LIBERTINE STRATEGIES
For Charlie
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Preface**  ix

**ONE**  
The Other *Grand Siècle*  3

**TWO**  
“Theme of the Traitor and the Hero”  33

**THREE**  
Fragments of a Philosophical Discourse  77

**FOUR**  
*Camera Lucida*  101

**FIVE**  
The Other in the *Grand Siècle*  157

Appendix: Neighboring Trends  203

Bibliography  209

Index  219
PREFACE

It has become something of a commonplace to note that Antoine Adam's *Romanciers du dix-septième siècle* has sparked a renewed concern with French seventeenth-century fiction. The energy of this revival is far from spent, and the near future will certainly bring new histories of trends in the early novel. The present study both is and is not such a history. It does deal with a group of novels similar enough to be examined under a common heading, and it suggests relationships, even relationships of influence, among them. Yet it does not aspire to the comprehensiveness of previous volumes on the seventeenth-century novel. Some may argue that its scope is not vast enough. Certainly there are contemporary novels related in important ways to the novels considered here. For example, Scarron's *Roman comique* could have played an interesting role in the chapter on narrative structures. Such parallelisms do not shatter the unity of my corpus. The novels I refer to as libertine profit in a special way from the type of reading proposed here. Had I chosen to explore every point of comparison with novels outside this small group, I would have obtained thoroughness at the expense of detail.

It is in the domain of what might be termed intimacy that this study differs most clearly from traditional histories of the novel. Categories such as "comic novel" or "realistic novel" produce corpuses too vast for anything but generalized examination. As long as all the seventeenth-century's non-"heroic" texts are considered as a package deal, they will receive only sketchy treatment. The assumption appears to be that the majority of these texts are not rich enough to sustain more rigorous analysis. A critic can easily devote an entire book to a text considered first-rate,
but he must deal with many more third-rate works to fill the same number of pages. Enough is known by now about the broad lines of the seventeenth-century novel’s evolution to allow critics to begin the exploration of its lesser trends and of their elective affinities, to compose aesthetic rather than factual histories. The type of analyses I propose here could not have been worked out for a larger body of texts. I hope this concentration has enabled me to convey some sense of the uniqueness of these libertine novels.

In the following pages, I often express concern over the critical neglect from which the writers I call libertine have suffered and continue to suffer. Happily, that situation is now beginning to change, at least with regard to some of them. Since I started to write about libertine strategies, one lengthy new contribution, Jean Serroy’s thèse d’état, L’Art romanesque dans les histoires comiques du dix-septième siècle (not yet published), has come to my attention. Although I have not been able to consult Serroy’s study, I do know that the majority of the writers I am concerned with here find a place in it. And there is surely other work in progress, or perhaps even completed, of which I am not yet aware. I do not intend to suggest that these coincidences are in any way unusual; books on similar subjects frequently appear simultaneously. But as an author certain to form part of one such coincidence, I cannot but express my interest in the current pattern of critical inquiry.

Before turning to the strategies I will refer to as libertine, a few words are in order on my own strategies in the following chapters. When I look over my initial prospectus for this book, much of what I finally wrote seems predictable. But the finished product contains many surprises, deviations from my original plan that I not only did not predict but could not have predicted, since they resulted from what I view as an important change in my motivation for writing the book. When I began working on this project, I was essentially motivated by my conviction that these novels are striking precursors of our own literary modernity. I would have described my task as one of making them more accessible to a contemporary public, of finding a broader audience for them. As my work progressed, however, it became increasingly evident to me that the single aspect of this project that I found most fascinating—indeed, almost obsessively so—was the complex bond between the libertine writer and persecution.
“Persecution” is a key term for this study. It may therefore seem surprising that what I mean by persecution is never very precisely defined. With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy for me to explain this vagueness. I was quite simply a victim of those whose victimization I have portrayed in these pages. If I was unable in most cases to set limits to my use of “persecution,” to say how, why, to what extent, and above all by whom the libertines were oppressed, it is because I was originally too trusting a reader of libertine texts. The libertine novelist and the libertine hero alike speak obsessively about their victimization. I took the writers’ obsession at face value, and did not sort out the very real efforts by the libertines’ mostly unnamed adversaries to limit both their physical and their literary freedom from their mythologizing of such efforts. I came to realize that these works had been relegated to a marginal status, not only because of the verdict of some arbitrary historical force or forces over which their authors had no control, but mainly because the libertine novelists consciously chose, and indeed at times militated for, such a position. They wanted to present themselves as underdogs, as victims of persecution, because their favorite mode of writing was defensive.

What is most interesting to me about this defensiveness is that it is contagious. The libertine novelist invites his readers (and critics) to identify with him, to pity his persecution, and ultimately to write from the victim’s position, to write defensively. At times, I became concerned that, by sympathizing with their defensive posture, I was perhaps making these writers less accessible rather than more so. By the end of the book, I even refuse to grant the libertines the position of influence previously accorded them by some critics. But it is also possible that the libertine defensiveness is not foreign to our modernity, and that, therefore, my own process of understanding was an essential part of my initial project.

It was only after completing this book that I discovered Leo Strauss’s Persecution and the Art of Writing, in which he refers to defensive literary techniques as “writing between the lines.” “The influence of persecution on literature is precisely that it compels all writers who hold heterodox views to develop a peculiar technique of writing, the technique we have in mind when speaking of writing between the lines.” By “writing between the lines,” Strauss designates the means by which a writer can “perform the miracle of speaking in a publication to a minority, while being silent to the
majority of his readers.” I am by no means a convert to Straussianism, but some of its terminology finds parallels in my work. For example, by “libertine strategies” I mean the techniques of “writing between the lines” practiced by the seventeenth-century French novelists I call libertine: Théophile de Viau, Charles Sorel, Tristan L’Hermite, Cyrano de Bergerac, Chapelle, and D’As soucy. Each of the following chapters examines one of the techniques of indirection by means of which these writers write “libertinely,” that is, transmit their message of intellectual and narrative freedom in a devious manner that serves to camouflage that message.

The initial chapter of Libertine Strategies defines the problem and the corpus to be examined and traces the history of libertine fiction in and after the seventeenth century. I begin the chapter in medias res with the discussion of a problem that acts as a mise en abyme of the entire libertine enterprise and serves, therefore, as a model for the pages to follow. The major libertine writers are known by their first names alone: Théophile, Tristan, Cyrano. The origin of these names and the story of their use present some of the central questions for Libertine Strategies: the importance of the act of naming for the libertine enterprise, the libertine penchant for fictionalizing history, and the peculiar libertine relationship to persecution. The critical indirection I favor in the first chapter is repeated in subsequent ones where I introduce a problem of particular importance for the libertine texts before turning to the passages in the texts I feel are illuminated by the initial discussion. Thus, chapter two opens with the question of the limits of autobiography, chapter three initially traces the limits of the novel’s territory, and chapter five begins by juxtaposing two theories of periodization and epistemological crisis, those of Bakhtin and Foucault. This structure seems appropriately libertine: my critical moves follow the swerve of libertine obliqueness. Actually, I chose this roundabout presentation in an attempt to awaken the reader’s curiosity by associating the libertine texts from the start with questions more familiar to him than these novels that have long suffered from critical neglect.

Early readers of this manuscript suggested that I conclude with a chapter on the successors of these libertine writers, Rousseau and Sade, for example. Such a section could have served to place
this study in a context of wider critical interest. I originally declined against writing such a conclusion because I felt the libertines should stand on their own. I was concerned that their works might be overshadowed by those of their more illustrious eighteenth-century "heirs." Now I also know that I did not write this conclusion because I sensed that a chapter would not be sufficient to trace the parallels I wished to explore. I am currently about to embark on what will be in some sense a sequel to this project, a book on the defensive strategies of Rousseau, Laclos, and Sade.

*Libertine Strategies* was written during the tenure of a fellowship sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The University of Pennsylvania released me from my teaching duties and facilitated my work in every way. I would like to thank all those who helped me obtain and use this grant, especially Vartan Gregorian. I would also like to thank the colleagues who read this manuscript in its early stages: Jean Alter, Clifton Cherpack, and Georges May. They argued with me, criticized me, even praised me—managed to keep me both going and on my toes. Maurice Laugaa provided encouragement in the crucial last phase of its composition. English Showalter’s thoughtful and generous criticism of the completed manuscript helped guide me through its revisions. My debt to Charlie Bernheimer is impossible to measure. He, too, argued with me, criticized me, and yes, even praised me—and he also poured over every word of this manuscript with more attention than I had ever dreamed it would receive.

New Haven, Connecticut
June, 1980

1. In an appendix, I discuss certain novels with affinities to the libertine tradition.
2. Strauss, pp. 24, 25. For most works, complete references are provided in the Bibliography. References that cannot be easily traced in this matter are included in the notes.
3. "Tristan" is sometimes considered a surname, but Tristan himself played with it as if it were a given name.