

# SAINT-SIMON AND HIS *MEMOIRS*

Colas DUFLO, Professor in French Literature, Paris Nanterre University

Marc HERSANT, Professor in French Literature, Sorbonne-Nouvelle University

---

## Part 1 – Saint-Simon, An 18<sup>th</sup>-century writer?

CD: Good morning Marc Hersant, you teach at Paris 3 Sorbonne-Nouvelle University. You recently published a biography of Saint-Simon that received an award from the French Academy, and you like to remind people that Saint-Simon, against the common belief associating him with the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Saint-Simon truly is an 18<sup>th</sup>-century writer.

MH: Good morning Colas Duflo. Yes, firstly because he literally was. He wrote his *Memoirs* between 1739 and 1750, around the time Voltaire wrote *The Age of Louis XIV*. We wouldn't place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century a writer who wrote his main work, the only one his name is associated with, in the 40s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? It all comes from a confusion between his work's universe and the time of its writing.

Saint-Simon is associated with Louis XIV like Racine or La Fontaine is, but when he begins his main work, the *Persian Letters* have already been published for 18 years, *Letters on the English* for a few years already and when he finishes it, Rousseau is about to write his first speech, which is a bit strange for a 17<sup>th</sup>-century writer. And not to mention the countless references in his work to the historical present, he speaks of Voltaire twice, condescendingly, and he personally knew, and we could say was friendly with, Montesquieu. If his work seems anachronistic, it is in full awareness of the Enlightenment and if it is not current, it is because of the violent rejection of a historical present that he knows all too well.

## Part 2 – Introduction to Saint-Simon's *Memoirs*

CD: What are the *Memoirs*?

MH: Strange question, since it's hard to sum them up in a few words. First off, Saint-Simon's *Memoirs* are one of the most astonishing writing adventures in our history. A single man, without immediate target audience, fills thousands of pages, working for himself and for a very potential posterity, of an unparalleled resurgence of both individual and collective past. Then, a strange and fascinating mosaic of very different texts, between historical chronicles, autobiographies, etiquette dissertations, vast genealogical presentations, giant portraits gallery, large scenes recreated by memory and dream, and many adrenaline rushes spawning an explosive style. And the *Memoirs* are a whole universe. The book's indexes are hundreds of pages long, where thousands of characters of all available styles teem, from most trivial to most exquisite, from Rabelais to Bossuet.

CD: What overview does Saint-Simon give of Louis XIV's reign?

MH: Negative, violent, passionate and at the same time tender and complex, because Saint-Simon is the adversary par excellence of absolutism and of the humiliation the nobility suffers. But at the same time, Saint-Simon lived for a long time very close to the king, hoping for a glance, a word. Therefore, when it comes to Louis XIV he is caught in a storm of contradictory feelings. And what is surprising is that this unrestrained bias, instead of erasing the king's reality, conveys the truest possible image of it.

CD: In 1715, when Louis XIV dies, Louis XV was a child. There is then a Regency period and Saint-Simon is quite close to the regent, the Duke of Orleans. What testimony does he give of this particular time in history?

MH: Cynical, because he considers the Regency as a period of decadence, pushing further down a country already messed-up by Louis XIV. Saint-Simon tried to influence the regent, in vain, and helplessly witnessed his rivals' triumph, especially Dubois', whom he draws a diabolical image of in his *Memoirs*. But what prevails despite everything is the pair he forms with his friend the regent, that he defends despite all his mistakes, and who does whatever he wants but who has for him an affection as deep as ironic. This male duo is as unforgettable, in its own way, as those of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza or Don Juan and Sganarelle

## Part 3 – Saint-Simon, a contemporary of Montesquieu and Voltaire

CD: We said at the beginning that Saint-Simon is a contemporary of Montesquieu and Voltaire, who also wrote about Louis XIV's reign and the Regency. Are there any common features to these authors and where do they stand out?

MH: Saint-Simon is not completely impervious to the Enlightenment spirit and in particular his positions on religion are tolerant. He condemns the Edict of Nantes revocation with force in his *Memoirs*, with sentences that most Enlightenment's writers, I am especially thinking of Voltaire, would have signed with their name with enthusiasm. I already said that Montesquieu liked him, and we can only imagine the ineffable charm of their conversations. But at the same time Saint-Simon lived through a negative time, completely foreign to that of the Enlightenment. To him everything true and everything good belongs to an irrevocably lost past. Historical time reacts like an acid, disfiguring the myth supposed to coincide with the truth that haunts the writer.

CD: To the reader discovering them, these *Memoirs* can appear daunting, at nearly 8,000 pages. What charm did you find there that brought you to give it years of your life? And where would you recommend starting, if one wanted to discover this writer?

MH: Indeed, anthologies can be misleading. The best one probably is François Raviez' for La Pochothèque because it is the most faithful to the work and its continuity. But we can't study an ocean by looking at three fishes under a magnifying glass. You have to dive into it. I would therefore

encourage an adventurous reader to go through a whole year of *Memoirs*. It is the only way, if you do not want to read everything, to apprehend the work's authentic rhythm and to let yourself be caught up in its dynamic. I personally have a weakness for the year 1709, which is an uninterrupted succession of wonders that perfectly justifies the famous comparison made by Proust between the *Memoirs* and *The Arabian Nights*. Because the *Memoirs* are very good at producing stories that can leave the most jaded reader speechless. A template life intended for an infinity of real lives. If one day I have a bit of time, I will make a pocket edition of year 1709 but who, having finished the year 1709, would not rush to the following one?

CD: Marc Hersant, thank you very much.

MH: Thank you Colas Duflo.