

BERNARDIN DE SAINT-PIERRE

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Part 1 - Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's career

LV: Hello Colas Duflo. You have assisted in the publication of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's works. In what way is he a significant author of the "turning point" of the Enlightenment and can we say that he is an heir to the philosophers?

CD: Born in 1737 and dead in 1814, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre is a perfect representative of this last generation of 18th-century writers who were to cross what is now called the "turning point" of the Enlightenment. His literary career is in itself an exciting testimony to these troubled times. His beginnings were those of an Ancient Regime writer, who submitted his books to royal censorship, frequented salons and sought pensions from government departments. And he ended his life under the Empire, a member of the Institute, decorated with the Legion of Honour, President of the Académie française and friend of Joseph Bonaparte, Napoleon's eldest brother.

Between the two, there was this great swing in history that is the French Revolution, where the world of these writers has completely changed. During the Revolution, he was steward of the royal garden, our current Jardin des Plantes, where he created the Menagerie. That's why we find his statue at the entrance of the Jardin des Plantes today. He was a professor of republican morality at the first Ecole normale, where things did not go very well.

Like all men of his generation, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre was influenced by the works of Voltaire but also those by Rousseau, who along with Fenelon is the modern writer he admires most. He had the chance to meet Rousseau himself in 1771 and to establish a friendly relationship with the author of *The New Héloïse* in the last years of his life, of which he left us some testimonies. But the decisive event in Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's formation came about a few years earlier.

Part 2 - Formative trips

LV: Indeed, I believe he has been involved in faraway journeys as a naval engineer. Can you tell us more about this experience?

CD: In 1768, when he was only a poor young man, vaguely engineer and vaguely adventurous man, he sailed for the Indian Ocean and arrived at Isle de France, which is now called Mauritius, where he lived for two years. Upon his return, he also spent a month and a half on Bourbon Island, currently Reunion Island. This journey will have a lasting impact on him and will feed into all his future work. In 1773, he published his *Voyage à l'Isle de France*. It is a collection of letters that reflects his experiences. He takes a very harsh look at colonial society and there is, in his pages, a very strong condemnation of slavery and the way slaves are treated. But Bernardin de Saint-Pierre also retains from his trip an experience of exotic and unspoilt nature that will deeply nourish his thoughts and sensitivity.

Part 3 - An important philosophical work: *Nature studies*

LV: You recently re-edited a philosophical work, *Etudes de la nature*. How does it sit in relation to the ideas of the Enlightenment?

CD: In 1784, he published his great philosophical work, *Etudes de la nature*. So, for us today, the process seems a little strange. It is a question of proving to the materialist philosophers and the science of his time, which he considers too mechanical, that Providence is at work everywhere in nature, that nature is good and entirely finalised for the general good. This sometimes gives quite comical and scientifically questionable reasoning, but it also gives very deep insights into the need for a holistic conception of nature, in which all beings are interdependent.

The tree is related to the place where it grows, to the animals that inhabit it and vice versa. But above all, this philosophy of nature, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre has developed deeply innovative literary descriptions of nature and in particular of exotic nature, which are absolutely magnificent. And his descriptions will inspire romantic authors such as Chateaubriand and Lamartine very closely. There are anthology pages here that will be read and imitated throughout the 19th century.

Part 4 - An iconic novel: *Paul and Virginie*

LV: What made him most famous is a little novel inserted in his *Etudes de la nature*, called *Paul et Virginie*. What does he say and what made it such a success?

CD: Well, in 1788, in fact, in the fourth volume of *Etudes de la nature*, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre added a little novel, *Paul et Virginie*, which soon had separate editions and enjoyed phenomenal success throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's novel is a form of exotic, pastoral work.

In the sumptuous background of the Isle of France, two mothers, rejected by the French society of the Ancient Regime, raise their children alone, Paul and Virginie, with the help of two slaves forming a kind of micro-utopian society, where we live a virtuous life in poverty but in happiness, in conformity with nature. Children live and work in nature without prejudice, both as brothers and sisters and promised to each other. As a teenager, Madame de Latour, concerned about Virginie's future, wanted to secure her fortune by sending her to Paris to her aunt's house, a noble woman who represented both devout and corrupt nobility, but this evil aunt wanted to make young Virginie forget her island.

After two long years of separation during which the two young people were very unhappy, Virginie returned to the Isle of France. But on arriving in sight of the Isle de France coasts, a hurricane dragged the boat over the surrounding reefs. Paul, from the shore, watches helplessly as the shipwreck unfolds. Virginie appears on the deck, a sailor tries to save her, but she would have to take off her large dress. She refuses out of modesty and drowns. After this dramatic episode, Paul is seen wandering all over the island, melancholically travelling through all the places of their childhood and finally, he dies as well as all the members of the small society.

This exotic and melancholic fiction, which comes entirely out of the contemplation of the ruined huts of the small society, as a meditation on an ideal past now gone and on a proximity to nature forever lost,

has fascinated contemporaries at a level that is difficult to imagine, to the point of becoming a kind of myth almost independent of the book that gave birth to it. *Paul et Virginie*'s adaptations will be found in the theatre, opera, in the Epinal print collection and recently again in television series and musicals.

And the story will be the subject of many rewritings in the 19th and 20th centuries. As the novel, with its beautiful illustrations, was also a book that young people were given a lot to read, sometimes in redacted versions, it can be said that it has long been part of the common culture and has had a profound impact on French literary culture. For example, Madame Bovary reads *Paul et Virginie*, or Baudelaire imagines a corrupt Virginie. Cocteau and Radiguet wrote an opera libretto around *Paul and Virginie* and Jean-Marie Le Clézio remembers *Paul and Virginie* in 1984 in one of his most beautiful novels, *The Prospector*.

LV: Thank you Colas for this rich insight into an heir to the Enlightenment who was also, as we can see, a great novelist.