout ce qui tient à lui, il est comme un sabot que des enfants malins font tourner à coups de fouet, tantôt d'un côté, tantôt de l'autre.<sup>37</sup>

Bastille prisoners often filled their letters with lamentations in the hope of softening their captors' resistance to pleas for their release, but there is no reason to doubt the despair expressed by Pelleport. As the weeks turned into months and the months into years, he had reason to believe that he never would be freed.

He filled much of the time with writing. From the beginning of his imprisonment, he was given a pen, ink, and paper.<sup>38</sup> The most important result of this liberal treatment was *Les Bohémiens*, but Pelleport also composed some poetry, which gave him an outlet for his feelings, as he explained in one of his letters: "Les Bastillants tiennent un peu de la condition des malheureux indiens et des misérables nègres....Il vaut mieux danser au bruit de ses chaînes que de ronger vainement son frein."<sup>39</sup> The verse that survives in his dossier shows him venting his resentment in short, satirical *pièces fugitives* aimed at Bernard-René de Launay, the governor of the Bastille:

*Avis au Journal de Paris sur un songe que j'ai eu*

Laun.. vient à expirer! quoi! passant, tu frémis.  
Ce n'est point une calomnie.  
Pour son honneur, moi, je m'en réjouis.  
C'est la meilleure action de sa vie.

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<sup>37</sup> Pelleport to François de Rivière de Puget, lieutenant du roi in the Bastille, November 22, 1787, Bastille papers, ms. 12 454. In a previous letter to de Puget, undated and in the same dossier, Pelleport wrote that despite his reproaches to his wife, he still felt "beaucoup d'amitié pour elle".

<sup>38</sup> In an undated note to the Bastille's governor, the marquis de Launay, de Losne recommended granting the following request from Pelleport: "Je vous prie, Monsieur, de laisser écrire le sieur de Pelleport, de lui donner des livres, plume, encre et papier." A note at the bottom, dated July 11, 1784, indicated that such permission had been given: "Fait comme il est requis." Bastille papers, ms. 12 517.

<sup>39</sup> Undated note by Pelleport to an unidentified person, Bastille papers, ms. 12 454.

Madrigal sur ce qu'on s'est plaint que l'auteur était méchant

Laun.. s'est plaint que j'ai l'esprit méchant.  
D'un coeur si bon le reproche est touchant.<sup>40</sup>

Pelleport scattered similar verse through his published writing. Most of it had the same tone – biting, sardonic, disillusioned.<sup>41</sup>

A note of nihilism accompanied the mockery that Pelleport turned on the world. The documentation that surrounds his imprisonment does not provide access to his innermost reflections, but what little can be known suggests that they were dark. He brooded over the denunciations that barred his way to freedom while others, like Brissot, were usually released after a few months. He had scores to settle, not just against Brissot but against nearly everyone whom he had known in London – and especially Morande, "libelliste et calomniateur de profession".<sup>42</sup> "Il serait mille fois plus heureux pour moi d'être tombé entre les mains des sauvages du Canada qu'en celles des calomniateurs", he wrote to de l'Osme. "Il vaut mieux, Monsieur, périr d'un coup de tomevack [sic] que de succomber sous les aiguillons empoisonnés des insectes venimeux qui m'ont réduit à souhaiter la mort à chacun des instants où j'aperçois à la sombre lueur de mon tombeau les restes de mon existence."<sup>43</sup> In his despair, Pelleport seems to have abandoned all belief in higher principles. Such, at least, was the testimony of another London *libelliste* who was

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<sup>40</sup> Undated verse by Pelleport on a scrap of paper under the heading "Mes adieux à Pluton", Bastille papers, ms. 12 454.

<sup>41</sup> Pelleport published a 31-page, satirical poem, *Le Boulevard des Chartreux, poème chrétien* ("à Grenoble, de l'Imprimerie de la Grande Chartreuse", 1779). It contains a great many attacks on monasticism written from a worldly perspective, and it celebrates the good things in secular life, especially women and liberty (p. 21): "Liberté, *libertas*, vive la liberté / Plus de cagoterie et point d'austerité." Although the poem is anonymous, Pelleport clearly identified himself as its author in two autobiographical passages in *Les Bohémiens*, I, 124 and 129. He also cites it in the preface to his translation of a tract by David Williams, *Lettres sur la liberté politique, adressées à un membre de la Chambre des Communes d'Angleterre, sur son élection au nombre des membres d'une as sociation de Comté; traduites de l'anglais en français par le R. P. de Roze-Croix, ex-Cordelier* ("seconde édition, imprimées à Liège aux dépens de la Société, 1783-89"). In the preface he describes himself (the translator) as "le Révérend Père de Roze-Croix, auteur du *Boulevard des Chartreux* et de bien d'autres petits ouvrages en vers". The only copy of *Le Boulevard des Chartreux* that I have been able to locate is in the Bibliothèque municipale de Grenoble, section d'études et d'information: 0.8254 Dauphinois.

<sup>42</sup> Pelleport to de Launay, undated letter, Bastille papers, ms. 12 454.

<sup>43</sup> Pelleport to de l'Osme, November 16, 1784, Bastille papers, ms. 12 454.

captured by the police in 1785, Jean-Claude Fini, alias Hypolite Chamoran. Fini described Pelleport not only as the author of the worst of the *libelles* produced in London but also as a "fourbe", a "monstre", and a "disciple de Diagore qui, lorsqu'on lui parle de la cause première qui régit l'univers, vous répond par un sourire ironique et trace un zéro, qu'il appelle sa profession de foi".<sup>44</sup>

Whom to believe? How to sift through fragments from the Bastille in order to piece together a picture of a life that shattered there? If indirect evidence be admitted, one can turn to a final source, the life and works of a man who never testified about Pelleport but who shared the Bastille with him: the marquis de Sade.



Sade's imprisonment in the Bastille, from February 29, 1784 to July 2, 1789, coincided almost exactly with Pelleport's: July 11, 1784 to October 3, 1788. Did those four years of cohabitation produce any intellectual exchange? Impossible to say. The two men had a good deal in common. Both were marquis from the old *noblesse d'épée*, both had been imprisoned at the request of their families for misbehaviour in their youth, both wrote obscene novels – at the same time and within close range of each other. Their names appear in close proximity in the records of the Bastille.<sup>45</sup>

Daily life in the Bastille was certainly hard, but it is easily misunderstood, owing to the myths that cloud the reputation of the place – the revolutionaries' nightmare of a house of horrors, on the one hand, and the revisionists' pastel-tinted picture

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<sup>44</sup> Jean-Claude Fini (known as Hypolite Chamoran or Chamarand) to de Launay, undated letter (probably mid-1786), Bastille papers, ms. 12 454. Chamoran was detained in the Bastille from November 27, 1785 until July 31, 1786. He and his supposed wife, Marie-Barbara Mackai, seem to have been involved with Pelleport in the production of *libelles* and the blackmailing operations in London; but he denied everything and denounced Pelleport vehemently during his stay in the Bastille. He is mentioned briefly in *La Bastille dévoilée*, III, 101 and in a letter from Morande to the foreign minister, Armand-Marc, comte de Montmorin, April 28, 1788 in von Proschwitz, *Beaumarchais et le Courier de l'Europe*, II, 1013.

<sup>45</sup> For example, in notes about special requests and permissions granted to prisoners, a clerk recorded that de Sade's wife had sent him a waistcoat and a candle on November 13, 1784 and that Pelleport's wife had visited him on November 19, 1784: Bastille papers, ms. 12 517, folios 79 and 82. Two recent books in the vast literature on de Sade contain detailed accounts of his life in the Bastille: Laurence L. Bongie, *Sade: A Biographical Essay* (Chicago, 1998) and Francine du Plessix Gray, *At Home with the Marquis de Sade: A Life* (New York, 1998). On Sade's writing in the Bastille, see especially, Jean-Jacques Pauvert, *Sade Vivant* (Paris, 1989).

of a one-star hotel, on the other. Modern notions of imprisonment do not correspond to eighteenth-century practices. The Bastille was a converted fortress, used for the confinement of special prisoners who were usually arrested by *lettre de cachet* and kept without trial for indefinite periods. For the small minority who remained confined for several years, like Pelleport and Sade, the psychological burden could be terrible, but they were not cut off from all contact with the outside world or even with each other. Prisoners did not share cells – nearly half of the 42 cells in the fortress were empty throughout the 1780s – but sometimes by special permission they were allowed to mix with one another. The most privileged occasionally had dinner together. They played cards, chess, and even billiards for a while in 1788. They had ample opportunity to read and write, at least when the rules were relaxed during the late eighteenth century. They received plentiful supplies of books, paper, and writing instruments. Some even devised ways of exchanging notes.<sup>46</sup>

The Bastille had a fairly extensive library; and although it did not contain much fiction, the prisoners sometimes wrote their own. Did they have any knowledge of each other's literary activities? The surviving evidence does not provide an answer to that question. One can only affirm that imprisonment and the enforced leisure it produced weighed heavily on some of the prisoners, provoking them to reflect on their lives and to express their thoughts in writing. Despite its thick walls and general gloom, or perhaps because of them, the Bastille functioned as a greenhouse for producing literature. It was in the Bastille that Voltaire began *La Henriade*, that La Beaumelle completed his translation of Tacitus, and that Sade drafted *Les 120 Journées de Sodome*, *Aline et Valcour*, and the first version of *Justine*. While this strange neighbour was venting his passions through his pen, Pelleport drafted a work that expressed a similar gamut of emotions but with a sharper style and greater literary skill.

Such is my assessment. Others may find *Les 120 Journées de Sodome* far superior to *Les Bohémiens*. But Pelleport's book deserves at least to be known. Having described the circumstances of its production, I would therefore like to discuss the text.

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<sup>46</sup> See Monique Cottret, *La Bastille à prendre. Histoire et mythe de la forteresse royale* (Paris, 1986), 31-33 and 129; Claude Quétel, *De Par le Roy. Essai sur les lettres de cachet* (Toulouse, 1981), 48-49; and Joseph Delort, *Histoire de la détention des philosophes et des gens de lettres à la Bastille et à Vincennes* (Paris, 1829; reprint Geneva, 1967), 3 vols.



The book opens as Bissot wakes up in a miserable bed in a garret in Reims. He has just bought his law degree, but that extravagance exhausted his savings, 300 livres, and he finds himself deeply in debt. What to do? The best solution he can hit upon is to become a philosopher instead of a lawyer – that is, to skip town before the bailiffs can clap him into debtors' prison. He justifies this resolution by delivering a "discours philosophique"<sup>47</sup> to his brother, who serves as his side-kick and has been sleeping beside him. It is the first of many philosophical harrangues scattered through the book, and it gives Pelleport an opportunity to parody Brissot's vulgar Rousseauism while slipping in some disparaging references to his origins as the son of a pastry cook in Chartres. In absurdly overblown language, Bissot deplores the inequalities of the social system and then veers off into a tirade against the tyranny of creditors based on his *Théorie des lois criminelles*. As this and many other allusions make clear, Pelleport had a thorough knowledge of Brissot's early writings and also of his background and family. The younger brother in the novel, Tifarès, corresponds to Pierre-Louis Brissot de Thivars, the younger brother of Brissot who was known as Thivars and who joined him in London in 1783 in order to provide assistance on various projects.<sup>48</sup> It was in that capacity that he had warned Brissot about Pelleport's duplicity in June 1784. Pelleport describes Tifarès as a skinny, superstitious simpleton, interested in little more than the next meal. When Bissot, continuing his oration, announces that they must leave Reims in order to return to nature and feed on roots and acorns, Tifarès protests that he would prefer to find a job as a kitchen hand. Finally, however, he agrees. He puts on six shirts – his way of transporting his entire wardrobe – and the two set off, Bissot-Brissot and Tifarès-Thivars, a modern version of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.

Next scene: a primitive road in Champagne. Speaking in his own voice, the narrator-author declaims against the corvée and the exploitation of the peasants. Then he deposits his heroes in a broken-down inn, where they spend their last pennies on a nasty meal – the occasion for another philosophic harangue, a parody of Brissot's *Recherches philosophiques sur le droit de la propriété* – and continue, resigned to sleeping in a ditch. After night descends, a brigand suddenly

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<sup>47</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, I, 3.

<sup>48</sup> Darnton, *J.-P. Brissot*, p. 257.

emerges from the darkness, pointing a rifle. He turns out to be Mordanes (Morande, whose name was often spelled with an s at the end), the guard and chief poacher of a band of nomads, who are gathered around a fire, roasting the day's plunder. Instead of disembowelling the strangers, the "Bohémien" invite them to join the feast. While Tifarès instinctively goes to turn the spit, Bissot treats his hosts to the "discours de réception"<sup>49</sup> that he had delivered at the Académie de Châlons-sur-Marne. The actual discourse, given at Châlons on December 15, 1780, concerned proposals for the reform of criminal law. Pelleport's parody of it mixes those ingredients with a declamation against despotism, religious intolerance, and assorted social evils, all served up in the pompous rhetoric of provincial academies. To address a troupe of brigands as noble savages – "sages habitants des forêts, illustres sauvages",<sup>50</sup> – and then to change gears and treat them as straight-laced provincial academicians is to pile absurdity on absurdity, especially as the purpose of it all is to get a free meal. In the midst of his entangled oratory, Bissot glimpses an even happier outcome. If he can be admitted to the company like a neophyte in an academy, he, too, could live by plundering peasants. The same went for Tifarès, who offers his services in plucking chickens "suivant les méthodes de l'*Encyclopédie*".<sup>51</sup> The Bohemians recognize the newcomers as men of their own kidney, and let them join the troupe.

At this point, Pelleport suspends the narrative in order to provide background information about the Bohemians. In describing them, he drops enough hints – references to publications, names obviously concocted as anagrams – for the reader to realize that the entire novel is a roman à clef, which will require continuous decoding. The guessing game begins as the president of the troupe, the abbé Séchant, introduces its main members to the newcomers. Séchant and his companion, the abbé Séché – their names evoke the aridity of their philosophy – are caricatured versions of two of the London *libellistes*, the abbé de Séchamp and the baron de Saint-Flocel. According to his police report, Séchamp was a former chaplain of the prince of Zweibrücken who had fled to London after becoming implicated in a plot to embezzle funds from a merchant in Nantes. He took part in Pelleport's blackmail operation while attempting to launch a physiocratic-philanthropic review entitled *Journal des princes*, which was

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<sup>49</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, I, 33.

<sup>50</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, I, 38.

<sup>51</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, I, 41.

intended to undercut the somewhat similar periodical published by Brissot, *Correspondance universelle sur ce qui intéresse le bonheur de l'homme et de la société*. Saint-Flocel joined him in this venture, having gained experience as a journalist on the *Journal de Bouillon*.<sup>52</sup> Brissot described Saint-Flocel in his memoirs as an "économiste outré" and the police put him down in their files as an adventurer, who changed names and jobs in order to escape punishment for various swindles.<sup>53</sup> The third principal Bohemian was Lungiet, a burlesque counterpart of Simon Nicolas Henri Linguet, the famous journalist who had joined the colony of French expatriates after being released from the Bastille in 1782.<sup>54</sup> Pelleport could not have expected every reader to identify every character in the book, but he made it clear that the Bohemians wandering through Champagne were actually Frenchmen settled in London and that their main activity, robbing barnyards, corresponded to the slanderous journalism of the *libellistes*.

Pelleport did not name the other members of the troupe, but he suggested that there were at least a dozen of them. The secret agents of the Paris police filed reports on everyone that they could identify among the French refugees in London and came up with 39 in all – an extraordinary rogues gallery of hack writers and confidence men.<sup>55</sup> Pelleport probably knew all of them. He certainly had plenty of colourful material on which to draw; but he did not attempt to portray the entire population of French writers in the Grub Streets of London, because he aimed a great deal of his satire at variations of French philosophy. He therefore divided the Bohemians into three philosophical sects: "la secte économique-naturellico-monotonique"<sup>56</sup> led by Séché, "la secte des despotico-contradictorio-paradoxico-clabaudeuristes"<sup>57</sup> led by Lungiet, and the "philosophes communico-luxurico-friponistes"<sup>58</sup> led by Mordanes. The first represented physiocracy and the doctrine of natural law; the second, enlightened despotism tinged with reactionary social doctrines; the third, predatory self-interest. Taken with Bissot's utopian

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<sup>52</sup> *La Police de Paris dévoilée*, II, 244-247. On Saint-Flocel and the *Journal des Princes*, see Jean Sgard, ed., *Dictionnaire des journalistes* (Oxford, 1999), II, 899.

<sup>53</sup> *Mémoires*, I, 329 and *La Police de Paris dévoilée*, II, 246-247.

<sup>54</sup> See Darline Gay Levy, *The Ideas and Careers of Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linguet: A Study in Eighteenth-Century French Politics* (Champaign, 1980) and Daniel Baruch, *Simon Nicolas Linguet ou l'Irrécupérable* (Paris, 1991).

<sup>55</sup> *La Police de Paris dévoilée*, II, 231-269.

<sup>56</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, I, 47.

<sup>57</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, I, 50.

<sup>58</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, I, 51.

Rousseauism, the Bohemians covered a great deal of the ideological spectrum.

There also were camp followers. Pelleport named only two, a mother-daughter combination: Voragine and Félicité. Félicité was the "belle voisine" from Mentelle's circle in Paris whom Brissot had mentioned in his early letters to Pelleport. They married in 1782 and settled in London, at 1 Brompton Road, near the offices of the *Courrier de l'Europe*, where Pelleport, a frequent contributor to the *Courrier*, visited them regularly, until Félicité barred him from the house. Félicité's mother, Marie-Catherine Dupont, was the merchant's widow from Boulogne-sur-mer who had become embroiled with Pelleport in the dispute over his unpaid bills of exchange and his speculation on the shipment of champagne from Reims, where he, like Bissot in his book, had run up enormous debts. She figures prominently in *Les Bohémiens* as the companion of Séchand and the sexual partner of anyone she could get; for Pelleport portrays her as a hideous, sex-starved hag. (Voragine appears to be an obscene anagram, which can be decoded in various ways, all of them nasty.)

Having introduced the principal Bohemians, the narrator steps out of the story and informs the reader that the troupe contains one last philosopher, the greatest of them all. He challenges the reader to guess this character's identity by deciphering the "sens caché"<sup>59</sup> of the description that follows. The philosopher belongs to no sect, subscribes to no religion, combines sensations without distortion in his common *sensorium*, bears his burdens without complaint, enjoys food and drink, and is a great lover. Who could that be? After a satirical tour of contemporary philosophy in which he debunks every variety of intellectual pretentiousness with a verve worthy of Voltaire, the narrator addresses the reader again:

Oh! je m'aperçois bien, mon cher lecteur, que vous vous impatientez, et que vous ne devinez pas qui était le héros dont j'ai tracé le portrait fidèle. Mais vous, jeune villageoise, alerte et fringante, que l'amour a plus d'une fois étendue sous le vigoureux Colin, si vous lisiez cet ouvrage vous vous écririez avec l'emphase du plaisir: ô! c'est Colin, c'est notre âne.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, I, 56.

<sup>60</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, I, 60. In a later aside to the reader, the narrator, who can be identified with the author, seems to subscribe to the donkey's hedonism: II, 63-65.



The stylistic virtuosity in this section of the book typifies Pelleport's technique. He develops a story line that points the reader in one direction, then interrupts it with a digression that shifts the perspective, and returns to the action – or sometimes to a digression within the digression – in a way that calls everything into question. He employs a perverse Shandean method, teasing and playing with the reader, then administering shocks and surprises. The sardonic philosophizing, which runs through a dozen schools of thought, ends in a eulogy of the donkey who carries the baggage of the troupe. And to deliver the punch line, a second putative reader appears, a not-so-innocent village lass who doubles the shock value of the joke by lauding the donkey's sexual prowess – probably an allusion to the donkey of Joan of Arc in Voltaire's *La Pucelle*. From philosophy to bestiality, Pelleport turns the trick with a dexterity that outdoes his neighbour scribbling away in a nearby cell: the marquis de Sade.

The libertine undercurrent appears in the very first sentence of the book, where Bissot is described as awakening at the crack of dawn, when "les filles de joie fermaient la paupière;...les femmes de qualité et toutes celles qui prétendent à la noblesse avaient encore pour six heures de sommeil; et les dévotes réveillées par le son lugubre des cloches, se hâtaient pour la première messe..."<sup>61</sup> A similar passage introduces the eulogy of the donkey at the beginning of chapter five, but here the narrator strikes another tone. He celebrates sex in a lyrical passage, speaking in his own voice without a trace of irony:

Oui, je me rappelle ce temps heureux, où couché dans les bras de Julie sur un matelas, sans rideaux, le premier rayon de l'aurore me tirait des bras du sommeil: un baiser tendrement savouré rendait mon amante à la vie: son coeur s'ouvrait au désir avant que ses yeux s'ouvrirent à la lumière. Je m'unissais à Julie; Julie me serrait dans ses bras d'albâtre; nous saluions le principe de la vie par cette union qui toute entière est due à son feu divin, et nous nous enivrions de plaisir, pour nous disposer au travail.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, I, 1.

<sup>62</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, I, 53.

It is a scene from Grub Street. The poor author wakes up next to his mistress in a garret, and after making love, his thoughts turn to the tyranny of the rich, the powerful, and the bigoted:

O! vous qui empoisonnez par des contes sinistres les courts instants que nous pouvons consacrer au plaisir, croyez-moi, notre prière était plus agréable à l'Être des êtres que le mauvais latin dont vous lui étourdissez les oreilles. Et vous qui dans vos coeurs de bronze logez la sordide avarice, hommes engraisés du bien de vos semblables, que la finance a fait riches de la pauvreté des nations, vous tous que la tyrannie a teints du sang des humains; geoliers barbares qui veillez sur les portes, et vous assoupissez sur les verroux, accourez, venez voir lever le philosophe Mordanes, et que l'envie ronge les restes desséchés de vos coeurs fétides et corrompus.<sup>63</sup>

The chapter then continues with the next adventure of Mordanes and the facetious praise of the donkey, but the passion of its opening paragraph provides a disconcerting overture to the burlesque passages that follow. The narrator himself has cut through the narrative with a *cri de coeur* that could have come from a cell in the Bastille, as if he were a prisoner railing against his jailors and giving full vent to his anger and his longing. The reader naturally asks: Who is the person addressing me in this strange manner, and where does he stand amidst the philosophies he derides?

After his eulogy of the donkey, the narrator answers those questions by identifying himself. He does not give his name, but he provides enough information to explain his disenchantment with the dominant values of his time – and all his remarks fit the biography of Pelleport. He was born into a privileged social position, he says, but early experience taught him to despise it. Judging from some scornful remarks about wealthy bourgeois who buy their way into the nobility, he belongs to the ancient *noblesse d'épée*.<sup>64</sup> At one point he hints at an abortive military career as "un jeune gentilhomme...sans fortune".<sup>65</sup> At another, he

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<sup>63</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, I, 54-55.

<sup>64</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, I, 65. See also the similar remarks in volume I, pages 75 and 181.

<sup>65</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, I, 68.

describes his attempt to get an appointment through a family friend at court. The friend recommends him to a minister as "le marquis de .... C'est un très bon gentilhomme; ses aïeux marchaient sous la bannière des miens à la première croisade."<sup>66</sup> In the end, disgusted by these attempts to place himself in the world of patronage and prestige, he decides to become an adventurer:

Un rayon du soleil de la justice a pénétré dans mon coeur, il y a fait éclore la liberté....et les entraves sociales sont tombées à mes pieds. J'ai dit adieu à la fortune, mon existence a commencé...J'ai dit, je vais parcourir la terre, et les barrières de la servitude se sont reculées devant moi. En vain le despote et ses gardes veillent sur les frontières de leur empire. Semblable au castor, je me suis dépouillé devant le chasseur.<sup>67</sup>

Where did he find his inspiration? Jean-Jacques Rousseau:

Et toi qui osas souhaiter de voir l'égalité rétablie sur la terre, vertueux citoyen de la méprisable Genève, toi qui osas découvrir aux hommes le secret de leurs tyrans, reçois l'encens que je vais brûler sur ton autel, et guide du haut de l'empirée mes pas et mes sentiments.<sup>68</sup>



A paraphrase of Rousseau's declamation against property in the *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité* follows this confession of faith, but then it is followed by more ribaldry and social satire. The narrator's Rousseauism turns out to be strangely Rabelaisian, miles apart from the gushy enthusiasm of Bissot. Bissot, however, like all the other philosophers, proclaims elevated principles and lives by plundering peasants. The narrator contrasts this hypocrisy unfavourably with the anti-philosophy of the donkey, "rienisme", as he calls it, which consists of rejecting

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<sup>66</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, I, 87. An earlier passage in this scene, p. 85, evokes Pelleport's father and his dead mother. As mentioned above, Pelleport attempted to get favourable treatment in the Bastille by citing his family's six centuries of military service under French kings.

<sup>67</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, I, 63.

<sup>68</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, I, 64.

all systems of thought while satisfying one's appetite.<sup>69</sup> The pursuit of pleasure, unimpeded by social constraints, stands out amidst all the pontificating as the only value worth pursuing. In that respect, despite their pretentiousness and hypocrisy, the Bohemians represent something positive. Their president, Séchant, describes them as "une troupe de personnes qui ne manquent ni d'appétit, ni de gaieté", when he introduces them to Bissot. They devote themselves to "la franche, l'aimable liberté.... C'est elle qui nous a rassemblés de tous les coins de l'Europe: nous sommes ses prêtres, et tout son culte se réduit à ne nous pas gêner les uns les autres."<sup>70</sup> The Bohemians share an attitude rather than a philosophy. They take a stance toward the world that already looks like bohemianism.

Even as philosophers the Bohemians seem harmless – all except for one: Mordanes. He is the only member of the troupe who appears truly evil. He does all the plundering, while the others hurl platitudes at each other without inflicting damage. His principal employment, stealing animals from peasants' barnyards, serves as a metaphor for Morande's métier: destroying the reputations of his victims by means of *libelles*. And he enjoys inflicting pain for its own sake. The most revealing of his atrocities takes place when he bludgeons two copulating chickens to death. The narrator recounts this incident after a long, lyrical passage celebrating sex. Desire is the vital energy that courses through all nature, he proclaims, and free love is the noblest principle in the natural order: "Jouissez, jouissez et gardez d'apporter le moindre trouble aux jouissances des autres".<sup>71</sup> As an illustration of this hedonistic Golden Rule, he celebrates the joyful lust of some chickens in a barnyard where Mordanes is prowling, and he invokes "le chant de ce coq, qui appelle ses poules, choisit la plus amoureuse, et lui fait une caresse franche, gaie, forte, ferme, telle que nous en ferions vous et moi à nos poulettes, si trop de bienséance, de vertu, de modestie, et trop peu d'autre chose peut-être, ne nous faisait tirer d'une aîle".<sup>72</sup> But in the midst of the chickens' love-making, Mordanes, "le barbare Mordanes", kills them with a brutal blow. He is giving Tifarès a lesson in the art of despoiling peasants. Overcome at first by pity, the basic sentiment of sociability according to Rousseau, Tifarès recoils in horror, then thinks better of it, and smashes the skulls of four ducks in a nearby pond. He has

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<sup>69</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, I, 59. "Riénisme" suggests the "zéro" mentioned above that Hypolite Chamoran claimed was Pelleport's "profession de foi".

<sup>70</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, I, 45-46.

<sup>71</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, I, 135.

<sup>72</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, I, 93. See also the similar remarks on I, 132.

switched his allegiance from Bissot to Mordanes and learned to be a murderer.<sup>73</sup>

Morande's own expression of the universal sex drive is rape. He makes Félicité his target. As the Bohemians resume their march across Champagne, Bissot takes up with Félicité, just as Brissot had done, with Pelleport as a witness, in Paris. They pair off and copulate blissfully. A few days later, while Félicité sits alone contemplating her expected motherhood, Morande jumps her, wrestles her down, and is about to penetrate her, when she devises a trick. By suddenly shifting her posture, she makes him miss his target and sodomize her – her way of protecting Bissot's claim to paternity. It is also Pelleport's way of inflicting injury on his former friend: to ravish the wife is to humiliate the husband. Pelleport goes further: he implies that Félicité enjoyed herself, for Bissot is not much of a lover, he reveals, and the stud-like energy of the rapist releases a libidinal charge in her. She even gets satisfaction from her gymnastic ruse. The chapter sports a cynical slogan: "Une souris qui n'a qu'un trou est bientôt prise."<sup>74</sup>

The sexual current that runs through the narrative appears as a fundamental force of nature, which the narrator compares to electricity, friction, fire, and phlogiston.<sup>75</sup> Although neutral in itself, it is relentlessly phallogocratic in its effects upon society. While elaborating a discourse on natural law, Séché goes so far as to argue that men own women as a form of property that can be bought, sold, traded, rented, and inherited.<sup>76</sup> To be sure, this burlesque episode reads more like a satire against the subjugation of women than an argument in favour of it. The narrator constantly presents women as objects of male desire, yet he also attributes an aggressive sexual energy to them; for the same *élan vital* courses through all forms of life: women are for the taking, and they help themselves to

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<sup>73</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, I, 136. See also I, 127 on "la douce pitié, mère de toutes les vertus".

<sup>74</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, II, 113. The rape scene is recounted with false naiveté by Félicité in a journal that the narrator claims he discovered in the "lycée de Londres" – a reference to the philosophic club that Brissot attempted to create in London after the model of the Parisian Musée of Mame's-Claude Pahin de la Blancherie: II, 112. In an earlier episode, the narrator presents Félicité as eager to be raped: I, 158.

<sup>75</sup> Pelleport had studied science and mathematics and apparently taught both while he was employed as a tutor in Le Locle and London. *Les Bohémiens* includes a long digression about science, inspired in part by contemporary balloon flights and experiments with electricity, which concludes that "le gaz inflammable est le principe universel": I, 164. Metaphors about phlogiston or inflammable air permeate Pelleport's descriptions of sexual activity. Thus the references to "fluid igné", I, 192; "étincelles phosphoriques" and "foyer électrique", I, 195; "flamme", I, 199; and "feu violent", I, 214.

<sup>76</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, I, 2033-209.

men. While Félicité is being raped, her mother, the insatiable Voragine, overpowers Thivarès. She copulates with many of the other Bohemians, even, the narrator suggests, with the donkey. Séchand, who is incapable of satisfying her "fureur utérine", dreams that she takes on an entire pack of Capucins.<sup>77</sup>

The monks enter the narrative as if from some libidinal underworld. Ostensibly on a pilgrimage, they wander through the countryside in the same manner as the Bohemians, who come upon them in the middle of the night. At first the Bohemians take them to be satanic creatures celebrating a witches' Sabbath but soon realize that they are fellow spirits given to debauchery. The two troupes join forces and settle down for a feast around a fire. They guzzle and gorge themselves into a stupor, wake up, and start to copulate – in twos and threes, then heaps of bodies piled up and linked together in nearly all the combinations celebrated in the libertine literature of the eighteenth century, Sade included. The polymorphous perversion degenerates into a brawl. Fists fly, noses splatter, blood flows everywhere along with muck and fluids discharged from numerous orifices. The donkey leaps into the fray, braying and flailing about deliriously. It is a Dionysian donnybrook, worthy of the best punch-ups described by Rabelais and Cervantes.<sup>78</sup> As dawn appears, the rioters stop for breakfast. They enjoy another hearty meal together, and then go their separate ways. A good time was had by all.

The orgy brings volume one to a climax. Volume two takes the troupe through more adventures interrupted by more burlesque philosophic lectures, but most of it is devoted to a disguised autobiography of Pelleport. Pelleport had spliced a great deal of information about his life into the first volume, especially in a long digression about a fictitious monk named Antoine Tribe, who steals a silver chalice from his convent in Cologne, wanders off to Rome, and then turns up in Geneva during the revolutionary upheaval of 1782. At this point his travels coincide with the itinerary that Pelleport probably followed: Geneva, Lausanne, Yverdon, Neuchâtel, Le Locle. Details about persons and events at each stop along the way suggest first-hand familiarity with the territory. By the time he reaches Le Locle, Tribe's identity has merged with that of Pelleport, who remains unnamed but can be recognized by many references. He turns into a poet, the author of an anti-monastic satire in verse, *Le Boulevard des Chartreux*,<sup>79</sup> and he becomes a tutor to

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<sup>77</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, I, 210.

<sup>78</sup> Pelleport invokes *Don Quixote* at the end of the description of the brawl: *Les Bohémiens*, I, 214.

<sup>79</sup> *Le Boulevard des Chartreux*, *poème chrétien*: see note 41.

the son of a local merchant, Jean Diedey.<sup>80</sup> The text includes an insider's account of life in the Diedey household along with well-informed descriptions of local customs, the watch-making industry, and the surrounding countryside. Tribe then disappears from the narrative, but another digression, seven pages later, describes a journey to Pondichery in a ship commanded by a captain Astruc in 1774, which probably corresponds to Pelleport's experience as a young soldier in India. Anyone who reads *Les Bohémiens* while supplied with the main facts about Pelleport's life is likely to concur: an autobiography lies hidden in the text.

Pelleport constantly interrupts his narrative with digressions that contain fragments from the story of his own life. They can be identified and pieced together to form a second narrative; and in the last hundred pages of the book, the two stories intersect: Pelleport, in the person of an unnamed, wandering poet, joins the Bohemians as they are camping on the outskirts of his native city, Stenay. He recounts his adventures to them, and as they listen they reappear in his tale under new names and in a new setting: Grub Street, London. The intersection and imposition of the narratives creates a complex structure, but Pelleport spins the story-lines together with a sure hand and a light touch: the last segment of the book carries the earlier bawdiness to a new extreme, as if to say that the human comedy is a farce, an off-coloured joke.<sup>81</sup>

The poet strays into the text while the Bohemians are setting up camp and preparing dinner. He has just been released from the Bastille and is about to join his brothers in Stenay but has paused to compose a song. Strumming a guitar, he sings a verse that, as he later explains, represents his true philosophy:

Voler de belle en belle,  
A l'amour c'est se montrer fidèle;  
Voler de belle en belle,  
Aux Dieux c'est ressembler.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> The only information I have been able to uncover about Jean Diedey is a letter that he wrote from Le Locle to the Société typographique de Neuchâtel dated July 29, 1778: Bibliothèque publique et universitaire de Neuchâtel, papers of the Société typographique, ms 1142, fo. 93. It merely concerns a payment of a bill of exchange.

<sup>81</sup> While maintaining an elevated tone and using classical rhetoric, often in a mock-heroic manner, Pelleport sometimes jolts the reader by interrupting his narrative with *grosses blagues* or dirty jokes. For example, in volume II, p. 128 he makes a gratuitous reference to "...Beaumont-le-Vicomte, dont le seigneur des accords a troqué le m du premier mot contre le c du troisième...".

<sup>82</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, II, 131.

Séchand recognizes a kindred spirit and calls out: An author! Taken by surprise, the poet panics. He wants to deny any connection with literature, because he fears the strangers may be a detachment of police. Not at all, they assure him: they, too, are authors; the donkey is loaded down with the treatises they are writing. They invite him to dinner, and while Tifarès turns the spit, the poet tells the story of his life, which he offers as an explanation of why he took such fright: "Je tiens en quelque manière à la république des lettres, mais c'est un aveu bien dangereux à faire dans ce temps...et pour vous en donner une preuve, je vais vous raconter mon histoire littéraire."<sup>83</sup>

He was born in Stenay, he explains, as unfertile territory as any place in France for the flowering of literature. His deceased father, an old-fashioned military officer from the ancient noblesse d'épée, could hardly read or write. Neither of his two brothers got much of an education. His two sisters were packed off to convents. But his mother had a chambermaid from Paris who loved novels and read *Don Quixote* to him. It was his downfall. Soon he learned to read himself and memorized all the adventures of the man from La Mancha. After returning from the Seven Years War – notably the Battle of Minden, which Pelleport had described earlier in an elaborate digression about military tactics – his father was horrified to find a budding scholar in the family. But the boy had learned to ride, shoot, dance, and chase girls well enough to win over the old man, who agreed to let him have a tutor. They got along badly until the tutor abandoned all attempts to indoctrinate his charge with Christianity and they concentrated on Greek myths. Then, however, the boy's mother died, and he was sent off to boarding school. He became great friends with one of his teachers, an abbé who taught him the classics in a spirit of pure paganism and was eventually expelled from the staff for harboring suspicious sympathies for revolutionary Romans. (Jealous colleagues persuaded the school's idiotic governor that Brutus and Cassius were "des rebelles qui conspiraient contre le roi dans quelque grenier de Paris".)<sup>84</sup> On his departure, the teacher gave the budding young poet copies of Ovid, Virgil, and Horace. This reference and many others – invocations to the gods, mock Homeric metaphors – testify to Pelleport's familiarity with the classics. His account of the poet's education also includes favourable references to science and mathematics, and it shows how the young man turned into a provincial *bel esprit*: he set himself up

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<sup>83</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, II, 135.

<sup>84</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, II, 152.

as an amateur astrologer, and used his predictions to make fun of the local notables, including his father's new wife, who had become his greatest enemy. She summoned a family gathering, which condemned the poet as a libertine and prevailed upon a local official to have him imprisoned by *lettre de cachet*. Tipped off by a girl friend, he fled to Liège, where he did some hack writing for an almanac, and then to London, where he got a job on the *Courrier de l'Europe*.



By now, the poet was embarked on a literary career. He wrote articles for the *Courrier* on all sorts of subjects and got along well with its editor, Antoine Joseph de Serres de La Tour, though not its publisher, Samuel Swinton, owing to impertinent remarks that offended some subscribers. But he resigned from the journal, because his father died, and he travelled to Stenay in the expectation of collecting an inheritance. His stepmother dashed those hopes by manipulating the legal procedures. So the poet had to return, penniless and on foot, to London. He got as far as Boulogne-sur-Mer. Unable to pay his passage across the Channel, he found himself in a church after a midnight mass on Christmas Eve, December 24, 1783 – and a miracle occurred.

Here the narrative takes a different turn. Between the poet's childhood in Stenay and his journalism in London, the well-informed reader could fill in the missing parts of Pelleport's biography by inserting episodes mentioned in other digressions: study at the Ecole militaire in Paris,<sup>85</sup> service with a regiment in India, and several years of married life in Switzerland. But Pelleport had not yet provided a full account of his experience in London – nothing beyond the caricatures of the French expatriates cast as Bohemians. In the last section of the book, he gave those writers new names and relocated them in London's garrets and cafés. He also shifted into a different key: the poet's tale, which had included some serious social criticism,<sup>86</sup> turned into an obscene farce organized around the notion of genital gigantism and the supposed craving of women for big penises.

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<sup>85</sup> An example of the autobiographical allusions that Pelleport scattered through the text is a passing reference to Edme Mentelle, the professor of geography at the Ecole militaire who had befriended him and Brissot, as "Manteau" in *Les Bohémiens*, II, 141.

<sup>86</sup> See the long declamation against the injustices of the social order in volume II, pp. 167-177, notably the poet's condemnation of the "ancienne tyrannie du droit féodal", p. 168.

Following the mass, the poet is accosted by a beggar, the only person left in the church, and he gives the poor wretch the last coin in his purse. It is an act of secular humanitarianism, not Christian charity, as the relentlessly irreligious text makes clear.<sup>87</sup> But it provokes a miracle. The beggar is transformed into the glorious Saint Labre, who rewards the poet by giving him a miraculous belt made out of knotted rope. He instructs the poet to hide the belt under his clothing, leaving an end that he can grasp through his watch fob. Whenever he needs aid, he should pull on the rope, moving from knot to knot according to the severity of the situation. His nose will grow three inches with each pull. As the saint himself discovered when he trod the earth as a poor, itinerant monk, women will find the big nose irresistible, and they will provide as much succour as needed – or more, depending on the number of knots pulled.

While Pelleport was spinning fantasies in the Bastille, the Catholics of Boulogne were celebrating Benoît Joseph Labre as their greatest native son, although he actually was born in the nearby town of Amettes in 1748. From his early childhood, he embraced the most austere form of Catholicism. By the time of his death in Rome on April 16, 1783, he had lived like a saint, mortifying his flesh in pilgrimages and performing miracles – 136 certified cures, according to a hagiography published in Italian in 1783 and in French in 1784. Canonization did not come until 1881, but Labre's reputation for saintliness provided Pelleport with perfect material for a sacrilegious satire that would carry his hero across the Channel.<sup>88</sup>

The impieties begin in Boulogne itself and take Brissot's mother-in-law, Voragine in the first part of the book, as their main target. She reappears as Catau des Arches, a sex-starved widow of a merchant, who eagerly coughs up 240 livres to play with the poet's nose as soon as he pulls on Saint Labre's belt and dangles it in front of her. His purse replenished, he reduces his nose to its normal size by letting out knots from the belt, and sails for London, though not before collecting tribute from several other women, who provide occasions for some well-placed

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<sup>87</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, II, 185.

<sup>88</sup> The biography of Labre written shortly after his death by his confessor, Giuseppe Loreto Marconi, *Ragguaglio della vita del servo di Dio, Benedetto Labre Francese* (Rome, 1783), was translated into French a year later by Père Elie Hard under the title *Vie de Benoît-Joseph Labre, mort à Rome en odeur de sainteté* (Paris, 1784). See the article on Labre in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, 2003), IX, 267.

barbs about the hypocrisy and pretentiousness of provincial society.<sup>89</sup>

London, by contrast, appears as a teeming world of adventurers, mountebanks, philosophers, scientists, politicians, agitators, publishers, and journalists. Their names swirl by: Fox; Pitt the younger; Lord North; Paul-Henri Maty, editor of the *New Review*; David Williams, the radical deist; Joseph Priestley, the champion of Enlightenment and science; Jean-Paul Marat, then struggling to make a name for himself as a scientist; James Graham, the inventor of the electric fertility bed; and an assortment of extravagant characters, probably acquaintances of Pelleport disguised under unidentifiable names: a German charlatan named Muller; an English quack called Remben; a certain J. P. D.; Ashley, a balloonist; Katerfiette, an astronomer; Piélatin, a violinist. In the midst of them all, the poet encounters "une troupe de malheureux Français affamés"<sup>90</sup> – the colony of French refugees. They include Brissot, who now appears as "Bissoto de Guerreville", the son-in-law of the widow des Arches, who lives as a dealer in second-hand clothes – that is, as a hack writer who cobbles together works by other authors.<sup>91</sup> The poet mentions the journalists connected with the *Courrier de l'Europe* and some other scribblers, but he reserves most of his scorn for Morande, who resumes his treachery as "le calomniateur Thonevet" (an allusion to Morande's full name, Théveneau de Morande).<sup>92</sup> Thonevet slanders the poet, attempts to blackmail him, and denounces him to a secret agent of the Parisian police, exactly as in *Le Diable dans*

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<sup>89</sup> Catau des Arches may be a play on Catherine Dupont. The text heaps scorn on Mme Dupont, stressing her hideous body and frustrated sex life. It claims that she devoured twenty miserable lovers while maintaining a facade of bourgeois respectability in Boulogne. Evidently Pelleport held her responsible, with Morande, for his *embastillement*. In vol. II, p. 231, the poet refers to collaboration between Mme Dupont (Catau des Arches) and Morande (Thonevet) as follows: "Le calomniateur Thonevet s'était avisé de composer plusieurs atroces libelles et de me les attribuer. Il s'unit, dans le dessein de me perdre, avec la veuve irritée. Ils écrivirent au ministre, et je fus enlevé à midi dans la ville de Boulogne et conduit à la Bastille."

<sup>90</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, II, 227.

<sup>91</sup> Brissot republished essays by others in a ten-volume anthology entitled *Bibliothèque philosophique du législateur, du politique, du jurisconsulte* (Neuchâtel, 1782-1785). In his account of his voyage to London, the poet says he accompanied the youngest of Mme des Arches's four daughters and deposited her in the London residence of "un benêt de gendre, négociant en friperie" (II, 202), whom he later mocks as the "friper Bissoto de Guerreville" (II, 219). Mme Dupont did indeed have four daughters, and the youngest, Nancy, joined the Brissots in London in 1783. She may well have made the trip in the company of Pelleport, who is mentioned along with her in the correspondence between Brissot and members of the Dupont family. See the three letters from Nancy's brother François Dupont to Brissot, April 22, 1783; May 7, 1783; and May 14, 1783 in Brissot, *Correspondance et papiers*, pp. 52-55. See also Brissot, *Mémoires*, II, 302 and 338.

<sup>92</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, II, 227.

*un bénitier*. But no intrigue, however nasty, can undo the poet, thanks to his marvellous nose.

Soon all London is talking about it, betting on it, celebrating it in prose, poetry, and scientific treatises. It provokes such a furious debate in Parliament that the government collapses and new elections are held. "Comme j'aime Fox et la liberté",<sup>93</sup> the poet agrees to reserve his nose for the wives and daughters of candidates committed to the Whigs. While campaigning for Fox at Covent Garden, however, disaster strikes. A pickpocket slips his hand into the vital watch fob and disappears with the magic belt. The poet despairs. Reduced to the status of a writer with an ordinary nose, he returns to Boulogne in order to publish a book with the press that Swinton used for the edition of the *Courrier de l'Europe* marketed in France. That was the false move that cost Pelleport his liberty. In this case, the poet puts the blame for the catastrophe squarely on Thonevet. Out of sheer malice, Thonevet composes several *libelles*, attributes them to the poet, and, with the help of widow des Arches, denounces him to the French authorities, who carry him off to the Bastille. Meanwhile, Bissoto has been trying to collect a new supply of rags in Paris. The police suspect him of collaborating on the *libelles*; so they lock him up, too – not in the Bastille, however, but in the nastier prison of Bicêtre, where he soon dies and therefore disappears from the narrative. After a long and miserable stay in the Bastille, the poet is finally released. While walking away, he hears a crier announcing an appeal from the archbishop for witnesses of Labre's miracles to testify to their authenticity so that Rome can initiate the process of canonization. As the most devoted follower of the saint, the poet decides to go to Rome himself. But first he must visit his brothers in Stenay. That is how he has come to cross paths with the Bohemians. He recommends a tavern to them, promising to join them for supper after he has had a reunion with his brothers. They pack up the donkey, continue on their way, and arrive at the tavern. The sun sets. Supper is cooking...



The novel ends there with a wonderfully open, inconclusive flourish. Before parting from the Bohemians, however, the poet offers a reflection that provides a conclusion of sorts to his story:

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<sup>93</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, II, 226.

Vous voyez que de maux m'a causé le triste essai que j'ai fait de la littérature et combien j'en dois être dégoûté. Aussi rien, je vous jure, ne m'effraie comme de m'entendre traiter d'auteur; il me semble toujours avoir à mes trousses une bande de ces alguazils que les puissants ont placés au coin des rues et des barrières pour empêcher que la raison ne s'introduise en contrebande.<sup>94</sup>



*Les Bohémiens* is among other things a book about literature, literature understood broadly as a system of money, power, and prestige. Speaking through his narrator, Pelleport views the system from the perspective of Grub Street. He longs for a patron, so that he can strike it rich "...sans être obligé d'entreprendre ni lycéomusée, ni museo-lycée, ni academico-musico-lycée, sans écrire de correspondance, journal, mercure, courrier, gazetier, gazetin, affiches, petites-affiches, annales, gazettes-bibliothèques, esprit desdits journaux, desdites gazettes, etc. et toutes ces autres escroqueries littéraires si fort en usage de notre temps".<sup>95</sup> But he has no patron, so he must fall back on all those practices so typical of Grub Street – and another one, too: the composition of *libelles*. In one of his many asides to the reader, he asks: "Avez-vous jamais été imprimé tout vif, mon cher lecteur? Avez-vous quelquefois, pressé par votre boulanger et par le cabarattier voisin, couru avec des souliers sans semelle les halles où les fripiers d'écrits trafiquent des pensées de ceux que le malheur a réduits à rêver pour vivre?"<sup>96</sup>

Then he turns on the reader and accuses him (not her, judging from the context) of living in luxury, thanks to dubious manoeuvres within some business or bureaucracy, while the poor author starves. Very well, then, reader, he says: let me tell you what it is like to live as an author who lacks independent resources. You walk into the office of an important publisher, Charles-Joseph Panckoucke, clutching your portfolio. Would Monsieur be interested in some verse about a recently

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<sup>94</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, II, 234.

<sup>95</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, II, 88-89. Among other things, these references evoke Brissot's *Lycée de Londres* and his journalistic *Correspondance universelle sur ce qui intéresse le bonheur de l'homme et de la société* as well as his *Bibliothèque philosophique du législateur, du politique, du jurisconsulte*. While settling accounts with Brissot, Pelleport presented him – accurately, I would say – as a typical hack writer struggling to survive in the difficult conditions of Grub Street.

<sup>96</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, I, 111.

deceased great man or perhaps a novel in two volumes (that is, *Les Bohémiens*)? It won't sell, Panckoucke replies, and waves you to the door: he can't find time to talk with the likes of you; he has to catch up on his correspondence. So you drag your manuscripts to a publisher of the second rank, Nicholas-Augustin Delalain. His daughter greets you politely in the bookshop; but when she learns you are an author, not a customer, she turns you over to her mother, in order to spare papa from wasting his time. Maman won't even look at the poems: she has already rejected three dozen batches of verse this morning. And when you offer her your "roman philosophique" (again, *Les Bohémiens*), she falls into a fury and runs you out of the office.<sup>97</sup> The only remaining hope is a dealer at the very bottom of the trade, Edme-Marie-Pierre Desauges, a specialist in hack works and forbidden literature who has already spent two terms in the Bastille. He finds your work excellent, just the thing that he can sell through his contacts in Holland. You return to your garret, overjoyed. Your landlord, baker, and wine supplier agree to extend more credit. You scribble away, adding last touches to your manuscript, until late at night. When at last you have collapsed in bed, there is a knock at the door. In comes a police inspector accompanied by the dread undercover agent Receveur, the anti-hero, along with Morande, of *Le Diable dans un bénitier*; out you go straight to the Bastille. While you rot in prison, Desauges, who has had your manuscripts copied after denouncing you to the police, prints your book and sells it through the underground. Your hunger verges on starvation; your health gives out; and when at last you are released, you have no choice but to turn yourself in to the poor house (Hôtel-Dieu) and die.<sup>98</sup> The picture is overdrawn, like one of Hogarth's caricatures which Pelleport probably saw in London, but every detail, including the names of the booksellers, corresponds to the realities of Grub Street, Paris.

In a similar digression, the narrator picks a quarrel with the reader. I know you are tired of digressions, he says. You want to get back to the narrative. You want action, but I won't give it to you, because you should learn something about what went into the book you are holding in your hands. You should acquire some

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<sup>97</sup> This scene, recounted in volume I, page 113, takes place in the book shop of the publisher of the *Almanach des muses*, who at that time was Nicolas-Augustin Delalain. But the text identifies him as "P..."; so I may have failed to pick up the allusion intended by Pelleport.

<sup>98</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, I, 111-118. This long passage, brimming with concrete details, demonstrates a thorough familiarity with life among the hack writers of Paris, but it also conforms to a genre, the dangers of life as a *littérateur*, which was a favorite theme of well-known writers such as Voltaire and Linguet.

knowledge of the literary market place. So here is another digression. Books have plenty of readers but not buyers. The ratio is roughly ten to one. One person may be willing to part with some change for a book, but ten or more borrow it or steal it and pass it around in ever-widening circles: from masters to lackeys, mistresses to chambermaids, parents to children, neighbours to neighbours, and booksellers to subscribers in reading clubs (*cabinets littéraires*) – all at the expense of the author. The situation is hopeless – unless the king were to deliver an edict that would transform the basic conditions of literature. For example, he could issue an *arrêt du conseil d'état* with a long preamble about the importance of authors and a series of articles, beginning with the following two:

1. No book may be loaned, except within families and then only as far in the collateral line as first cousins, subject to a penalty of 500 livres to be paid to the author.

2. No servants may pass around their masters' books, subject to a penalty of a year's wages or, failing that, physical punishment: they will be branded on the left ear with the letters P D L for *prêteur de livres* and whipped in front of all the book shops in the town.



Pending such a measure, the narrator-author (the two can be assumed to speak throughout the novel with the same voice) proposes a temporary solution. This very book, the one that you are now reading, must be sold only in a fine binding and at a high price, which is to be maintained for the benefit of its author. The publisher is therefore forbidden to sell it in sheets, boards, or paper coverings. The digression ends with a remark delivered directly at the reader, who is deemed to demand that the narrator-author get on with the story:

Votre impatience redouble, mais avant de la satisfaire il était juste que je m'occupasse de mes intérêts; chacun pour soi. Non, je n'irai pas, martyr d'un ridicule désintéressement, négliger mes propres affaires. Je parle un peu de moi, j'en conviens; mais quel est l'auteur qui s'oublie dans ses ouvrages?<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> *Les Bohémiens*, II, 76.

In fact, of course, the author has inserted himself in the narrative throughout the book. The digressions reinforce that tendency by showing how the author's autobiography bears on the condition of literature in general – and how the reader is complicit in perpetuating that condition.



Did readers actually respond in the way called for by the text? Probably not, because the text had so few readers – next to none, judging by the number of copies that have survived and the lack of reviews and references in contemporary sources. The publication of *Les Bohémiens* was a non-event situated at the heart of the most eventful period of French history. Even if a few copies made it into the hands of readers, they can hardly have provoked much of a reaction. The French in 1790 were creating a brave new world and doing so in deadly earnest. They had no reason to be interested in a satirical account of life in a republic of letters that no longer existed. Pelleport's novel was out of date before its publication. Pelleport himself was out of tune with his times. While his contemporaries threw themselves passionately into the Revolution, he stood apart and looked upon the world from a perspective that combined disenchantment with derision – or "riénisme". Yet he deployed a prodigious talent when he evoked the life of Grub Street under the Ancien Régime. Seen from the twenty-first century, his novel looks extraordinarily modern, and his Bohemians appear as the first full embodiment of bohemianism.

## About the Author

Robert Darnton, KB Fellow 2006, is Professor of European History at Princeton University. Throughout his career Professor Darnton has concerned himself with the literary world of Enlightenment France, often focusing not on the *philosophes* but on writers outside the first rank and the material they produced. Using the archives of an 18th-century Swiss publishing house he has brought to light a vast illegal literature of philosophy, atheism, and pornography that was smuggled into France in the decades before the Revolution. In the course of this work Professor Darnton has developed an influential anthropological approach to history, has advanced novel interpretations of the French Revolution, and has helped to create the field known as “the history of the book”. He also has a longstanding interest in electronic books, Web publishing, and other new media. His books include *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (1968), *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie* (1979), *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (1982), *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (1984), *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (1989), *Revolution in Print: the Press in France 1775-1800* (1989, Daniel Roche coeditor), *Edition et sédition* (1991, written in French, not available in English), which won the French Prix Médicis, *Berlin Journal, 1989-1990* (1991), and *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Prerevolutionary France* (1995), which won the National Book Critics Circle Award. Professor Darnton has been the recipient of the Leo Gershoy Prize of the American Historical Association (for *The Business of Enlightenment*), a MacArthur Fellowship (1982-87), the Los Angeles Times Book Prize (for *The Great Cat Massacre*), Princeton University’s Behrman Humanities Award (1987), the Gutenberg Prize (2004), and the American Printing History Association Prize (2005). In 1999 he was named a Chevalier of the Légion d’Honneur, the highest award given by the French government, in recognition of his work. Professor Darnton was recently awarded three honorary doctorates from French universities. He received the first from the University of Bordeaux in October 2005, the second from Versailles on 20 June 2006, and will receive the third from Paris IV-Sorbonne in October 2006.



## **KB LECTURES**

KB Lectures are organised in conjunction with the Koninklijke Bibliotheek (KB) – *National Library of the Netherlands*, in The Hague. The Lecture is often based on the KB's special collections and is delivered by the KB Fellow.

Previous KB Lectures were:

1. 2005: Peter Burke *Lost (and Found) in Translation: A Cultural History of Translators and Translating in Early Modern Europe*  
Published by NIAS, 2005
2. 2006: Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie *Weatherwise - The Impact of Climate on the History of Western Europe, 1200-2000*  
Unpublished

The KB Fellowship is a joint venture between the Koninklijke Bibliotheek (KB) - National Library of the Netherlands and NIAS. It is awarded to a renowned foreign scholar in the humanities and offers sustained access to the extensive collections of the National Library. The research facilities provided at both institutes allow the recipient to reap the benefits of both places: the KB's unique collections and NIAS' international and multidisciplinary environment. With the implementation of this fellowship, NIAS and the National Library hope not only to encourage and strengthen the collaboration between libraries and their collections and between scholars and their research but also to further the dissemination of knowledge in the humanities and to promote research in this area.

NIAS is an institute for advanced study in the humanities and social sciences. Each year, the Institute invites approximately 50 carefully selected scholars, both from within and outside the Netherlands, to its centre in Wassenaar, where they are given an opportunity to do research for up to a ten-month period. Fellows carry out their work either as individuals or as part of one of the research theme groups, which NIAS initiates every year. In addition, through its conference facilities, the Institute also functions as a meeting place for scientific programmes of a shorter duration and more specific character, such as workshops, seminars, summer schools, and study centres. NIAS is an institute of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW).

The Koninklijke Bibliotheek (KB) - National Library of the Netherlands is located in The Hague. The KB gives access to the knowledge and culture of the past and present by providing high-quality services for research, study and cultural experience. The KB's collection constitutes the living national memory of written, printed and electronic publications. The humanities take pride of place, with special attention being given to Dutch history, language and culture in a wide international context. The KB is also a knowledge centre for the supply of scientific and scholarly information and the pivot of national and international co-operation.

