

From «erudite libertinism» to Enlightenment free-thought:
the *Réflexions morales et métaphysiques*¹

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Title: From «erudite libertinism» to Enlightenment free-thought: the *Réflexions morales et métaphysiques*.

Abstract: Our investigation is based on the critical edition of the *Réflexions morales et métaphysiques*, an anonymous clandestine manuscript dating from the beginning of the XVIIIth century. Two manuscript copies were known, to which we now add a third, that we discovered in Geneva. Our first step was to determine the links between these copies and the lost original, then to identify the author – who sent a letter from Lyon, signed «Delaube», to Reinier Leers in 1715 with a view to publication. The track of the Lyon family De Laube proving fruitless, we tracked down a formula of the *Réflexions* which led us first to Jean Terrasson, author of the *Traité de l'infini créé*, and then to Camille Falconet, friend of Terrasson and founding member of the Academy of Lyon. Falconet lived in Paris from 1707, where he became known as a member of the Academy des inscriptions, close to Fontenelle and Malebranche, and as a «bibliomaniac», whose library was open to young writers and in particular, circa 1748-1750, to the Encyclopedists. Two further lines of research deserve to be explored: 1) the relationship between the *Réflexions*, that we attribute to Falconet, and the *Theophrastus Redivivus*, now attributed to Guy Patin, and the way in which that filiation came about; then, 2) the reception of the *Réflexions*, and in particular their influence on the political philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Keywords: Falconet, Patin, Rousseau, immaterialism, Spinozism

The *Réflexions morales et métaphysiques sur les religions et sur les connaissances de l'homme* are one of the most enigmatic texts among the clandestine philosophical manuscripts of the eighteenth century. The existence of the *Réflex-*

¹ Una versione precedente di questo articolo è già stata pubblicata su *Siglo Dieciocho*, considerando la rilevanza della ricerca e dei suoi risultati si è ritenuto utile pubblicare in questo numero una versione in inglese del testo.

ions was momentarily revealed in a letter dated 1715, when a certain «Delaube» explained the argument of the work and claimed to be its author; they were then absent for more than fifty years from the networks distributing forbidden works, until they suddenly reappeared towards the end of the 1760s in the form of two copies bearing apparently contradictory dates (1742 and 1767). In these two copies the main text is accompanied by a final additional note mentioning several British philosophers, whereas the sources of the original text are almost all French: the note compares the *Réflexions* with other clandestine texts composed certainly after 1715 and even after 1742.

Attribution is similarly shrouded in mystery: who was «Delaube», whose name has been cited among the unknown protagonists of the clandestine debate on religion and morals at the beginning of the eighteenth century? What were his links with the disciples and friends of Malebranche, from whose works he draws several characteristic metaphysical positions? How do these borrowings fit in with the skepticism rooted in the *Essais* of Montaigne (Malebranche's reviled enemy) and with the very diverse context, where scientific, moral, political, and metaphysical observations are presented in an apparently disordered fashion but remain faithful to a logical argument which the author strives constantly to reaffirm.

1. *The known manuscripts*

Investigations into the *Réflexions* take as their starting-point the letter addressed to Reinier Leers, dated from Lyon on 13 August 1715 and signed «Delaube» (Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, fonds Marchand 2, and copy in the hand of Allamand: Marchand 66). In his letter, «Delaube» offers his work to Leers for publication and vaunts its qualities, but Leers had already sold his bookshop to Caspar Fritsch and Michaël Böhm in 1709 and had died in Paris some months before the date of the letter, on 14 November 1714.

Two copies have long been known of a text which corresponds perfectly with the text described by «Delaube»: one at the Municipal Library of Rouen (shelf-mark: Montbret 553), the other – in the hand of Joseph-Claude Raby – at that of Grenoble (collection Raby, ms 504). The comparison of these two versions allows us to conclude that they are independent copies of the same source-text. We have discovered a third copy at the Library of Geneva (ms Supplément 509)². This bound volume bears on its first page the following indication: «Ce manuscrit ne m'appartient pas. G. Cramer». The signature is that of Gabriel Cramer, the well-known Genevan printer of Voltaire's works. Some variants in the Genevan copy contain phrases which correspond to the works of Louis-Antoine Caraccioli (1719-1803), a former Oratorian, author of all sorts of works who

² See the *Catalogue des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque de Genève, Archives de la famille Roget. 19e-20e siècle. CH BGE ms fr. 7441-7485*, Genève 2010.

lived by his pen. Our investigation – of which we can only resume here the conclusions – has allowed us to deduce that this manuscript is a copy of a version established by Joseph-Claude Raby. Raby is therefore the source of the two families of manuscripts: X, which gives the Grenoble and Rouen copies, and Y, that is known only by the Genevan copy. We thus observe that Raby played a vital role in the diffusion of the *Réflexions morales et métaphysiques*.

Without pursuing here the examination of these copies, we will present our investigation concerning the author and the philosophical substance of the *Réflexions*.

2. Enquiry concerning the author

2.1. Delaube

Let us return to the letter addressed to Leers in 1715, which raises a number of questions concerning not only the author but also the addressee, who had died some months previously. The letter mentions the place from which it was sent, allegedly Lyon, and it is signed «Delaube». The famous De Laube family of the Lyon region, descended from a family which had its roots in the Dauphiné, naturally comes to mind. However – to resume our research on this question – we discovered that Philibert-Hubert de L'Aube, whose dates are compatible with the composition of the *Réflexions*, was an aggressive landowner, constantly bringing court-cases against his neighbours and tenants: his profile is incompatible with that of the author of the *Réflexions*, who, as is shown in the annotation of our critical edition, is a scholar, an avid reader of Montaigne, Pascal, Malebranche, Spinoza and many others... Our author is fond of abstract arguments, and he is able to develop sophisticated conclusions from the most technical aspects of Cartesian metaphysics. The Lyon family thus led us into a *cul-de-sac*.

2.2. Jean Terrasson

In the course of his analysis of the qualities of the Infinitely Perfect Being, the author of the *Réflexions* invokes «the laws of uniformity and variety» which, he affirms, govern divine Creation. This conception of a «law of variety» derives from a passage by Malebranche, but it is a distortion of that passage. The formula in the *Réflexions* corresponds however exactly to one that can be found in the *Traité de l'infini créé* by Jean Terrasson, composed shortly before 1703, revised by the author around 1710-1715 and presented on 15 July 1715 by the Jesuit Etienne Lombard before the Académie des sciences et des arts of Lyon³.

³ Jean Terrasson, *Traité de l'infini créé*, ed. A. Del Prete, Honoré Champion, Paris 2007, p. 153: «La nature a deux loix égales, l'uniformité et la variété». *Réflexions morales et métaphysiques*: «Il faut qu'elle soit conforme aux lois d'uniformité et de variété qui règnent dans la nature, qui forment

There is no doubt that the author of the *Réflexions* is following the text of Terrasson on this point and this coincidence incites us to take a closer look at the career of Jean Terrasson. According to the eulogistic prefaces by D'Alembert and Paradis de Moncrif and the anonymous *Lettre de M. *** à l'éditeur*, three texts added to the posthumous edition of his *Philosophie applicable à tous les objets de l'esprit* (Paris, Prault et fils, 1754), Jean Terrasson was born in Lyon on 31 January 1670, eldest son of Pierre Terrasson, counsellor of the Sénéchaussée du Présidial, who sent him to take orders in the Oratory in 1685, although the son felt no particular vocation and, indeed, announced his intention to leave the Oratory after the death of his father. This was exactly what he did «immediately after his father's death» between 1700 and 1702. He remained in Paris as preceptor to the eldest son of Rémond de La Renouillère, but his pupil died prematurely – probably in 1706 or at the beginning of 1707 – and Terrasson then entered, on 10 March 1707, thanks to the protection of the abbé Bignon, the Academy of Science as a pupil of the perpetual secretary, Fontenelle. He was given the newly created position of assistant mechanic on 3 January 1716; subsequently, he was appointed assistant geometer on 1st June 1718, associate geometer on 4 December 1719, and veteran on 22 February 1741. He was professor in Greek and Latin philosophy at the Collège royal (now Collège de France) from 1720 until his death. He was also elected to the Académie française on 22 March 1732 – said to be «the last member of the Academy elected under the influence of Mme de Lambert». He died – without last rites – on 15 September 1750. The various biographical articles and the mentions of Terrasson by Raynal and Grimm in the *Correspondance littéraire* paint the portrait of man without any inclination to religious belief.

Terrasson is best known as the probable author of the *Traité de l'infini créé*, of which a number of manuscript copies circulated before publication in 1769. Our research confirms this attribution⁴, which opens up new paths of enquiry, since the *Traité de l'infini créé* was presented by Father Etienne Lombard before the Académie de Lyon on 15 July 1715 and we know by the correspondence of one of the academicians that the text of the *Traité* circulated in Lyon before 1707.

Camille Falconet was one of the founder-members of the Académie de Lyon on 30 May 1700, and he even lent his house for the first meetings of the Academy, situated in old-town Lyon on the site of the present Gadagne Museums. Falconet established himself in 1707 in Paris, where he was a close friend of Jean Terrasson – which leads us to look more closely at his whole career.

2.3. Camille Falconet

toute la solidité et la beauté de cet univers, et qu'elle répande sur tout un caractère admirable de la divinité.» (Rouen, ms p. 176).

⁴ See A. Del Prete, *Du nouveau sur le Traité de l'infini créé par l'abbé Jean Terrasson*, «La Lettre clandestine», 29 (2021), p. 373-388.

Camille Falconet (or Falconnet) was born in Lyon of a very distinguished family on 1st March 1671⁵. He was the great-grandson of Charles Falconet (before 1585-1641), ordinary physician to the queen Marguerite de Valois in 1614 and 1615. His grandfather, who directed his education, was André Falconet (1611-1691), a physician qualified in the Faculty of Montpellier, member then dean of the college of physicians in Lyon, medical counsellor to the king and first physician to Christine de France, duchess of Savoy; he is well known by his correspondence with Guy Patin⁶. Noël Falconet (1644-1734), Camille's father, was also a physician qualified in the Faculty of Montpellier; he married in 1670 Marguerite Monin. Camille was the first of their fifteen children; his godfather was Camille de Neufville de Villeroy, archbishop and count of Lyon, with the rank of *primat des Gaules*; his godmother was Marie Angélique Turpin, aunt of Louvois and sister-in-law to the chancellor Michel Le Tellier.

In 1678, his father, Noël, was called to Paris as physician to the Grande-Ecurie (Royal Stables) and was then appointed consultant physician to the king. He remained in Paris until 1722, so that it was Camille's grandfather, André Falconet, who directed his education. Precocious and studious, Camille was sent to Paris to pursue his studies in rhetoric at the collège du cardinal Lemoine, then returned to Lyon at the age of 14 to study philosophy (in 1685-86); to pursue medical studies, he went to Montpellier, then to Avignon. He returned to Lyon towards the end of the 1680s, but apart from the inheritance of his father's title of *commissaire de la Santé*, there is no trace of his activity as a physician before 1707. That year, on arrival in Paris, he had to begin his medical studies again: he passed his bachelor theses at the age of 36, defended his graduation theses and became a Paris physician at the age of 39 (1710). The following year, he presided the thesis of Antoine de Jussieu, a student from Lyon and well-known future botanist. From then on, as far as his medical research was concerned, total silence reigned until 1730. His medical vocation does not appear to have been very strong: his place of election and predilection was not the Académie des sciences but the Académie des inscriptions et des belles lettres, where he was elected in 1716, with the support of the abbé Jean-Paul Bignon. He was to become a *membre pensionnaire* in 1744. It was not by his medical practice that Falconet made himself known but by his «inexhaustible erudition» (Le Beau) – satirised by La Mettrie: «Vous connoissez ce médecin, ou plutôt ce savant...» who has accumulated «une des plus curieuses bibliothèques de Paris»⁷.

Falconet's «cabinet» was situated in the rue Traversine, near the Palais Royal and the Butte Saint-Roch (in a house now n° 9, rue Molière) – close to the «Richelieu

⁵ See Le Beau, *Eloge historique de M. Falconet*, L. Durand, Paris 1762; *Catalogue de la bibliothèque de feu M. Falconet*, Paris 1763, Avertissement, and *Dictionnaire historique des académiciens de Lyon 1700-2016*, Lyon, Éditions de l'Académie, 2017, s.v. (art. by D. Saint-Pierre).

⁶ The correspondence between Guy Patin and André Falconet stretches over the years between depuis 1647 and 1672 (440 lettres): see the excellent electronic edition established by L. Capron: <https://www.biusante.parisdescartes.fr/patin/>.

⁷ La Mettrie, *Ouvrage de Pénélope ou Machiavel en médecine par Aletheius Demetrius*, Berlin, 1748, 2 vol., I, p. 175-176.

Quadrilateral» where the Bibliothèque nationale was to be established in 1720. Jean François Dreux du Radier attests that Falconet's cabinet was «the rendez-vous of people of merit and of the most distinguished reputation. I saw there several times MM. D'Alembert, Diderot, Dumarsais, Rameau, the comte de Caylus, the marquis d'Hérouville, etc.». Falconet's friends also frequented the salon of Mme Doublet de Persan (née Legendre), of which he himself was one of the regular guests: among them were Dortous de Mairan, Mirabaud, Lacurne de Sainte-Palaye, the worldly abbés Legendre and Voisenon; the «academic» sessions were presided over by Bachaumont and the circle was intensely interested in Spinoza's philosophy and in the consequences to be drawn from Malebranche's occasionalism⁸.

We know that, during the 1750s, Falconet opened up his library to the Encyclopedists: D'Alembert mentions the fact in his *Discours préliminaire*:

M. Falconet, médecin consultant du roi et membre de l'Académie des belles-lettres, possesseur d'une bibliothèque aussi nombreuse et aussi étendue que ses connoissances, mais dont il fait un usage encore plus estimable, celui d'obliger les savants en la leur communiquant sans réserve, nous a donné à cet égard tous les secours que nous pouvions souhaiter. Cet homme de Lettres citoyen, qui joint à l'érudition la plus variée les qualités d'homme d'esprit & de Philosophe, a bien voulu aussi jeter les yeux sur quelques-uns de nos articles, & nous donner des conseils & des éclaircissemens utiles.

Diderot echoes him in the article «Bibliothèque» in the *Encyclopédie*:

Celle [la bibliothèque] de M. Falconet, infiniment précieuse par le nombre et par le choix des livres qu'elle renferme, mais plus encore par l'usage qu'il en sait faire, pourrait être mise au rang des bibliothèques publiques, puisqu'en effet les gens de lettres ont la liberté d'y aller faire les recherches dont ils ont besoin, et que souvent ils trouvent dans la conversation de M. Falconet des lumières qu'ils chercheraient vainement dans ses livres.

Grimm adds that “the *bonhomme* Falconet would have been content to have in his library maître François, maître Benoit and maître Michel”, i.e. Rabelais, Spinoza and Montaigne, and he emphasises the warm welcome extended by Falconet to young writers of that period:

Il inspirait la passion à tous ceux qui l'avaient vu une fois; c'était un de ces hommes qu'on ne pouvait plus oublier. Il était le père et le protecteur né de tous les gens de lettres sans appui. Ils n'avaient pas besoin d'autres titres pour recevoir des conseils et des secours. Son immense bibliothèque était au service de tout le monde.⁹

⁸ P. Vernière, *Spinoza et la pensée française*, p. 268-269, 394-395; see also P. -F. Moreau, «Le bord du précipice. Dortous de Mairan entre Malebranche et Spinoza», in R. Carbone, Ch. Jacquet et P.-F. Moreau (dir.), *Spinoza-Malebranche. A la croisée des interprétations*, ENS Editions, Lyon 2018, pp. 37-49.

⁹ *Correspondance, littéraire, philosophique et critique par Grimm, Diderot...*, t. 6, Paris 1878, p.

This testimony is confirmed by an unpublished letter of Alexandre Deleyre¹⁰. Indeed, the whole world of French philosophers was familiar with Falconet's library¹¹: Maupertuis was to be found there regularly, Voltaire alludes to it and became familiar with Spinoza's works to be found there. It was in Falconet's library that Rousseau consulted a medical thesis defended under his presidency in 1749: he could find there all the sources for his encyclopedic articles on music. Falconet made Vico's works available to his friends, *La Scienza nuova* (1725, 1744) and the *Autobiografia*. He was the only person in Paris to possess the second edition of *La Scienza nuova*: Diderot and d'Holbach debated over it with Galiani in Falconet's «cabinet»; Condillac also discovered it and mentions it in his *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (1746); Boullanger does the same and exploits it in his *Antiquité dévoilée* (1766); Bonamy, a friend to Falconet and Fréret, and Antoine Terrasson, Jean's brother, also read it in Falconet's house.

Falconet's own writings and his papers presented before the Académie des inscriptions also attest his extensive interests and knowledge: «a universal curiosity which led him to embrace all kinds of erudition» (Le Beau, *Eloge historique*, p. 6). His was an encyclopedic mind, interested in philosophy, physics, astronomy, zoology and botanics, and also all aspects of history; he defended his convictions in the fields of vortices, subtle matter, criticism of human credulity, skepticism, the naturalistic interpretation of Malebranche's works, engendering of species (interlocking of seeds), medicine, the rule of self-evidence... Having become a pillar of social, academic and philosophical life in the mid-eighteenth century, Falconet was regarded as a «philosophe honnête homme» when he died in Paris on 8 February 1762.

Falconet's erudition corresponds perfectly to that of the author of the *Réflexions morales et métaphysiques* and we can observe that practically all the works cited in the *Réflexions* were to be found in Falconet's library.

Moreover, Terrasson's unpublished works were another source for the *Réflexions*. The *Traité de l'infini créé* was communicated to Laurent Dugas, president of the Lyon Academy before 1707 – probably shortly after 1703, since it is known (by a copy purchased by Huet) that manuscript copies of the text began to circulate around that date: this is a crucial point, since it suggests that Falconet may have been able to read the *Réflexions* at that early date, before moving to Paris in 1707. We have seen that the *Traité* defines «laws of uniformity and variety», which play an essential role in the metaphysical system of the *Réflexions*: they must have been part of the very conception of the *Réflexions*. A great number of other phrases and formulae are drawn from or based on maxims published after

266-7 (avril 1765).

¹⁰ BNF, n.a.f. 22.098. Other letters in this collection attest Falconet's extensive network of correspondents: Caumont, Grosley, La Monnoye, Alexander Monro the physician (1697-1767), Jean-François Séguier, the Strasbourg book-seller, Jean Charles Pohle... All of them thank him for the communication of books from his library and several of them allude to his «cards» (reading notes written on playing cards); some of them request him to greet on their behalf his colleagues at the Académie des inscriptions, Lévesque de Burigny and Fréret.

¹¹ *Catalogue de la bibliothèque de feu M. Falconet*, Paris 1763, 2 vol.

Terrasson's death in *La Philosophie applicable* (1754) – maxims covering all fields of knowledge and culture: ethics, politics, poetry. Thus, before 1715, the author of the *Réflexions* was familiar with Terrasson's unpublished works, and indeed certain textual details of the anonymous *Lettre* published as a preface to Terrasson's posthumous work *La Philosophie applicable à tous les objets de l'esprit* (1754) suggest that Falconet contributed to that publication. Moreover, when Falconet adopts a position on certain specific questions, be it vortices, subtle matter, criticism of human credulity, skepticism, or the naturalistic interpretation of Malebranche's works, his text is in perfect harmony with the *Réflexions*.

Last but not least, the author of *Réflexions* repeatedly uses passages from *La Logique, ou l'Art de penser* by Arnauld and Nicole to support his position, and Falconet was an assiduous reader of that work: of the four marked passages in the copy of the *Logique* (2nd ed. 1664) owned by Falconet (BnF, Paris, R.2183), three correspond to quotations present in the *Réflexions*. These include a mention of Montaigne (*Logique*, éd. 1664, p. 342; cf. *Réflexions*, ms. Rouen, p. 209); a remark on those who oppose the universal consent argument (*Logique*, p. 36; ms. Rouen, p. 162); and a comparison between «Pyrrhonians» and dogmatists (*Logique*, p. 10; ms. Rouen, p. 97).

In the present state of research, while definitive material evidence remains to be found, Falconet is the only author to whom the *Réflexions* may reasonably be attributed. This attribution implies that he maintained absolute secrecy concerning his real convictions: no testimony of the period mentions his heterodox philosophical opinions. It is only in the *Encyclopédie* that Falconet is introduced by D'Alembert and Diderot into the circle of Enlightenment free-thinkers and heralded as a significant reference for the new generation of writers emerging at that time. His official function as medical counsellor to the king, the protection of the cardinal Dubois and the abbé Bignon – his temperament too, no doubt – imposed discretion, but this should not diminish the strength of the evidence which allows us to designate him as the author of the *Réflexions morales et métaphysiques*. This discovery allows us to better grasp the constraints weighing heavily on the expression of free-thought during this period and the discretion which clandestine philosophers were obliged to observe: theirs was the famous motto: *Foris ut moris est, intus ut libet*. It seems that Falconet maintained that perfect discretion throughout his life.

3. Falconet and Patin: from one generation to another

A recent discovery has not only revealed a major and unsuspected source of the *Réflexions* but also adds a strong argument in favour of our hypothetical attribution of that work to Camille Falconet.

The *Theophrastus Redivivus*, the first explicitly atheist text composed in France, dated 1659, can now be attributed to Guy Patin; all the arguments in favour of this attribution are presented by Gianluca Mori in a book devoted to

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that question¹². It is therefore of importance to remember that, from 1647 until his death in 1672, Patin maintained an intense correspondence – 440 known letters – with André Falconet, Camille's grandfather who was in charge of the boy's education. Patin had confidence in André Falconet and did not hesitate to mention discussions with his friends Gabriel Naudé and Pierre Gassendi on a number of delicate subjects: Patin's letter to André Falconet dated 25 August 1648 is a good example:

M. Naudé, bibliothécaire de M. le cardinal Mazarin, intime ami de M. Gassendi, comme il est de mien, nous a engagé pour dimanche prochain, à aller souper et coucher en sa maison de Gentilly, à la charge que nous y ferons la débauche; mais Dieu sait quelle débauche. M. Naudé ne boit naturellement que de l'eau, et n'a jamais goûté vin. M. Gassendi est si délicat qu'il n'en oseroit boire, et s' imagine que son corps brûleroit s'il en avoit bu; c'est pourquoi je puis bien dire de l'un et de l'autre ce vers d'Ovide: *Vina fugit, gaudetque meris abstemius undis*. Pour moi, je ne puis que jeter de la poudre sur l'écriture de ces deux grand hommes; j'en bois fort peu, et néanmoins ce sera une débauche, mais philosophique, et peut-être quelque chose davantage; peut-être tous trois, guéris du loup-garou et délivrés du mal des scrupules, qui est le tyran des consciences, nous irons peut-être jusque fort près du sanctuaire. (éd. L. Capron, lettre du 27 août 1648)

The clandestine nature of such discussions is confirmed by the following sentence:

Je fis l'an passé ce voyage de Gentilly avec M. Naudé, moi seul avec lui, tête à tête. Il n'y avait point de témoins, aussi n'y en fallait-il point. Nous y parlâmes fort librement de tout, sans que personne en ait été scandalisé. (*ibid.*)

By the word «personne» (no one), Patin implies ironically «neither one of us»; and it is well known that Naudé was a naturalistic atheist, who had got rid of any kind of «werewolf» of superstition. Thus, the «sanctuary» mentioned has here the sense of religious impiety, as in the title given to the French translation of Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus* in 1678: *La Clef du sanctuaire*. The mention of this philosophical «debauchery» – «and perhaps something more», implying «religious» – suggests that Patin played the role of scribe among these three friends and that he transcribed subsequently the fruits of their readings and discussions, adding the remarks of others drawn from his notebooks («cahiers»). This hypothesis is reinforced by Gianluca Mori's analysis and explains the characteristic structure of the *Theophrastus Redivivus*, which is a mosaic of quotations drawn from classical authors (Aristotle, Cicero, Plutarch, Epicurus, Lucretius, Diogenes Laertius, Sextus Empiricus, Lucian, Ovid, Horace...) and from the Italian naturalists (Machiavelli, Pomponazzi, Vanini, Campanella). The letter addressed to André Falconet bears witness to the confidence that Patin

¹² G. Mori, *Athéisme et dissimulation en France au XVII^e siècle: Guy Patin et le «Theophrastus Redivivus»*, Honoré Champion, Paris 2022.

had in him, whereas he was generally very careful not to express his real convictions to his numerous correspondents. Another letter confirms the intimate nature of this friendship:

Je voudrais être à Lyon avec vous pour une huitaine, nous nous y entretiendrions, *inter privato parietes*, de plusieurs choses *quæ litteris non consignantur*. (éd. L. Capron, lettre du 20 août 1660).

Now, the careful textual study of the *Réflexions morales et métaphysiques* allows us to affirm that they are firmly based on the *Theophrastus Redivivus* on a number of themes: in particular on the comparison of men with animals and on the equality between men in the state of nature, on the breaking of natural law through the invention of arts and sciences and by the institution of the laws of civil society, and on the «Law» which suppressed natural liberty, introduced social inequality, established private property and exploited religion as an instrument of political domination.

The relation between the two texts adds another strong argument in favour of the attribution of the *Theophrastus Redivivus* to Guy Patin, since Camille Falconet may well have discovered that clandestine text among his grandfather's papers after his death in 1691, or, more probably, through his father, Noël Falconet, who had been Patin's pupil and *protégé* – lodging even in Patin's own house – when studying philosophy in Paris between 1658 and 1660. It is also under Patin's guidance that Noël engaged in the study of medicine in Paris between 1660 and 1662. Patin made his *protégé* take patience:

Les fêtes qu'il est ici avec moi, il met toujours quelque chose dans le cahier. Je lui ai parlé de certains écrits que j'ai céans de quibus movi salivam, et lui ai fait espérer que je les lui prêterais quelque jour. Dès le lendemain qu'il était fête, il m'en parla et me les demanda; sur quoi, je lui répondis ce que le Messie dit à ses apôtres qui le pressaient de la fin du monde et de ce grand jugement universel qui les étonnait, et non sans cause car cela sera bien terrible: Habeo adhuc multa vobis dicere, sed non potestis portare modo [Jean, 16,12]. Il ne se fâcha point de mon refus, je les lui prêterai quelque jour quand il sera plus avancé et quand il en sera plus capable. Ce sont des cahiers historiques et politiques dans lesquels il y a bien des particularités dont il ne pourrait encore faire son profit. (lettre à André Falconet du 3 janvier 1659, éd. L. Capron, n° 551)

He had the habit of dictating his reflections to Noël, who transcribed them in his own notebooks:

Noël Falconet était auprès de moi, à qui je dictai quelques gentillesses qu'il écrivit dans son cahier. Il y en pourra mettre tous les jours et je l'y exhorterai. (Patin à André Falconet, le 6 mai 1659, éd. L. Capron, n° 562)

– then Patin allowed him the privilege of perusing his own personal notes:

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Vous serez bien aise d'apprendre que Monsieur votre fils a beaucoup profité de vos lettres car il se lève matin et emploie bien son temps; celui même qu'il pourrait donner à son divertissement est souvent employé à lire Borboniana, Grotiana et Naudeana. Il rit sous cape quand il y trouve quelque chose à son gré, et cela lui arrive souvent. Aussi ces manuscrits prennent les gens par le nez et les empêchent de devenir de grands sots. Cela me réjouit. (Guy Patin à André Falconet, le 25 novembre 1659, éd. L. Capron, n° 585).

It seems most probable that, being in Patin's confidence, Noël Falconet was allowed to read his clandestine philosophical work and that he communicated it to his own son – perhaps in the form of extracts or notes. This hypothesis is reinforced by the discovery of a copy of Erasmus's correspondence bearing Patin's *ex-libris* and annotations by André or Noël and by Camille Falconet¹³, since this is documentary proof that certain documents were passed on by Patin and fell into the hands of Camille Falconet. The link with Guy Patin is thus confirmed. Moreover, this link explains why Patin was so careful in the composition of his atheist treatise – superficially disguised as an attempt to refute libertine arguments: he did indeed intend to communicate his manuscript to his faithful friends and feared that it might fall into the wrong hands.

4. Rousseau / Falconet

Several readers' reactions to Falconet's *Réflexions* are worthy of further investigation, such as that of Louis-Antoine Caraccioli and his copy (now in Geneva), the metaphysics of Jean-Baptiste-René Robinet, which seem to be based on the *Réflexions*, and the diatribe of the Jesuit Father Tournemine, who attacks the atheists opting for immaterialism. We can only give a very brief summary here of the case of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose borrowings from the *Réflexions*, if confirmed, would throw new light on the inspiration of his two *Discours* and *Contrat social*.

Rousseau arrived in Paris on 10 October 1744. He resided for some months with Altuna, and then, after the latter's departure, moved in with Thérèse Levasseur at the hôtel Saint-Quentin, rue des Cordiers. He was then nursing the project of a great work on *Political Institutions*. He became secretary to Mme Dupin and to her stepson Dupin de Francueil between 1745 and 1751. During those years he became familiar with Diderot, D'Alembert, Condillac, Grimm...: it was, according to the psychological portrait of Rousseau painted by Pierre-Marie Masson, a period of «philosophical unease» («malaise philosophique»). Towards the end of 1748, Diderot invited him to contribute a number of articles on music to the budding *Encyclopédie* and Rousseau composed immediately his

¹³ See J.-C. Margolin, «Guy Patin, lecteur d'Erasmus», in *Colloquia Erasmi Turonensia*, Vrin, Paris 1972, I, pp. 323-357.

contribution of some 400 articles (signed «S»). Like the other *encyclopédistes*, Rousseau very probably frequented Falconet's library during that period.

Indeed, a substantial number of clues, taken together, seem to indicate that Rousseau read the *Réflexions morales et métaphysiques*¹⁴. We can present here only one case in point: the analysis of the natural equality of all animals and the social inequality among men, bearing in mind that this was a theme that Falconet himself had inherited from Guy Patin's *Theophrastus Redivivus*.

In his first *Discours* (1749), Rousseau is obviously sensitive to the question of the diversity (or inequality) of social positions and denounces commerce and the arts and sciences which engender «the disastrous inequality introduced among men by the distinction of talents and the debasement of virtues» («l'inégalité funeste introduite entre les hommes par la distinction des talens et par l'avilissement des vertus» [éd. B. Gagnebin et M. Raymond, III, p. 25]). In the second *Discours*, the same question arises, and Rousseau declares that uniformity reigns in the state of nature; diversity is introduced by the inequality of positions in civil society; human independence in the state of nature gives way to the dependence and subordination introduced by private property and exacerbated by self-love and by the passions. Social order and social hierarchy are maintained thanks to religion, of which the real function is purely political.

Although Rousseau's thought goes further than – and sometimes against – the *Réflexions*, certain characteristic phrases may lead us to conclude that he was familiar with the arguments of the clandestine work and that he based his radical stance on those arguments. The second *Discours* can be read as a *defence* of man in the state of nature against the portrait of his feebleness and misery to be found in the *Réflexions*, in which his condition is debased lower than that of animals. Human condition in the state of nature is characterised by solitude and therefore by independence; language is of no use at that stage, since man does not need the help of other men and does not seek to communicate with them (III, p. 151-152). His happiness resides in «the sensation of his present existence» («le sentiment de son existence actuelle» [p. 144]). Such is the happiness of humanity in its infancy (p. 160), which is curtailed by his very perfectibility (p. 142). Thanks to his independence, man is innocent in the state of nature: it is when the constitution of families, the defence of private property, the search for commodities and the development of languages determine the emergence of human communities (p. 168-169) that moral laws and notions of good and evil emerge. Without property, there was no dependence

¹⁴ One might think that Rousseau perhaps possessed a copy of the *Réflexions* and that he could therefore have been the intermediary – during his stay in Grenoble in 1768 – by whom Raby obtained a copy. However, this hypothesis seems to be excluded by the testimony of Bovier and Servan on the quarrelsome relations between the «promeneur solitaire» and the circle of the founder-members of the Grenoble library: see C. Cœuré and J. Sgard, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau à Grenoble. Le Journal de l'avocat Bovier*, Grenoble 2012.

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(p. 169); independence defined natural liberty and innocence. But, from the moment that, «having fenced off a strip of land, [someone] took into his head to declare «this is mine»» [«ayant enclos un terrain, [quelqu'un] s'avisait à dire, *ceci est à moi*»], civil society was founded (p. 164, 175). This reflection leads to the famous formula of the *Contrat social*: «Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains» [«L'homme est né libre, et partout il est dans les fers» (livre I, chap. 1, *loc. cit.*, III, p. 351)]. Property inevitably brings with it *inequality*, *dependence* and thus *servitude* (or *subjugation*) and *slavery*; inequality engenders the «diversity of passions and talents», the cultivation of «useless» and «pernicious» arts and «frivolous» sciences: it is indeed human perfectibility, man's very intelligence, which brings about his moral corruption.

All the terms of this debate are to be found in the *Réflexions*, where the analysis of the *inequality* that engenders *dependence* and *subordination* is based on the general laws of *uniformity* and *variety*:

L'uniformité veut que toutes les créatures participent aux biens de la terre, parce qu'elles n'ont point d'autre fonds d'où elles puissent tirer leur nourriture; la variété demande de la différence dans cette participation; cette différence est encore nécessaire, parce qu'elle jette les premiers fondements de la subordination. (*Réflexions*, ms Rouen, p. 177)

Falconet denounces man's inventions which reflect the «calamity» of his nature:

Rien cependant ne montre tant la bassesse des hommes que l'usage de leur propre métier, que les causes instrumentales de leur propre ouvrage, et qui ne servent qu'à marquer leur imperfection et leur calamité. (ms Rouen, p. 57)

By the exercise of their crafts and professions, men increase inequality. In both authors one can observe an identical and explicit reflection on the social conditions of the installation of *slavery*:

[Les hommes] s'appliquent à différents métiers qui leur coûtent un pénible apprentissage et qui les accablent d'un travail rude et souvent ingrat. Ce sont ces métiers différents qui sont comme autant de chaînes qui les lient les uns aux autres et qui commencent leur esclavage. (Rouen, ms p. 48)

Whereas, in human society, «each man bears his slavery» («chacun porte son esclavage» [Rouen, ms p. 50]), animals are independent, not being tied by any «commercial relation or individual business» («relation de commerce ou d'affaires particulières»):

les animaux, étant exempts des soucis que donnent le négoce et la subordination, ne sauraient avoir besoin de pareils secours [de l'écriture]. Chacun d'eux est tout à lui-même: il ne tient à aucune société, ni à parents ni à amis, et quand il marche tout marche avec lui. Quelle indépendance! Quelle liberté! (Rouen, ms p. 164)

It is the artificial requirements of men and thus their very nature that, according to the author of the *Réflexions*, render them unable to maintain their natural independence: if they had been content with their animal condition, they could have avoided subjection to social subordination; but since they have abandoned that natural independence, religion, political imposture, has become necessary to maintain social cohesion:

S'ils pouvaient, à l'exemple des animaux, se contenter des fruits de la terre tels qu'elle les produit et des habits qu'ils apportent à leur naissance, ils acquerraient tout à coup une indépendance absolue, et pour lors les sociétés civiles approcheraient de leur fin. Mais la nécessité qu'ils ont des mets et des habits artificiels les force à s'unir ensemble, et à établir cette quantité prodigieuse d'arts et de métiers qui sont la première union des sociétés. La religion, quelle qu'elle soit, vient au secours pour affermir et perfectionner cette union. L'obligation indispensable où sont les bipèdes de vivre en société provient donc de la faiblesse de leur nature, qui ne leur permet pas de vivre comme le reste des animaux dans une société naturelle et indépendante [...]
(ms Rouen, p. 205-206)

And the religious illusion completes their slavery «by the order that it gives to them to follow blindly the orders of their superiors» («par le commandement qu'elle leur fait d'obéir *aveuglément* à leurs supérieurs» [*ibid.*, p. 206]).

We thus understand that Rousseau defines the condition of man in the state of nature according to that of animals as it is defined in the *Réflexions*. Uniformity reigns in the state of nature, even if there is necessarily a minimum of «natural inequality» – according to the physical strength, aptitudes, and vivacity of individuals, for example. «Instituted inequality», political and social inequality, on the other hand, derive from the multiplication of social ranks and conditions which depend on each other and which destroy natural independence. The independence of the state of nature is thus replaced by the dependence and subordination introduced by private property and exacerbated by self-love and the passions. The laws of uniformity and variety, which guide the action of the Infinitely Perfect Being in the *Réflexions* become, in Rousseau's texts, the laws of the evolution of man, who undergoes the effects of his «perfectibility» on leaving the state of nature and entering into social life.

And how does man abandon the state of nature and enter into the society which brings about his slavery? By instituting private property:

Le premier qui ayant enclos un terrain, s'avisa de dire *ceci est à moi*, et trouva des gens assez simples pour le croire, fut le vrai fondateur de la société civile. (*Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*, Second part, *loc. cit.*, III, p. 164)

The author of the *Réflexions* also underlines this radical break between nature and society – a break which is marked by the appropriation of worldly goods by the most powerful men:

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Voici enfin le comble de la calamité des hommes: les biens de la terre ne sont point communs entre eux; les plus forts se sont emparés d'une partie, qu'ils ont grand soin de conserver ordinairement et de laisser en héritage à leur postérité. (ms Rouen, p. 50-51)

The usurpation of earthly goods engenders the slavery of social hierarchy. In civil society, all trades and professions are interdependent, so that there is not a single «biped» who «enjoys perfect liberty»: slavery follows them everywhere; «each man has his inferiors and superiors on which he depends» and thus «each man bears his enslavement» («chacun porte son esclavage» [ms Rouen, p. 50]). The author of the *Réflexions* thus announces Rousseau's analysis and in the very terms which will be those of Rousseau.

We cannot multiply here the examples of parallel passages in the *Réflexions* and in Rousseau's works: they are precisely indicated in the introduction to our critical edition of the *Réflexions*. They permit us to conclude that the *Réflexions* are characterised by an intertwining of certain philosophical, moral and political problems: the uniformity of the state of nature and the diversity of social status and conditions, the constant opposition between animals («quadrupeds») and men («bipeds»), happiness defined in terms of a «sensation of existence», the sensation (or sentiment) of the present moment, reason reduced to sentiment, the uselessness of arts and sciences, self-love well or badly conceived, private property designated as usurpation, the crucial status of money in social life, social inequality and interdependence designated as subordination and slavery, religion regarded as a political imposture. To these themes and phrases – which are so many convergent clues – one might add similar passages in the *Profession de foi du vicaire savoyard*. The comparison of these parallel passages leads us to consider as a perfectly plausible – and even probable – hypothesis Rousseau's reading of the *Réflexions morales et métaphysiques*.

5. Conclusions: a key-text in the evolution of free thought

The *Réflexions morales et métaphysiques* were written at a hinge-period, so to speak, between the high season of «erudite libertinism», of which the *Theophrastus redivivus* is the secret, imposing emblem, and the period which witnessed the triumph of a free-thought of Cartesian, Malebranchist and Spinozist lineage, characterised by the publication of such texts as the *Essai de métaphysique* by Boulainviller, the *Examen de la religion* by Du Marsais, *La Religion du chrétien* by Yves de Vallone, the *Difficultés sur la religion* by Robert Challe, and the *Mémoire* of the curé Meslier. The *Réflexions* bring together, in a generally coherent synthesis, a number of typical traits of each current of thought. Seen in this perspective, they may be compared to *L'Esprit de Spinoza*, of which certain copies present quotations from Spinoza and Hobbes but also a number of literal extracts from a classical texts of «erudite libertinism», the *Considérations politiques sur les coups*

d'état by Naudé (1639). It would be a mistake, however, to think of this evolution in strictly chronological terms, since most of the manuscripts just mentioned date from the two first decades of the eighteenth century. It is more a question of the meeting of two cultural constellations, of which the second, deriving from Cartesian and post-Cartesian philosophy, finally triumphed over the former, representing the heritage of «erudite libertinism».

On the one hand – that of «erudite libertinism» (if Pintard's etiquette is still useful) – the *Réflexions* are characterised by the accent put on the fictitious nature of religion, considered to be an imposture, i.e. a political art of which the only function is to maintain social order. In this sense, like the *Theophrastus redivivus*, the *Réflexions* refer constantly to the main monotheistic religions as «Laws» (see especially Rouen ms., p. 18-24), following the Averroist conception of the religious phenomenon. This conception tended to wane in the eighteenth century: the multiplication of accounts of foreign travels and the development of ethnological research, which contributed to reinforce the conviction that religion is a universal phenomenon to be found in all cultures and in all civilisations, led intellectuals to abandon the libertine explanation of the origins of religion in favour of an anthropological explanation. For Du Marsais, but also for Challe and Fréret, religion was first born of man's fear and his love of the marvellous (his «goût du merveilleux»¹⁵) – to borrow a formula inspired by Fontenelle which often occurs in Enlightenment literature and figures frequently in clandestine philosophy.

On the other hand – that of the new free thought derived from the philosophers of modernity – the *Réflexions* are characterised by the radical choice of a philosophical foundation in Cartesian and post-Cartesian thought (above all Malebranchist, but with echoes of Spinoza and probably even of Leibniz). As opposed to the *Theophrastus redivivus*, the *Réflexions* ignore completely the Italian Renaissance and employ the classical Greek and Latin authors in a very limited and always implicit manner: the almost total absence of quotations may be interpreted as the rejection of the libertine *modus scribendi*, now replaced by a more personal and intimate style. Descartes had opened this pathway by his violent rejection of philosophers of the past, ancient and above all modern, and by his dislike of erudition. Thus the author of the *Réflexions* (Falconet, according to our hypothesis) starts his philosophical journey at zero, following the method of the Cartesian *Metaphysical Meditations*. Instead of arranging quotations from a great variety of authors – according to the libertine practice of collecting *excerpta* – the *Réflexions* are the result of a personal meditation which has no need of exterior authorities to assert itself.

It is true that, while the *Theophrastus redivivus* is presented as an atheist text (despite the presence of a *Proemium* and a *Peroratio operis* which present an almost caricatural version of Christian fideism), the *Réflexions* do not abandon

¹⁵ See Du Marsais, in the *Encyclopédie*, art. «Éducation» (and in *Œuvres de Du Marsais*, Paris 1797, t. 5, p. 189; see also *ibidem*, pp. 351, 367).

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the idea of a «God», whom the author sometimes addresses in passionate terms, apparently expressing an almost religious fervour¹⁶. But in fact, the difference is not as great as it may at first appear. The *Réflexions*, while condemning atheism, finally adopt a kind of Spinozist immaterialism, which reduces the Divinity to a necessary cosmic principle devoid of any personal attributes. And when, around 1715-18, Father Tournemine denounces the new «wave» of immaterialist thought of which the *Réflexions* are the most striking example, he does not hesitate to accuse the immaterialists of «impiety» since, from his point of view, it is perfectly vain to use the term of «God» in order to designate a first cause of the universe while reducing that cause to the blind necessity of nature¹⁷.

We can thus grasp the novelty of the atheism of the *Réflexions* as opposed to traditional libertinism: the new atheism is founded above all on the divine attributes and it is compatible with an immaterialist thesis:

Il n'y a qu'à approfondir un peu la chose pour être convaincu de notre ignorance. Nous avons dit que c'est l'esprit qui sent, voit et entend; on n'en peut pas douter. Cela étant, tous les objets visibles et sensibles sont dans l'esprit. [...] Il s'ensuit donc de là que, quand [l'âme] voit ou entend, elle le sent. Elle ne saurait sentir que dans elle-même; donc elle voit et entend dans elle-même, puisque voir et entendre n'est que sentir; donc tous les objets sensibles et visibles sont dans l'âme, attendu qu'ils en sont des sensations. [...] tout le monde visible n'étant que l'âme humaine diversement modifiée. (*Réflexions*, Rouen ms, p. 27-28)

– and even with a doctrine of the immortality of the soul:

Il est certain que ce principe pensant qui est dans tous les animaux est semblable, et ne subsiste plus par rapport à moi après la destruction de leur machine. [...] Cette espèce d'absence ne doit pourtant pas nous porter à reconnaître ce principe anéanti. Le néant est une chimère qu'on ne peut comprendre; c'est une illusion de croire les êtres capables d'y tomber. Que savons-nous si cet être pensant n'est point réuni à quelque autre substance, ou mis dans quelque autre vie passagère ou éternelle, où toute société est nécessairement interdite avec nous? Jusqu'ici je n'en sais rien, et l'on ne doit pas décider sur ce qu'on ne sait pas avec évidence: c'est un principe qui nous éloignera sûrement de l'erreur si nous le suivons toujours exactement (*Réflexions*, Rouen ms, p. 112-113)

¹⁶ See, for example Rouen ms, p. 118: «J'ai cherché partout quelque substance pour m'éclaircir et je n'en trouve point, si ce n'est vous, mon Dieu: vous êtes mon flambeau qui devez dissiper toutes mes ténèbres».

¹⁷ See Tournemine, *Réflexions sur l'athéisme*, dans Fénelon, *Œuvres philosophiques*, Paris 1718, p. 555: for the immaterialists «tout ce que nous croyons voir, sentir de corporel [...] n'a rien de réel, ce font de vaines idées, des fantômes que notre esprit fabrique, ou plutôt qui naissent dans nous par la nécessité naturelle qui nous a fait naître; [...] l'impiété se flatte de s'être par ce nouveau système délivrée de tout devoir et de tout remords; d'avoir ôté aux vrais philosophes tous les moyens de prouver l'existence de Dieu, de s'être mise enfin dans un repos que rien ne peut troubler.» (*Réflexions sur l'athéisme*, p. 555).

This is a significant break with the libertine atheism of the seventeenth century, which is almost entirely founded on the dogma of the mortality of the soul (not necessarily on its material nature). The new atheism of the *Réflexions* does not need to define itself as «atheist» because it presents itself as a new conception of God. It's Spinoza's strategy, which concludes that atheism is absurd or that the real atheists are the theologians. For Spinoza, as for the author of the *Réflexions*, God is a universal principle that no one can deny – except those who try to reduce Him to a finite being doted with anthropomorphic attributes:

Sagesse, bonté, justice, puissance, êtes-vous les attributs de mon Dieu? [...] Tout ne subsiste que par vous-même. [...] Pensons avec bienséance et disons hardiment, Seigneur, que cette étendue infinie n'est que vous-même. C'est vous qui vous manifestez du côté de votre immensité et d'une infinité de façons différentes. C'est vous qui vous faites sentir, qui vous faites apercevoir d'une infinité de manières: les cieux, les astres, les airs, les planètes, la terre et toutes les créatures visibles, tout cela n'est qu'une faible portion de vos grandeurs infinies. Vous êtes infiniment plus que tout cela. Nous sommes engloutis dans un point de vous-même; nous sommes enchaînés à une partie de cette immensité divine que nous appelons notre corps et par cette partie nous tenons à toute votre immensité. Nous roulons éternellement en vous-même, où nous ne voyons jamais que successivement un rayon de votre divinité, parce que nous ne pouvons vous comprendre tout entier. (*Réflexions*, ms Rouen, p. 118, 123, 234)

The modernity of the *Réflexions* also appears in the treatment of the question of free will, which is a kind of philosophical test *par excellence*, allowing us to perceive immediately to which dynasty of atheist lineage a given author belongs. For, while the *Theophrastus redivivus* defends human liberty and the impossibility of divine prescience, the *Réflexions* declare, on the contrary, the impossibility of free choice and the absolute submission of men to divine causality (itself perfectly devoid of liberty, since God acts according to the *necessity* of his infinitely perfect nature)¹⁸. This is the most obvious mark of the acceptance of a determinist metaphysics deriving from the mechanistic conception of nature and destined to reign over European thought without any notable opposition until Kant.

However, if the metaphysical foundations of the *Réflexions* are modern, the traces of the author's libertine philosophical background (which would be perfectly obvious if our hypothetical attribution to Camille Falconet were confirmed) have not disappeared from his moral and political thought. This can be seen if we consider another crucial question, which reveals once again the profound link between the two texts: while condemning the theologico-political «Law», the *Theophrastus* and the *Réflexions* nevertheless regard it as necessary

¹⁸ See, for instance, Rouen ms., p. 134: «Ce qui nous porte à juger si favorablement de notre liberté apparente, c'est que nous ne sentons aucune violence dans l'accomplissement de nos prétendues volontés. Cela vient de ce que Dieu nous pousse par une voie si douce et si secrète qu'il nous est impossible de nous en apercevoir: nos chaînes sont invisibles».

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for the ignorant «mob» devoid of critical intelligence. This is why the *Theophrastus* declares – to our surprise – in the chapter 2 of Treatise III, that «all religions are good» (implying: provided they please the rabble and are useful to the sovereign in controlling popular excesses)¹⁹. Similarly, we read in the *Réflexions* that religions are an indispensable social «link» that politicians have to exploit in order to «moderate» the brutality of the mob and that it is «good» that they exist in the present state of inequality among citizens (*Réflexions*, Rouen ms., p. 195). The «sapiens» (*Theophrastus redivivus*) and the «philosophe honnête homme» (*Réflexions*) alone can throw off the false «Law» of religion and the Christian condemnation of the passions.

Lastly, the *Réflexions*, once again close to the *Theophrastus*, lead to a philosophical conception of death of which the classical sources (Seneca and Cicero) are at times explicit and at others implicit. For the *Theophrastus*, death is simply the last stage of a natural process which begins with the birth of the individual and should not be regarded as bad or evil («*non est etiam ullum malum*»). It is, in any case, only a moment («*punctum temporis*»), which is often almost imperceptible («*sine sensu*»), that it would be absurd to fear («*mors nullo modo est timenda*»)²⁰. The «gentleman philosopher» («philosophe honnête homme») in the *Réflexions*, similarly, «is not afraid of death» since it is «not an evil»; it is indeed reduced to a «simple and indivisible instant» which hardly gives us «the time to glimpse it»²¹.

However one may interpret these analogies and differences, it is clear that the *Réflexions* are without any doubt the most important text among the clandestine philosophical tracts of the eighteenth century, since they bear decisive elements of the libertine thought of the previous century. In this perspective, they allow us to understand how certain «erudite libertine» doctrines – among which those, adopted by Rousseau, of the natural equality between men and the corrosive impact of civilisation and of the arts and sciences – survived and exercised their influence long after the chronological limits of «erudite libertinism», bringing with them a novel contribution, often misunderstood or underestimated, to the development of Enlightenment philosophy.

¹⁹ See *Theophrastus redivivus*, critical edition by G. Canziani et G. Paganini, Firenze 1981, vol. 2, p. 349-63.

²⁰ *Theophrastus redivivus*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 753.

²¹ *Réflexions*, Rouen ms., p. 253-54.