

ENLIGHTENMENT BEFORE THE ENLIGHTENMENT: CLANDESTINE PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

In the 17th century not all manuscripts were clandestine because there also existed manuscripts written for public circulation (first and foremost the correspondences that were semi-public, or certain collections of poems that circulated first in manuscript and then in printed form), but it is undeniable that most of the resolutely “heterodox” authors found it useful to entrust their ideas to manuscripts both to protect themselves against the retaliation of the authorities and to circumvent the censorship to which printed books were subject. These philosophical manuscripts were messengers of “full heterodoxy” which we could call “global” and not “local”. The exclusion did not regard one or another context but *all* (or almost) of the contexts of the *Ancien Régime*, as they expressed a radical dissent in contrast with *all* of the orthodoxies of modern Europe. Bodin’s *Colloquium*, like *Theophrastus redivivus* and Meslier’s *Mémoire*, could not have been published either in a Catholic country or in a Protestant one, either in an absolute monarchy or in a republic. The clandestine authors were aware that it would be impossible to spread their ideas outside a circle protected by the manuscript form and most often by anonymity.

KEYWORDS

Enlightenment, Clandestine Philosophy, Atheism, Deism. Free-Thought, Bodin, *Theophrastus redivivus*, Meslier, Challe, Du Marsais, Fréret.

1. INTRODUCTION

The philosophical clandestine manuscript is an early modern literary genre par excellence: there is nothing like it either in the Middle Ages or in the Renaissance. The 17th and 18th century clandestine philosophical manuscripts became a field of study and historical research above all in the 20th century. These manuscripts form an appreciable *corpus*: around two hundred and fifty texts corresponding to some two thousand manuscript copies owned by public and private European and North American libraries and which mainly date

back to the 17th and 18th centuries, but also some to the beginning of the 19th century (see Benitez 1978, 1996, 2003, 2013; for a general overview see Paganini 1998a, 2005, 2008; there is also a date base constantly updated: Philosophie Cl@ndestine).

It is only in the years straddling the 16th and 17th centuries that anonymous authors (for example, the author of *Quatrains du déiste*, around 1620, or of *Theophrastus redivivus*, in 1659) or well-known ones like Jean Bodin (renowned for his other works, but also considered to be the author of the most famous deist manuscript, *Colloquium Heptaplomeres*) entrusted to this form of communication the propagation of ideas and works which could never have been printed and published in their time.

2. WHAT IS A CLANDESTINE PHILOSOPHICAL MANUSCRIPT?

Obviously, different forms of clandestinity existed: there were erotic texts, political pamphlets, satires of court life and of the nobility, forbidden or 'heretic' religious texts (from the Jansenist books to the Hebrew texts, or the Protestant ones in Catholic countries and vice versa), and books about alchemy and occult (see Mothu 2012). These different forms of clandestinity often made recourse to the manuscript as a means of diffusion, and they also fed the clandestine printing, often overseas, of books that were then circulated by the so-called *colporteurs* or sold surreptitiously. The status of "clandestine" is relative in time, place, and situation, and is therefore affected by events: what is clandestine in one period or in one country may not necessarily be so in other ones, under one regime or another (see La Lettre Clandestine 2002: 13-131). In fact, the clandestine philosophical manuscripts are a species within a much wider genre, that of forbidden literature in general, whether printed or in manuscript. The boundaries therefore need to be drawn.

We can suggest a non-abstract but historically based definition of the "clandestine philosophical manuscript", distinguishing it from other forms of clandestinity (religious, political, erotic, satirical, purely literary etc.) by the intersection of three criteria: "clandestinity of expression", "clandestinity of ideas", and the "philosophical" nature of these ideas.

The first criterion is fairly clear. In the 17th century not all manuscripts were clandestine because there also existed manuscripts written for public circulation (first and foremost the correspondences that were semi-public, or certain collections of poems that circulated first in manuscript and then in printed form), but it is undeniable that most of the resolutely "heterodox" authors found it useful to entrust their ideas to manuscripts both to protect

themselves against the retaliation of the authorities and to circumvent the censorship to which printed books were subject. One of the classic sentences with which one of these underground works begins (*Symbolum sapientiae*: Canziani, Schröder, Socas 2000, p. 99) and which can still be found as exergue to book I of David Hume's *Treatise of human nature*, clearly describes the controls to which texts and ideas were subject at the time: «Rare and happy are the times in which one is allowed to think whatever one wants and to say whatever one thinks » (Tacitus, *Historiae*, I, 1). Hence the widespread use of anonymity (even in the case of the *Colloquium Heptaplomeres* none of the ancient copies bear the author's name). In many cases this anonymity has never been unveiled, such as for *Theophrastus redivivus*, *Symbolum sapientiae*, *L'Art de ne rien croire*, *Doutes des Pyrrhoniens*, and many other important works; in other cases the authorship was so well protected that still today there is debate over who the author or authors of *L'Esprit de Spinosa* or the *Traité des trois imposteurs* actually were.

One could object that in this last case a printed version was unexpectedly published in Holland in 1719. However, the entire run was immediately suppressed by the police so the work had to be circulated in manuscript; as of today only four printed have been found out, while about one hundred of manuscript copies have survived. Therefore, even the exception proves the rule, so that we can say that even in the field of the “forbidden”, the “clandestine” manuscript usually preceded and sometimes superseded the “forbidden book”. Even the great “philosophes” not only drew inspiration from these manuscript works, but they also undertook in the second half of the 18th century a large scale campaign promoting the publication of these texts. Obviously, the publication in France was not authorized, so they were printed abroad and then circulated furtively (see Artigas-Menant 2001). As the numerous cases of seizure by the police and of penalties confirm (think of Bonaventure de Fourcroy (see Benitez 2005) whose text survives at the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal exactly because it was confiscated by the police, or the case of the cleric Guillaume (see Mothu 1997), or the misfortunes of the more famous Diderot), it is not true that there was a certain tolerance of the clandestine manuscripts, that they were more “ignored than forbidden” by the authorities, and that their level of “toxicity” was inconsequential, as Mothu (2000) suggested.

The second criterion is the “clandestinity of ideas”: these philosophical manuscripts as such were messengers of “full heterodoxy” which we could call “global” and not “local”. The exclusion did not regard one or another context but *all* (or almost) of the contexts of the *Ancien Régime*, as they expressed a

radical dissent in contrast with *all* of the orthodoxies of modern Europe. Bodin's *Colloquium*, like *Theophrastus redivivus* and Meslier's *Mémoire*, could not have been published either in a Catholic country or in a Protestant one, either in an absolute monarchy or in a republic. The clandestine authors were aware that it would be impossible to spread their ideas outside a circle protected by the manuscript form and most often by anonymity. Rightly, Martin Mulsow coined the suggestive expression: "Moderne aus dem Untergrund" (Mulsow 2002; Mulsow 2015), or "Enlightenment Underground", to indicate forms of thought that remained hidden because they were peripheral to any "official" and "approved" culture, towards which they expressed a "radical" and "fundamental" dissent". In these cases, clandestinity was not a contingent fact but a necessity intrinsic to the very contents of these texts. One might remark that in certain situations the political pamphlets, the court satires, and the Jansenist texts were hunted down with even more determination and so the authors of these manuscripts were in even greater danger. However, albeit forbidden, texts of this type did not advocate a total rejection of orthodoxy in all of its aspects: philosophical, religious, moral, and political, as most of the "philosophical" manuscripts did.

3. WHAT ARE CLANDESTINE PHILOSOPHIES?

Finally, the last, but not least, criterion: these works were clandestine *philosophical* manuscripts, even if the term "philosophy" should not be interpreted in the classical sense of the major systems of the 17th century. Certainly, this manuscript *corpus* is varied and heterogeneous; it includes texts of just a few pages and also much longer treatises (the thousand handwritten pages of *Theophrastus redivivus*); even from the point of view of the quality of the arguments, their nature varied: sometimes, the arguments are weak and almost propagandistic, but in other cases they deservedly accompany and at times boldly anticipate the Enlightenment philosophical ideas. The case of atheism is exemplary: the first treatise in the history of modern philosophy that openly and comprehensively supports the thesis of explicit atheism is not a printed book but a clandestine manuscript: *Theophrastus redivivus*. This work dates back to the year 1659 and thus more than a century earlier than the time at which modern atheism is usually considered to have originated with D'Holbach, Diderot, and Naigeon (cf. Paganini 2013a). The same thing could be said about "deism" or the idea of "natural religion" which appears first in some clandestine manuscripts (*Colloquium*, *Quatrains du déiste*, *Doutes des Pyrrhoniens*, and Challe's *Difficultés sur la religion*), before than in Voltaire's,

Hume's, and the early Diderot's works. In addition, the program of "natural history of religion", which traces its genealogy according to completely natural and human factors, appeared and was developed brilliantly in the clandestine manuscripts well before the homonymous work by Hume dated 1755. Besides atheist and deist treatises, one third category of clandestine works is represented by pantheist texts that draw both on ancient sources (Stoicism, Aristotelian naturalism, 'popular' pantheism, oriental philosophies and religions) and modern ones (mainly Spinoza). The *Esprit de Spinoza* (titled in other versions as *Traité des trois imposteurs*) is the most representative of this third stream, reading Spinoza's *Deus sive natura* in a materialistic key suggested by Hobbes's philosophy (on this wide variety, see Canziani 1994).

These clandestine texts are "philosophical" in a broad sense, discussing metaphysical, religious, and moral topics from a critical point of view based fundamentally on what the authors consider to be the criterion of reason, opposed to authority, tradition, revelation. From the end of the Renaissance to the Libertine age and until the birth of the Enlightenment, these manuscripts crossed important cultural and philosophical transformations. We cannot speak of "clandestine philosophy" in the singular because the authors drew on different traditions and concepts: they referred to the skepticism of Montaigne and Bayle, to the rationalism of Descartes or Malebranche, to the metaphysics of Spinoza or to the mechanical approach of Hobbes, or yet again to the empiricism of Locke. Likewise, there were different orientations: from skepticism to atheism, from deism to materialism, from Spinozism to pantheism. If Leo Strauss had ever taken into consideration the clandestine texts he would have realized that the channel of these clandestine manuscripts allowed freer, more direct and "radical" reflection processing than the encrypted published texts he tried to read "between the lines" (Strauss 1952).

This kind of philosophical reasoning was in general opposed to most metaphysical systems for many and different reasons: sometimes it reintroduced the "forgotten" currents of classical-renaissance naturalism while in other cases it anticipated the *philosophie* of the 18th century with its leaner and more polemical style. There were, however, also major systematic texts (such as, in different forms, the *Theophrastus redivivus* in the 17th century and the *Mémoire* by Jean Meslier at the beginning of 18th century). Nevertheless, their content was diametrically opposed to the "official" theologies and philosophies of the time. Not all this means that the clandestine authors were impervious to modern philosophical ideas. Indeed, while criticizing and contesting them, the *clandestins* also used modern philosophies, transforming

and adapting them for their own purposes which were often completely different from those of the original authors.

In short, the question “what is a clandestine philosophical manuscript?” can be given an answer that is not solely *empirical*, relying on the mere repertory of the corpus, or solely *sociological* or *ideological*, but *historically founded*, looking both at the contents and the circumstances that prevented the publication of this kind of texts.

4. A HISTORY IN SCHOLARSHIP: THE DISCOVERY OF THE CLANDESTINE PHILOSOPHICAL MANUSCRIPTS

This clandestine and heterodox underground has been the subject matter of studies for no more than 100 years. To contextualize the significance of this research, it may be useful to define the various stages of the scholarship research on this topic.

The first was pioneering, from the discoveries of Gustave Lanson (1912) to Ira O. Wade’s monograph (1938). The articles by Lanson, which retraced the university course he held in 1906-1907, provided an ordered and systematic overview of the clandestine manuscripts from Pierre Cuppé to Jean Meslier, from Boulainviller to Fréret and Dumarsais, even if there were numerous and, at times glaring, mistakes: for example, the *Promenade de Cléobule* is attributed to Boulainviller instead of Diderot; Lanson claimed that *Theophrastus redivivus* was “very similar and at times identical” to the *Traité des trois imposteurs*, a fact that is patently untrue; Meslier was considered a “Spinozist” etc. Above all, Lanson’s overview was focused exclusively on France and the Enlightenment, since its aim was to study the formation of the “esprit philosophique”. In his opinion there was no apparent significant difference between Voltaire and Montesquieu on one hand, and the much more radical authors of the clandestine manuscripts on the other. His articles also contained paradoxes: a 17th century text such as *Theophrastus redivivus* (1659) was included in the context of the Enlightenment. This distortion in perspective, focused on 18th century philosophy, would affect research for many years. Wade’s book marked a real step forward and for the first time correctly defined the unity of its historiographical object: *The clandestine organization and diffusion of philosophical ideas in France from 1700 to 1750* (1938), even if he continued to include *Theophrastus*, wrongly considering it to be the aggregation of other clandestine texts. As regards the repertory of the manuscripts, the step forward made by Wade was significant: while Lanson had found around thirty texts and a hundred or so copies, Wade listed in his

“Appendix” 102 titles and 392 copies, including, *inter alia*, manuscripts being outside France and belonging to the British Library, the library of Leningrad, and Harvard University.

The second stage, commenced with J. S. Spink’s book (1960), culminated with Margaret Jacob’s (1981). The study of the clandestine works went beyond the focus on the *Lumières* and new historiographical categories were worked out, in which the clandestine diffusion of ideas and documents played a primary role. Spink launched the “French free-thought” category, reuniting 17th and 18th centuries with the fortunate intuition of going back to Gassendi and his legacy. In this framework, *Theophrastus redivivus* finally found its correct historical location. M. C. Jacob coined the new category of “Radical Enlightenment”, incorporating in the paradigm both the Newtonian science and the English political revolution, and extending the study to a cosmopolitan web that no longer coincided with the French *Lumières*, but rather with the milieu between Holland and England which in turn acted as a bridge to continental culture. Along with this new conceptualization, the geography and chronology of the early modern radicalism changed. The 17th century stage became even more important to understand the birth of the Enlightenment ideas. Two notable and simultaneous conferences re-launched research specifically on the clandestine texts: the Italian one held in Genoa, gathering Gregory, Canziani, Paganini, Ernst etc. and focusing on the 17th century and libertine culture (Gregory et al. 1981) and the French one, directed by Bloch (one of the main players in these studies), which still concentrated on the 18th century (Bloch 1982). It was in this period that some relevant texts were published in a critical form: the *Works* by Meslier (1970), those of and Boulainviller (1973-1975; see Brogi 1993), the *Difficultés sur la religion* (1972), and *L’âme matérielle* (1973), while Miguel Benitez (1978) defended his pioneering thesis with the study and systematic cataloguing of many clandestine manuscripts.

The third stage, from the 1980s to the present, has been characterized by true resurrection of the texts. Many have finally come back to light and have been printed. For the first time, fundamental texts which had never been published such as the monumental *Theophrastus redivivus* (1659) have been edited (Canziani and Paganini 1981-1982), while new critical editions of what had been published in the 18th century with significant modifications such as *Militaire philosophe* were issued (Challe 2000). Other major texts were finally brought out in critical editions with notes and comments, primarily the *Traité des trois imposteurs et L’Esprit de Spinoza* (Charles-Daubert 1999; Berti 1994). An important impulse was given by R. H. Popkin, who dealt extensively with

this last treatise, but also with the circulation of Hebrew texts that were transformed from apologies of Judaism into “philosophical” and “anti-Christian” polemical works (Berti, Charles-Daubert, Popkin 1996; Popkin and Vanderjagt 1993). The great book series “Libre pensée et littérature clandestine”, edited by Antony McKenna, was assembled: this collection now has seventy titles (including both studies and texts), while research expanded into other areas, such as the German one, with the book series edited by W. Schröder (“Philosophische Clandestina der deutschen Aufklärung” and “Freidenker der europäischen Aufklärung»). A specialized journal has been published since 1991: “La Lettre Clandestine”, while the number of conferences and collections of studies have multiplied, above all in Europe but also in the Americas. Miguel Benítez has published the most complete repertory of the clandestine manuscripts (Benitez 1996, p. 20-61; 2003, p. 33-82) along with some important collections of studies (Benitez 2013) and a full monograph on Meslier (Benitez 2012). Winfried Schröder (1998) re-founded the history of modern atheism based on the clandestine texts. Another exponent of this epoch of research and editions is Gianluca Mori, whose critical edition of *L'Examen de la religion* by Du Marsais (1998) and the collection of texts edited along with Alain Mothu, *Philosophes sans Dieu* (Mori and Mothu 2005) deserve special mention. Sergio Landucci published a critical edition of *La Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*, which he convincingly attributed to Fréret (1986), while Antonella Del Prete published the *Traité de l'infini créé* by Terrasson (2007). These are just few examples in a literature which grows from year to year. In fact, these thirty-five years of catalogues, editions, and studies have greatly expanded and increased our knowledge of the clandestine world, creating a subject of specialization that works at the same time in an interdisciplinary perspective. Far from being limited to France, like in the beginnings, the geography of clandestinity now embraces the whole of Europe, from Vienna to Helsinki and St. Petersburg, from Parma to London, from Venice to Rouen, from Paris to Berlin, with areas of minimum intensity (such as Bavaria, most of Italy and nearly all of Spain still dominated by inquisitorial control) and areas of maximum intensity, but all or almost all in contact with each other. Moreover, the 17th century has proved to be a very rich and important period for the production of these subversive texts; the major progenitors of *clandestina* certainly belong to this century. Somehow the center of gravity of the clandestine chronology has shifted towards the 17th century that has certainly taken on an importance similar, if not greater, than the 18th, also from the point of view of originality. Recently, Jean-Pierre Cavaillé has published another important text dated 1668: the

Apologie pour Machiavelle by Louis Machon (2016), which circulated only manuscript and was never printed before.

As a result of this quantitative and qualitative growth in studies and editions, the current stage of research has reached a wider and more mature vision of the clandestine phenomenon from a geographical, sociological, and chronological point of view (see also McKenna and Mothu 1997), Mothu and Del Prete 2000). The fact that studies are now being conducted in previously unexplored or little known areas such as Germany, Holland, Denmark, and Spain is certainly a change. On the other hand, from a diachronic point of view, we can clearly see the continuity between the period of the “libertines” and that of the “clandestines”, even before the advent of Spinoza. Moreover, we have become aware of the fact that Latin had been an important language for clandestine communication for many years, even in the 18th century, as confirmed by the extraordinary good fortune of the *Colloquium Heptaplomeres*, one of the most widespread texts. At the same time, the “philosophical” reputation of these manuscripts texts, whose history has been recently included in the most comprehensive and authoritative history of philosophy, the new *Ueberweg* (Paganini 1998), has been raised; subsequently they have been included also in the *Dictionnaire des philosophes français du XVII^e siècle* (Foisneau 2015). Moreover, starting from the Tenth International Congress (Dublin 1999) on the Enlightenment (see Paganini, Benitez, Dybikowski 2002), every congress of the ISECS includes at least one session on this particular topic.

5. RETHINKING THE ORIGINS OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

This final stage has seen new historiographical categories to flourish, thanks to the growth of the clandestine corpus. The epoch in which the clandestine manuscripts were written and diffused preceded the age considered to be the «official» start of the Enlightenment, in the 1720s and 1730s, i. e. between the publication of the *Lettres persanes* (1721) by Montesquieu and the *Lettres philosophiques* (1734) by Voltaire. By contrast, the study of these clandestine texts permits to go backwards to the end of 16th century (with the ‘deism’ of *Colloquium* by Bodin: see Paganini 2013b) and to the early 17th century, with the rise of the “libertine” philosophical dissidence destined to culminate in the “radical libertinism” of the *Theophrastus redivivus* (Paganini 2013c). The clandestine communication of ideas certainly continued also after the 1730s, but the impression is that it was more a quantitative expansion than a qualitative creation of original ideas. After the

1750s, thanks to the growing efficacy of the publishing industry abroad and to the profusion of book hidden trafficking (“sous le manteau”), printed editions of clandestine texts multiplied, even if the phenomenon of secret writing and transmitting texts did not totally cease. By consequence, the study of this precocious radicalism has inducted the scholars to reconsider the geographical and chronological coordinates of the early modern philosophical culture. The clandestine authors not only anteceded the more famous Enlightenment thinkers, but very often, they were also more radical and consistent in their subversive purposes. We have already mentioned the birth of modern atheism; nearly the same can be said about the origins of materialistic psychology, that is thought to be the result of the late 18th and early 19th century philosophy, whereas its real starting point can be found in a clandestine manuscript *L’Ame matérielle* (late 17th century).

These are the reason why the clandestine authors have found their place in the “radical enlightenment” of Israel (2001, p. 684-703). In addition, Gianni Paganini has proposed the category of “radical libertinism” to underscore the innovation and importance of 17th century texts such as the *Theophrastus redivivus* and, more in general, to establish a link between libertinism and radical thought (Paganini 2014, 2013b). Crossing geographical, chronological, and ideological boundaries that seemed deep-set, the clandestine philosophical manuscripts showed themselves to be one the great laboratories of our modernity, more than a half century before the origins of the Enlightenment.

6. INTERPRETING THE CLANDESTINE PHILOSOPHIES: RADICAL LIBERTINISM AND RADICAL ENLIGHTENMENT

It is also for this complexity of inputs and multiplicity of sources that it is difficult to frame the phenomenon of clandestine philosophies within one dominant historical pattern. Wanting to stress these peculiarities, O. Bloch wondered if it the very condition of clandestinity helped not only to form traits, but also to "impregnate the content" of these manuscripts: according to him, "materialism of the clandestine age" would be "a literary materialism, a work of erudition and a system of interpretation," in short, "an Ancien Régime materialism", which should be distinguished from the late Enlightenment materialism as a "materialism confined in interpretation of texts" differs from "a materialism open on nature and facing science". Bloch explained thus many of the "archaic" characters present in these manuscripts: not only "the idealization of a past," in which the ancient sages had direct access to nature, then disguised by myths and esoteric doctrines, but also the conviction that

the truth would ultimately be accessible through a demystifying reading of ancient books, or even the idea of an "eternal and secret" philosophy, in a word elitism that went hand in hand with a continuous "solicitations" of canonical texts and discovery of "symptoms" of a "hidden" doctrine behind the *prima facie* readings (Bloch 1997).

Although suggestive, this thesis needs to be softened, if not corrected. In reality, the gap between the two epochs is not that sharp, not just for bibliographical reasons (it is impressive to see the wave of editions that even in the age of "scientific" materialism these texts "literary" or "erudite" had, thanks precisely to "mature" materialists like Diderot and D'Holbach), but also for more substantial reasons. We have already seen that without the vast background of investigations on the human nature and its past undertaken by the clandestine radicals, it would hardly have emerged a concept so "modern" as that of "natural history of religion." Even the shift from the unity of religions into the frame of "prisca sapientia" (typical of the Renaissance) to the idea of a natural religion opposed to the positive religions (typical of modernity) much owes to the critical deism of these hidden thinkers.

Another comprehensive formula has been advanced A. McKenna (1996), according to whom the clandestine philosophical debate should be seen "in the perspective of the history of the conflict between Montaigne's Pyrrhonism and the rationalism of Descartes and Malebranche." Although suggestive, even this thesis is not wide enough to encompass the entire clandestine production, so it is true that the whole spinozistic and monistic component is left out, albeit it is widely diffused in these treatises. By contrast, on the hegemony of this component has focused the interpretation provided by J. Israel with its category of "Radical Enlightenment", which deals also with clandestine literature (Israel 2001, p 684-703). As is well known, Israel has claimed the basic opposition between a "moderate" and a "radical" Enlightenment, finding the core of the latter in Spinozism or in a "monistic" conception of reality. Thus, against N. Malcolm's thesis, which had underlined the presence of Hobbes, Israel affirmed the greater importance of Spinoza whose philosophy was tightly connected to the ideas of freedom and republicanism (cf. Israel 2006). From this point of view, the fact that the clandestine text more obviously "democratic" and emancipatory (*L'Esprit de Spinoza*) explicitly referred to Spinoza (although it also drew on Hobbes in other respects) seems to be a strong point in favor of Israel's thesis. However, one must remember that the very birth of the formula "Radical Enlightenment", owned to M. C. Jacob, was linked to a pluralistic view of the phenomenon, focusing on the anglo-dutch context, the heritage of Hobbes's philosophy, English

republicanism and the influence of Freemasonry. More recently, for the German sphere, M. Mulsow has even widened the range of the radical sources, including socinianism, unconventional erudition, Jewish ideas, antiplatonic, skeptical and eclectic philosophies), that came together at the "underground" genesis of *Frühauflklärung*.

Some major debates among scholars had a certain feed-back on Israel's initial thesis. In a more recent intervention he argued that he did not want to "deny that Radical Enlightenment was a complex and plural phenomenon," but nevertheless reiterated that there was "at the center of this chaotic set of influences [...] a unique impulse recognized by all" and that it came "mainly from monistic philosophies, which had a largely spinozistic character and origin." (Israel 2007, p. 43) In the second volume of his work, Israel ended up readmitting at the roots of the Enlightenment the libertine heritage and the radical Renaissance interpretations, which he had previously excluded (in the former case) or neglected in the latter (Israel 2006, p. 481-495). In reality, as to the absolute centrality of Spinoza's inspiration, the underground literature shows some more articulate landscape than the one depicted by Israel. Sometimes, the reading of *Tractatus theologico-politicus* was independent and even more influential than that, properly monistic, of *Ethics*; other times, more "radical" results were achieved independently and prior to Spinoza reading. Needless to say, *Theophrastus redivivus* came at least a decade before Spinoza and, on the other hand, the most decisively "atheistic" thinker of the early thirties of the 18th century, Jean Meslier, developed a system that, while being "monistic" in the materialistic sense of this term, did not depend on Spinoza's inspiration; in fact, not being a Spinozist, Meslier even pretended to escape the objections which from various parts (from Bayle to Fénelon) had been addressed to Spinoza's metaphysics (see Benitez 2012). The nuance in favor of a more general category like "monism" that Israel has introduced during the debate on the "Radical Enlightenment" is undoubtedly more suitable to describe the evolution of clandestine thought and appears historically more inclusive. Both *Theophrastus* and Meslier, for example, are "monistic" without being "Spinozistic".

One sort of criticism addressed to the research on clandestine texts can be summarized thus: they would give too much space to forms of "dogmatic metaphysics," while the true Enlightenment rejected the "esprit de système" in the name of "esprit systématique", and was more characterized more by the experimental method than by metaphysical speculation. Keeping "materialism as an ideology" at the centre of attention, but not seeing the immense work done by the 18th century science on matter, would mean, according to Casini

(2006) who made these remarks, to fall into an error of historical perspective, "giving an excessive relief to the currents of the clandestine movement of ideas, to secret activity, marginal and loser subcultures, to the mentality of the plot." In the first place, scientific issues were certainly not unrelated to some of the clandestine texts and authors (just think of *Telliamed* and *L'Ame matérielle* for the former, Fontenelle and Meslier for the latter), although most of these writers (again with the macroscopic exception of Fontenelle) were certainly not 'professional' scientists, but amateurs and curious of science. One more complex issue is whether it is correct to draw such a sharp line between "metaphysics" and "science," even in the age of Enlightenment. Doing so, one should relegate in the former not only some 'minors' but also many "major" Enlightenment thinkers, like D'Holbach, Helvétius, La Mettrie who developed speculative reasoning that went much beyond the limits of the science of the time. What is perhaps worse, such dividing line would end up cutting into two halves personalities that practiced both sides of the radical culture, both science and 'metaphysical' or 'ideological' philosophy (think of authors such as Maupertuis, Diderot, Condillac, Voltaire himself). All that would have curious effects on the intellectual outlook of a movement, like the Enlightenment, that always stressed the connections between science and metaphysics, obviously a new kind of metaphysics different from both Scholastics and Cartesianism.

7. THE *PHILOSOPHES* AND THE CLANDESTINE WORKSHOP

In addition, some of the great philosophers of the 18th century participated in their own and actively to the manuscript circulation of ideas. The case of Voltaire is exemplary: besides the in *Epître à Uranie* he circulated as a manuscript a different version of his *Lettre sur Mr Locke*, which contained the famous hypothesis that matter can think and declared the impossibility of demonstrating the immortality of the soul. In this manuscript version, Voltaire called on divine omnipotence to assert that the corporeity of the soul does not necessarily imply its corruption, while this passage disappeared from the published version included in the *Lettres philosophiques*. This precaution did not prevent their suppression: the *Lettres* were condemned to be burned by the decree of the Parliament of Paris on June 10, 1734 as apt to "inspire the most dangerous libertinage for religion and the order of civil society". Voltaire, threatened with arrest, had to retire first in Lorraine and then at Cirey in the castle of M. du Châtelet, where he remained (even with the interruption of several trips) for a decade. He contributed to the publication of Meslier's *Testament*, in fact an *Extrait* purged of atheism and radical politics, and

transformed in a more acceptable (to him) profession of deism. Voltaire knew and appreciated other clandestine texts such as *Telliamed*, *Examen de la Religion chrétienne*, *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*, the so-called *Militaire philosophe*, while polemically reacting to the atheism contained in the *Traité des trois imposteurs* (which he only knew by the 1768 edition). Lastly, in the *Dîner du Comte de Boulainvilliers*, printed in 1767, Voltaire paid homage to the men who had fed underground literature, like Fréret, Du Marsais and Boulainvilliers (see Benitez 2009). Also D'Holbach and Naigeon edited many unpublished treatises, realising as many peculiar transformations of these text: in the hands of D'Holbach the deistic manuscript of Difficultés sur la religion of Robert Challe became a more radical and atheistic pamphlet, contrary to the original intentions of the author.

Concerning another great figure of the Enlightenment, Denis Diderot, since 1938 Venturi demonstrated convincingly that, in order to understand the *Pensées philosophiques* (published in 1746 and immediately condemned to the stake together with La Mettrie's *Histoire naturelle de l'âme*), "it is good to break away a while from thinking of the great works of the French Enlightenment that preceded them, of the great names of Montesquieu, Fontenelle, Voltaire, who dominated the first half of the eighteenth century, and to look instead at that simpler and often more aggressive literature that, with pamphlets and manuscripts, carried out the debate of the Enlightenment on a humbler field" (Venturi 1988, p. 74). Following this good advice, we have situated another work of Diderot, which he had left manuscript, the *Promenade du Sceptique* (or more precisely the *Promenade de Cléobule*) against the background of the "clandestine" skepticism (Paganini 2002). This work puts on stage many of the typical figures present in the clandestine currents. Besides criticizing Christianity (which he had already done in his previous deistic writings) the *Promenade* stages a dialogue between Pyrronists, atheists, deists, Spinozists; the very topic developed by the character of Oribaze (the Spinozist) will almost literally resumed in letter from Diderot to Voltaire (June 11, 1749) in defense of another booklet of his own, the *Lettre sur les aveugles*. In the first part of the *Promenade*, the contrast between the wise Cléobule and the most ardent Ariste clearly expresses the distance that distinguished the prudent attitude of the first generation of "esprit forts" ("Religion and government – Cléobule says - are two sacred subjects that is not allowed to touch") from the active attitude of the new circle of *philosophes* surrounding Diderot. When he composed the *Promenade*, Diderot was well aware of the risk that he would have run if he had published it, and in this sense too, Cléobule's calls for caution should be read. Venturi (1988, p. 152)

believed that the text of the *Promenade*, together with the publication of the *Lettre sur les aveugles*, had been one of the reasons for the author's arrest (1749) by the police, even though on that occasion the work was not found and Diderot could claim to have burnt it, while acknowledging to be its author, what he instead has always energetically denied about *Pensées philosophiques*.

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