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Paul et Virginie, or *the Enigma of Evil*:
The Double Theodicy of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre

Marco Menin

I. A CATHOLIC “PHILOSOPHE”

In May of 1795, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, who had been professor of *morale républicaine* at the École normale supérieure since its establishment the year before, was nominated to be a member of the Institut de France. From there he would launch a long fight in favor of religion, initially against the materialist atheists, the successors of the Encyclopedists, and later against the Idéologues. This conflict culminated in a public convocation on July 3, 1798, where Bernardin discussed, in front of the moral science class, the *mémoires* that had been submitted to a literary contest in response to the question “What are the most suitable institutions for founding the morality of a people?”¹

In his lecture, subsequently published in pamphlet form as *De la nature de la morale*, Bernardin reprimanded the contest’s fifteen participants for misconstruing the essence of morality. Bernardin’s detailed notes on the submissions, conserved in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, demonstrate how the participants had incorrectly extrapolated the effects of morality instead of its cause:² “Some placed [the foundations of morality]

¹ All the biographical references are from Malcolm Cook, *Bernardin de Saint-Pierre: A Life of Culture* (Oxford: Legenda, 2006).

² See Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, *Esquisses diverses*, Bibliothèque nationale de France (hereafter BnF), cote NAF 24 147, f. 12 r.

in education, while others in law; the former in celebrations and entertainment; the latter in our own versatile heart.”³ Yet all of the answers failed to take into account the only true foundation of any ethical assumption: the existence of a good and just God. Bernardin’s impassioned defense of the “celestial morality, innate in each one of us”⁴ provoked a hostile reaction from the other members of the Institut. Aimé-Martin described this controversy in a biography of Bernardin, one published before the posthumous edition of his *Œuvres complètes*: “From the very first lines of the solemn declaration of his religious principles, a cry of fury erupted from all parties in the room. Some mocked him, asking him where he had seen God and what he looked like; others mocked his credulity; . . . they provoked his insanity to the point of challenging him to a duel so as to prove to him, with swords in hand, that there was no God.”⁵ Besides Aimé-Martin’s clearly hagiographic intent, this anecdote effectively illustrates the seminal role that the Christian religion played for Bernardin, who, in defiance of the popular and dominant thinking of his time, never ceased to defend both faith and providentialism.

The inseparable link between theological and philosophical reflection and, more specifically, the religious foundation of morality, serves as the basis for a credible interpretation of Bernardin’s indisputable masterpiece, the novel *Paul et Virginie*. This work, published in 1788, is a paragon of the sentimental novel of the late eighteenth century. The plot of the story is itself very simple, and revolves entirely around the distinction—made famous by Rousseau—between natural goodness and social corruption. *Paul et Virginie* is the story of two young children who live on the island of Mauritius (then named Île de France) under French rule. The children of two mothers who have been outcast by French society, Paul and Virginie are raised together as brother and sister among the splendors of the tropics, a symbol of the state of nature. In their adolescent years, a reciprocal love emerges between the two youngsters, whose narrative appears to be destined toward a happy ending. Yet, this idyllic state is destroyed by an eruption of European prejudices. Virginie’s aunt, in fact, convinces the young

³ “Les uns les ont placés [les fondements de la morale] dans l’éducation, les autres dans les lois; ceux-ci, dans des fêtes et des spectacles; ceux-là, dans notre propre cœur si versatile,” Bernardin, *Œuvres complètes* de Jacques-Henri-Bernardin de Saint-Pierre [hereafter OC], 12 vols., ed. Louis Aimé-Martin (Paris: Mequignon-Marvis, 1818), 5:424.

⁴ “Morale céleste, innée dans chacun de nous,” OC, 5:427.

⁵ “Aux premières lignes de la déclaration solennelle de ses principes religieux, un cri de fureur s’éleva de toutes les parties de la salle. Les uns le persiflaient, en lui demandant où il avait vu Dieu et quelle figure il avait; les autres s’indignaient de sa crédulité; . . . l’on poussa la démence jusqu’à l’appeler en duel, afin de lui prouver, l’épée à la main, qu’il n’y

girl to move to France, where she would attend school and inherit her family's patrimony. Virginie manages to resist Paris's corrupting influences and to remain pure, so much so that she decides—after a few years—to return to Mauritius. On her journey home, Virginie's ship sinks after crashing upon rocks during a terrible storm. Paul watches Virginie die and then, shortly thereafter, expires from grief.

Thanks to its lively description of the tropics, as well as a masterful use of pathos, Bernardin's novel became one of the most resounding literary successes of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Between the years 1788 and 1806—when the final edition of the work was revised by the author—there were at least forty editions of the novel, many of which were pirated, and nearly thirty translations into different languages. The work so deeply permeated the European collective imagination that it was cited by some of the most important writers of the nineteenth century: Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, Guy de Maupassant, and Guido Gozzano, among others. Numerous rewritings and adaptations (especially theatrical and visual) transformed *Paul et Virginie* into an autonomous myth.⁶ The novel emerged from the intellectual milieu of the “apologistes sentimentaux,”⁷ a minor school of thought that attempted to reply to the arguments of the Lumières with appeals to Christianity. Nevertheless, while the literary properties of *Paul et Virginie* are widely acknowledged, its philosophical and theological relevance continues to be underappreciated.

By and large, *Paul et Virginie* is considered to be the expression of a vaguely Rousseauist religiosity. In the text, Bernardin revisits the principles of Rousseau's sentimental deism: it can be read as a pastiche of the “dogmas” of faith of the Savoyard Vicar (the protagonist of the *Profession de foi*, a short theological novel inserted into the larger *Émile*) and the tormented love story of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Certain naive considerations, such as the exaltation of an impossible return to nature or the identification between nature and virtue, have led critics to consider Bernardin as an epigone of the Rousseauist vulgate. While the difference in theoretical stature

avait pas de Dieu,” Aimé-Martin, “Essai sur la vie et les ouvrages de Bernardin de Saint-Pierre,” OC, 1:244.

⁶ See Jean-Michel Racault, “Le devenir de *Paul et Virginie*: Du livre au mythe,” in Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, *Œuvres complètes*, tome 1, *Romans et contes*, ed. Racault et al. (Paris: Garnier, 2014), 405–31.

⁷ Didier Masseau, “La position des apologistes conciliateurs,” *Dix-huitième siècle* 34 (2002): 121–30, at 125. About the *Lumières chrétiennes*, see, furthermore, Masseau, *Les ennemies des philosophes: L'antiphilosophie au temps des Lumières* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2000), 237–72 and David Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

between Bernardin and Rousseau cannot be downplayed, the widespread prejudice that views him solely as “a confused and incoherent philosopher; a fantasist scholar who is rightly mocked”⁸ is ungenerous and unjustified, as has been demonstrated in more current studies.⁹ The recent years have in fact witnessed a substantial increase in scholarly assessments of Bernardin’s writings, including a new critical edition of his complete works¹⁰ and the first annotated edition of his correspondence.¹¹

I will offer a careful analysis of *Paul et Virginie* that seeks to reinsert the novel within the broader backdrop of Bernardin’s philosophical-naturalistic reflection, in order to better understand the central role that Catholic theology plays in the literary work and also to reveal the original conclusion reached by Bernardin: the unique synergy between religion and philosophy elicited by his fictional narration.

II. PAUL ET VIRGINIE: APPLYING THE *ÉTUDES DE LA NATURE* THROUGH FICTION

While the novel has usually been interpreted as a stand-alone text, *Paul et Virginie* was originally published in the fourth volume of the third edition of the *Études de la nature* in 1788. The *Études* (whose first edition appeared in June 1784) represent, together with the posthumous *Harmonies de la nature*, Bernardin’s manifesto: their objective is to provide a systematic analysis of the providentialist and anthropocentric finalism that characterizes the natural world. Whatever the nature of possible preliminary drafts of the text,¹² *Paul et Virginie* was presented to the eighteenth-century reader as a fictional extension of the doctrines found in the first three volumes of the *Études*. This close tie between *roman* and *philosophie* was affirmed in

⁸ “Un philosophe confus et même incohérent; un savant fantaisiste et justement moqué,” Racault, “Philosophie et antiphilosophie dans la crise des Lumières: Le cas de Bernardin de Saint-Pierre,” in *Les marges des Lumières françaises*, ed. Masseau (Genève: Droz, 2004), 153–76, 153.

⁹ See Simon Davis, “État présent Bernardin de Saint-Pierre,” *French Studies* 69 (2015): 220–27; and Gabriel-Robert Thibault, *Bernardin de Saint-Pierre: Genèse et philosophie de l’œuvre* (Paris: Hermann, 2016).

¹⁰ Racault et al., *Cœuvres complètes*.

¹¹ See Bernardin, *Correspondance de J.-H. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre*, ed. Cook, Electronic Enlightenment, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, <http://www.e-enlightenment.com>.

¹² See Marie-Thérèse Veyrenc, *Édition critique du manuscrit de Paul et Virginie de Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, intitulé: Histoire de Mlle Virginie de la Tour* (Paris: Nizet, 1975), 47–49.

numerous independent publications that referenced the work. For instance, in the lengthy *Préambule* to a deluxe edition from 1806, Bernardin emphasizes how “this short work . . . is but a repose from my *Études de la Nature*, and my application of its laws for the delight of two ill-fated families.”¹³

Thus it would be overly reductive to construe *Paul and Virginie* as a mere ploy intended to encourage readers to acquire a new edition of the *Études*—as it has been considered in the past—or as a trivialized illustration of philosophical theories. This pastoral novel aspires instead to be a serious application of the theoretical text with which it is deeply and subtly interwoven. It is not simply a presentation of content in a different literary form. Rather, it addresses readers who are presumably familiar with the *Études* and who, thanks to this familiarity, possess the heuristic key for deciphering the profound—omnipresent, but implicit—philosophical message that drives the narrative.

With its sentimentalism and exotic tinge, *Paul et Virginie* was destined to achieve long-lasting success during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The *Études*, on the other hand, are considered to be a mediocre philosophical speculation that merited, at most, mention in the *sottisier* of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*.¹⁴ No editions of it appeared in the twentieth century. Jean-Michele Racault emphasizes how the progressive “detachment” of *Paul et Virginie* from the corpus of the *Études* has inevitably distorted the reputation of Bernardin’s novel: “Far from making an *hapax* within a celebrated work that has been rightly forgotten, *Paul et Virginie* cannot be truly understood without this as a starting point.”¹⁵ The accuracy of this argument, which has not been adequately appreciated, is confirmed by a careful analysis of the religious issues that Bernardin had always claimed to be at the heart of his philosophy. Reading the pastoral novel alongside the long debate around the existence of Divine Providence that informs the

¹³ “Ce petit ouvrage . . . n’est au fond qu’un délassement de mes *Études de la Nature*, et l’application que j’ai faite de ses lois au bonheur de deux familles malheureuses,” Bernardin, *Paul et Virginie* (hereafter PV), in *Œuvres complètes*, tome 1, *Romans et contes, Préambule*, 333. On the genesis of the novel and its literary peculiarity, see Jean Fabre’s masterful study “*Paul et Virginie*, pastorale,” in *Lumières et Romantisme: Énergie et nostalgie de Rousseau à Mickiewicz* (Paris: Éditions Klincksieck, 1980), 225–57.

¹⁴ See Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), 474.

¹⁵ “Loin de constituer un *hapax* au sein d’une œuvre réputée justement oubliée, *Paul et Virginie* ne peut véritablement se comprendre qu’à partir de celle-ci,” Racault, *Préface*, in Bernardin, *Paul et Virginie* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1999), 87. On the need to read Bernardin’s novel in the context of the *Études*, see Colas Dufflo, “*Paul et Virginie*,” tome IV des *Études de la nature*,” in *Bernardin de Saint-Pierre au tournant des Lumières: Mélanges en l’honneur de Malcolm Cook*, ed. Katherine Astbury (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 125–36.

central portion of the *Études de la nature* makes clear the originality of Bernardin's answer to one of the thorniest problems that all of the great thinkers of the Enlightenment had to address: the doctrine of theodicy and its justification.

III. THE ENIGMA OF EVIL

The *Études* are a consciously anachronistic attempt "to [compose] a general History of Nature."¹⁶ The main objective of this programmatically "incomplete" book, due to its length and to the complexity of its subject, is the defense of Providence, as the author informs us in the opening pages of his work: "I will display . . . , against our century, the blessings bestowed by Nature and the objections that have been raised against the providence of its Author."¹⁷ Bernardin maintains that the reality of an anthropocentric, providentialist pattern must be demonstrated before the six laws governing the universe—convenience, order, harmony, consonance, progression, and contrast—can be studied in detail and applied to both the natural (the Earth, flora, and fauna) and the social worlds. The reflection on Providence is the epistemological essence of the *Études*, insofar as it provides both an explication of the operation of nature as well as a justification for the possibility of extending the explanatory criterion of the physical world to the moral world.

The long debate surrounding Providence, to which six of the fourteen *études* are entirely dedicated, is comprised of objections and responses. The third *étude*, notably entitled *Objections contre la providence*, provides a synthesis of the atheistic and materialistic positions that give rise to the conclusion that "man has been tossed on the earth by chance" and that "every thing expires with us."¹⁸ The following five studies are dedicated to meticulously rebutting this theory, so much so that they appear to defend God from the accusation of being, metaphorically, an evil or indifferent maker. Hence the centrality of the issue of theodicy in the text is understood—in the wake of Leibniz's *Essais de théodicée* from 1710¹⁹—as

¹⁶ Bernardin, *Études de la nature* (hereafter *EN*), ed. Duflo (Saint-Étienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2007), 53; *Studies of Nature*, trans. Henry Hunter (Philadelphia: Joseph J. Woodward, 1835), 9.

¹⁷ *EN*, 66; trans., 25.

¹⁸ *EN*, 102; trans., 47.

¹⁹ On the problem of theodicy in early modern philosophy, see Paul Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne 1680–1715*, 3 vols. (Paris: Boivin, 1935), 1:136–57 and 286–311; Willi Oelmüller, *Die unbefriedigte Aufklärung: Beiträge zu einer Theorie der Moderne von Lessing, Kant und Hegel* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1969), 189–218.

questioning the compatibility of evil in the world with the existence of God. The final lines of the third *étude* summarize the dramatic “enigma of evil”:

But there is no God. If there were, He would be unjust. What being, of unlimited power and goodness, would have exposed to so many ills the existence of his creatures; and laid it down as a law, that the life of some could be supported only by the death of others? So much disorder is a proof that there is no God. It is fear that formed him. How must the world have been astonished at such a metaphysical idea, when man first, under the influence of terror, thought proper to cry out that there was a God! What could have made him God? Why should he be God? What pleasure could he take in that perpetual circle of woes, of regenerations, and of death?²⁰

This passage recalls the famous “Riddle of Epicurus” described by Bayle in the *Dictionnaire historique et critique*,²¹ which is extensively debated in Leibniz’s *Essais*. According to Bayle, the presence of evil forces humankind to confront a series of equally troublesome implications: either God wishes to remove evil, but cannot; or he can, but he does not wish to; or he neither can, nor wishes to. If he wishes to, but cannot, he is weak and therefore powerless; if he can, but does not wish to, he is hostile and therefore evil; if he neither can, nor wishes to, he is as weak as he is evil, and therefore he is not a true God. Yet, the most troubling implication is based on premises that are commonly accepted by defenders of Christianity: if God, who by definition is all-powerful and fair, can remove evil and wishes to do so, how then can the presence of evil be justified?

Bernardin discovers a solution to this profound conundrum through a lucid analysis of the very notion of “evil.” He carefully responds to the objections against Providence, based on the disorder of the terrestrial sphere (fourth *étude*), plant kingdom (fifth *étude*), and animal kingdom (sixth *étude*), after which he focuses on the objections surrounding the constataion of the evils of the human race (seventh and eighth *études*) and the objections founded on the incomprehensible nature of God and on the impossibility of proving the existence of life after death (ninth *étude*).

This line of argument hinges on a tripartite analysis of evil: manifestations of physical evil (including evil regarding animate and inanimate

²⁰ EN, 103; trans., 47.

²¹ See Pierre Bayle, “Epicure,” *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, 4 vols. (Amsterdam: Pierre Brunel–Samuel Luchtmans, 1740), 2:364–76.

nature); moral evil (indissolubly tied to human existence); and the imbalance between crime and punishment in the world (injustice). Interestingly, Bernardin's analysis is strikingly reminiscent of the taxonomy of evil that would be proposed by Kant, just a few years later, in his essay "On the Failure of All Attempted Philosophical Theodicies," albeit with a diametrically opposite objective. While Bernardin is a fervid defender of theodicy—although fully aware of its complications—Kant sets out to systematically demonstrate the impossibility of philosophical theodicy entirely.

Bernardin's treatment of theodicy appears to be, at first glance, in perfect alignment with the critical "grid" proposed by Kant, as can be inferred from a more in-depth analysis of the three different types of evil.²² Bernardin resolves the question of physical evil in a radical fashion by denying its validity. In vehemently opposing the materialists, he maintains that there can be no physical evil—which, for him, is identified through disorder even more so than pain—within the order of nature. Since "Nature does nothing in vain,"²³ insofar as it is a work of God, if something poorly created is thought to have been detected in nature, the defect must be searched for not in the perceived thing, but rather in the eye of the beholder. From this point of view, to see evil means to see poorly, as the following explanation of physical pain confirms: "The other ills of Nature [*maux de la nature*] are equally necessary. Pain of body and vexation of spirit, are barriers erected by Nature to prevent our deviating from her laws."²⁴

Bernardin's explanation of the remaining two types of evil—moral evil and injustice—would appear, at first glance, to be equally drastic and formulaic. He argues that moral evil (or sin), understood as contravening natural law, should be ascribed exclusively to man, not God. Yet, as Leibniz suggests, God would only allow evil as a means of good, without ever directly committing any wrongdoing: "Superior reasons of perfect wisdom have determined him [God] to permit these evils, and even to co-operate therein."²⁵ Furthermore, a similar conception of moral evil justifies the

²² See Immanuel Kant, "Über das Mißlingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodizee (1791)," in *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: Reimer-de Gruyter, 1910), 8:253–71; "On the Failure of All Attempted Philosophical Theodicies," trans. Michel Despland, appendix to Michel Despland, *Kant on History and Religion* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1973), 283–97.

²³ EN, 145; trans., 79.

²⁴ EN, 236; trans., 141.

²⁵ Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, *Essais de théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal*, §276, in *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, 7 vols., ed. Carl Immanuel Gerhardt (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1960–61), 6:281; *Theodicy*, trans. E. M. Huggard, ed. Austin Farrer (London: Routledge-Kegan Paul, 1952), 296.

explanation of injustice, revealing the need to postulate a future order after death, in which every individual will be assigned his deserved reward or punishment:

The evils of society are no part of the plan of Nature, but they demonstrate the existence of another order of things: for is it natural to imagine, that the Being good and just, who has disposed every thing on earth to promote the happiness of man, will permit him to be deprived of it without punishing the wretch who dared to counteract his gracious designs? Will He do nothing in behalf of the virtuous but unfortunate man, whose constant study was to please him, when He has loaded with blessings so many miscreants who abuse them?²⁶

Bernardin's solution to the problem of the existence of evil is, in reality, much more complex and coherent than a superficial summary of his work might suggest. While it features arguments that are themselves conventional, the *Études* introduces an original approach to theodicy. The unique convergence of certain philosophical-naturalistic premises allows Bernardin to delineate a "double" theodicy, which finds its clearest expression not in the theoretical debate surrounding Providence, but rather in *Paul et Virginie*, which presents an accurate and dramatic transposition of the enigma of evil as thoroughly outlined in the first section of the *Études*.

IV. ANTHROPODICY AND NATURAL RELIGIOSITY

In describing the essence of the relationships that human beings have with nature and with their neighbors, the *Études* not only advance the fictional anthropology at the heart of *Paul et Virginie* but also closely structure its plot. The symmetrical division of the novel into two parts²⁷—separated by Virginie's departure for France—reflects the philosophical work's line of argument. While the first part of the novel, which is dedicated to the idylls of childhood and the vicissitudes of adolescence, reconstructs the perfect original harmony between man and nature, the second part—dominated by the interlude of separation and by the catastrophic shipwreck—raises the question of the enigma of evil: why must the innocent Virginie die? Why

²⁶ EN, 236; trans., 141–42.

²⁷ On symmetric divisions that characterize the novel, see Philip Mestry, *Une analyse des macro-structures de Paul et Virginie, suivi de deux autres études* (Paris: Nizet, 1990).

must an exotic dream turn into a nightmare? Or rather, to reformulate the question in philosophical terms, how can the presence of evil in the world be reconciled with the existence of Divine Providence, as evoked in the very first lines of the novel?

As in the *Études*, in *Paul et Virginie* the question of physical evil is marginalized in favor of an in-depth analysis—albeit not one devoid of tensions—of moral evil and injustice. The natural world, which finds its literary transposition in the lush microcosm of the Île de France, becomes the most solid proof of the *bienfaisance* of nature. When it acts properly, nature brings about good, proving the existence of a divine plan: “Solitude, far from having blunted these benevolent feelings, had rendered their dispositions even more kindly. Although the petty scandals of the day furnished no subject of conversation to them, yet the contemplation of nature filled their minds with enthusiastic delight. They adored the bounty of that Providence.”²⁸

This opposition between the history of nature and the history of humankind is especially reminiscent of the expository strategy in the *Profession de foi* by Rousseau, an undoubted influence for Bernardin. In fact, thanks to the spectacle of nature, the Savoyard Vicar—whose figure is a thin veil for Rousseau himself—discovers the first two “dogmas” of his religiosity, according to which the universe is fueled by a will, and that will is an intelligent one. Given the impossibility of providing a rational and causal explanation of the world’s order, he instead provides an ethical and aesthetical definition of nature, which finds its validation in moral sentiment. Yet, when he turns from the harmony of the natural world—a sure sign of the existence of a wise creator—to the chaos of the society in which he lives, the vicar clearly perceives the distance that the progress of history has placed between humankind and nature. This rupture is moral evil: “The picture of nature had presented me with only harmony and proportion; that of mankind presents me with only confusion and disorder! . . . Providence, is it thus that you rule the world Beneficent Being, what has become of your power? I see evil on earth.”²⁹

Rousseau’s solution to the problem is well known. It exonerates both

²⁸ PV, 212; *Paul and Virginia*, trans. Sarah Jones (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1879), 64.

²⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, Profession de foi du vicaire savoyard*, in *Œuvres complètes et Lettres: Édition thématique du Tricentenaire*, ed. Raymond Trousson and Frédéric S. Eigeldinger, 24 vols. (Geneva: Slatkine; Paris: Champion, 2012), 8:697; *Emile, or On Education*, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, ed. Roger Masters and Christopher Kelly, 13 vols. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1990–2010), 13:439.

the nature of mankind, which is good and not sinful, and God, who only created good: “Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man.”³⁰ The origin of evil, in other words, is no longer to be searched for in man, but rather among men—that is, in society, as it has historically come to place itself in opposition to nature. According to Cassirer’s famous theory, the originality of Rousseau’s position consists in identifying “a new subject of responsibility, of imputability. This subject is not individual man, but human society.”³¹ The enigma of evil is thus transported to an entirely new arena. Rousseau removes the question of theodicy from the competency of metaphysics and places it at the heart of an ethical-political reflection, transforming it into an anthropodicy.

This recapitulation of Rousseau’s anthropodicy represents the first model of theodicy that can be found in *Paul et Virginie*. In fact, Bernardin constructs an actual *sociodicée* centered upon the conviction that political evils are born in the rejection of natural law, thus attributing to them a historical and social, rather than an ontological, connotation. In order to determine the validity of this theory, he dutifully incorporates in the novel the methodological conviction—expressed in the *Études*—that “to justify the order of Nature, it is sufficient to deviate from it.”³²

This method finds a twofold application in *Paul et Virginie*. First, in the juxtaposition between the exterior and the *petite société* of Madame de la Tour and Marguerite—the image of a primigenial “golden age” in which the perfect harmony between man and nature reigns. Paul and Virginie, “children of nature,”³³ come to know the existence of evil only after they abandon the enchanted utopia of their *retraite*,³⁴ as demonstrated in the emblematic tale of the *négresse marronne*, whom the youngsters bring back to her slave driver, begging—in vain—for her to be pardoned. In addition to introducing the slave trade, a problem of great significance to Bernardin

³⁰ Rousseau, *Profession de foi*, 309; trans., 161.

³¹ Ernst Cassirer, “Das Problem Jean-Jacques Rousseau,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 41 (1932), 177–213 and 479–513, at 207; *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, trans. Peter Gay (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954), 75.

³² *EN*, 177 and 236; trans., 101 and 141.

³³ *PV*, 232; trans., 103.

³⁴ On the utopian dimension of the *petite société*, see Racault, “Roman et utopie dans *Paul et Virginie*: De la petite société au mythe collectif,” in *Nulle part et ses environs: Voyage aux confins de l’utopie littéraire classique* (Paris: Presses de l’Université de Paris Sorbonne, 2003), 389–443 and Angélique Gigan, “Surnaturel et religion dans *Paul et Virginie*: Configuration d’une utopie céleste,” in *Bernardin de Saint-Pierre au tournant des Lumières*, 137–49.

and an institution which he strongly condemned,³⁵ this episode enhances with clarity the idealized dimension in which the two youngsters are raised. In fact, the (dramatically realistic) image of the black fugitive stands in stark contrast to the (sentimental and utopian) description of Domingue and Marie, the slaves of Madame de la Tour and Marguerite, who are, to all effects, members of the family, as made clear by the fact that both succumb to grief following the death of Virginie. In their attempt to do good, the youngsters become lost in the woods and bewildered by nightfall. They face for the first time the incomprehensible evil committed by man against man. This prompts Virginie to exclaim “Gracious Heaven! how difficult it is to do good! and yet it is so easy to do wrong [*il n’y a que le mal de facile à faire*],”³⁶ a phrase that encapsulates Bernardin’s understanding of morality.

The enigma of evil is introduced again, and in a significantly more intense manner, in the juxtaposition of the Île de France and Europe. This macroscopic contrast, which culminates in the tension between interior and exterior in the privileged microcosm where the children come of age, corresponds to the Rousseauian distinction between the state of nature and civil society. Bernardin’s tendency to identify nature and virtue, as well as to overlap the state of nature with the spectacle of nature—two illicit operations, from Rousseau’s point of view—compel him to present a Manichaean dualism juxtaposing morality and society. For Rousseau, authentic morality can be realized only through a break between nature and society. For Bernardin, this disjuncture needs to be overcome by the “reconquest” of original harmony.³⁷

This radical tension between natural goodness and social evil emerges most notably around the question of religion. According to Bernardin, human beings are in fact naturally religious animals.³⁸ The only authentic form of religion is a “natural religion,”³⁹ which he identifies with early

³⁵ For more details regarding the question of slave trade in Bernardin’s thought, see Isabelle Vissière, “Esclavage et négritude chez Bernardin de Saint-Pierre,” in *Études sur Paul et Virginie et l’œuvre de Bernardin de Saint-Pierre*, ed. Racault (Paris: Publications de l’Université de la Réunion, 1986), 64–79 and Thibault, “À l’épreuve de l’esclavage,” in *Bernardin de Saint-Pierre: Genèse et philosophie de l’œuvre*, 173–96.

³⁶ PV, 207; trans., 51.

³⁷ On Bernardin’s unique conception of harmony, see Marco Menin, “History Denied: Theories of Harmony in the *tournant des Lumières*,” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 40 (2017): 255–72.

³⁸ “The sentiment of Deity is the first mover of the human hearth,” EN, 443; trans., 321.

³⁹ On Bernardin’s peculiar religiosity, see Kurt Wiedemeier, *La Religion de Bernardin de Saint-Pierre* (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires Fribourg, 1986) and Duflo, “De la religion naturelle à la religion de la nature: Rousseau et Bernardin de Saint-Pierre,” *Dix-huitième siècle* 33 (2001): 517–27.

Christianity: “Were the Christian religion producing universally its native effects, the earth would be a paradise.”⁴⁰ This “pure religion,”⁴¹ characterized by the perfect union between human beings and nature, is that which is taught to the two youngsters: “All they had been taught of religion was to love it, and if they did not offer up long prayers in the church, wherever they were, . . . they raised towards heaven their innocent hands, and hearts purified by virtuous affections.”⁴² Conventional orthodoxy is to be substituted, according to a leitmotif typical of deism, with orthopraxy: “[Paul and Virginie] reasoned but little upon these sacred volumes, for their theology centered in a feeling of devotion towards the Supreme Being, like that of nature: and their morality was an active principle, like that of the Gospel.”⁴³

In opposition to this form of natural religiosity is positive, dogmatic, and hypocritical religion. This “false” religion—which is most obviously embodied in the character of the French aunt—corresponds in reality to superstition and the triumph of prejudice. It is not by chance that Virginie’s confessor convinces her to leave, using a specious argument based on an inversion of Catholic values. His prophecy is later revealed to be tauntingly false: “My children, he exclaimed as he entered, God be praised! You are now rich. . . . We must obey our aged relations, even when they are unjust. . . . Your voyage to France will end happily.”⁴⁴

V. ESCHATOLOGY AND THE REVALUATION OF FINAL CAUSES

Anthropodicy makes the death of Virginie comprehensible. The young girl dies because she left Mauritius for Paris—because she chose (albeit unconsciously) society over nature, and ambition over love. In a way, therefore, she becomes irreparably disconnected, and only a tragic ending appears to guarantee the coherence of her character. Virginie embodies the hendiadys between nature and virtue. Even so, evil remains unjustifiable; Bernardin repeatedly confirms the young girl’s innocence. Virginie’s fate appears to call into question the existence of Divine Providence. In fact, at the conclusion of the agonizing shipwreck scene, Bernardin writes, “We retired from

⁴⁰ *EN*, 205; trans., 118.

⁴¹ *PV*, 194; trans., 23.

⁴² *PV*, 198; trans., 32.

⁴³ *PV*, 224; trans., 86.

⁴⁴ *PV*, 244–45; trans., 138.

the spot overwhelmed with dismay. . . . Some of the spectators seemed tempted, from the fatal destiny of this virtuous girl, to doubt the existence of Providence: for there are in life such terrible, such unmerited evils, that even the hope of the wise is sometimes shaken.”⁴⁵

Anthropodicy must necessarily give way to a subsequent model of theodicy, one which presents itself as a natural eschatology. In Bernardin’s view there are two explanations of evil that neither oppose nor contradict, but, if anything, productively complement each other. While anthropodicy provides a social and historical (and, therefore, human and worldly) justification for evil, eschatology offers a metaphysical and transcendental justification, situating evil within the broader context of cosmic occurrences. From this point of view, the shift from the anthropodic model (which characterizes the novel up until the shipwreck of the Saint-Géran) to the eschatological model (exemplified in Virginie’s pomposity) coincides with the discovery of the third dogma of faith in Rousseau’s *Profession de foi*. The certainty that “man is, therefore, a free agent, and as such animated by an immaterial substance”⁴⁶ arises from the need to postulate a future divine justice that eases the suffering of the innocent in this world. Bernardin reiterates the same argument in the elderly man’s final words to Paul: “As for me, I suffer myself to float calmly down the stream of time to the shoreless ocean of futurity; while, in the contemplation of the present harmony of nature, I elevate my soul towards its supreme Author, and hope for a more happy lot in another state of existence.”⁴⁷

The young man, whose character has too often been overshadowed by that of his lover, encounters the enigma of evil more than anyone else. Virginie is a Christological figure, “deliberately choosing to die and choosing to die untainted because she has reserved her love for God alone.”⁴⁸ She dies as “an angel prepared to take her flight to Heaven,”⁴⁹ while Paul embodies the uncertainties and the vulnerabilities of ordinary men. His character, both noble and tragic, is reminiscent of Job’s: though dismayed and hurt by his fate, with the pain swiftly leading to his death, Paul remains compassionate and keeps his faith intact.

Yet how can all of this exemplify a philosophy of nature and, more importantly, what distinguishes Bernardin’s position? The answer to this

⁴⁵ PV, 292; trans., 254.

⁴⁶ Rousseau, *Profession de foi*, 701; trans., 442.

⁴⁷ PV, 267; trans., 189.

⁴⁸ See especially Cook, “Paul et Virginie, a roman poétique,” *Australian Journal of French Studies* 24 (1987): 245–52.

⁴⁹ PV, 292; trans., 252.

twofold question is to be found, on the one hand, in the epistemology of the *Études de la nature* and, on the other, in the lengthy discussion between the elderly man and Paul mentioned above. That discussion, together with the young man's faith in Divine Providence, exemplifies the model of theodicy that drives the entire storyline.

Bernardin is not simply a spokesperson for a compensatory vision of divinity; rather he develops a project of theodicy on a systematic reevaluation of final causes: "A few feelings of contempt that philosophers have for final causes are all that he [the Author of nature] gives us to know: he has concealed all the rest."⁵⁰ It is with this point that he distances himself from Rousseau. In fact, *La Profession de foi* openly calls into question the validity of the principle of final causes, which—according to the definition given by d'Alembert in the *Encyclopédie*—consists "in finding the causes of the effects of nature by way of the ending that its author had to consider when producing said effects."⁵¹ According to Rousseau, "we do not have the measurements of this immense machine; we cannot calculate its relations; we know neither its first laws nor its final cause. We do not know ourselves; we know neither our nature nor our active principle."⁵² In other words, without doubting that the existence of God can be revealed in the spectacle of nature, this truth, for Rousseau, establishes itself exclusively through our feelings. It cannot be confirmed at a demonstrative level. By contrast, Bernardin builds his entire philosophical system upon a generalized and anthropocentric finalism, which is validated by the *merveilles de la nature*: "All his works speak of their Author. The plain which gradually escapes from my eye, and the capacious vault of heaven which encompasses me on every side, convey to me an idea of his immensity; the fruits suspended on the bough within reach of my hand, announce his providential care; the constant revolution of the seasons displays his wisdom."⁵³

Bernardin adopts this argument from Fénelon, whose *Traité de l'existence de Dieu*⁵⁴ brought it fame and, more importantly, from Leibniz, whose philosophy is the "guide" for eschatological theodicy, just as Rousseau's is for anthropodicy. However, Bernardin's systematic and coherent

⁵⁰ EN, 247; trans., 151.

⁵¹ "À chercher les causes des effets de la nature par la fin que son auteur a dû se proposer en produisant ces effets," Jean le Rond d'Alembert, "Causes finales," *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 17 vols., ed. Denis Diderot and d'Alembert (Paris–Neuchâtel: Le Breton, Briasson, David–Durand, 1751–72), 2:789.

⁵² Rousseau, *Profession de foi*, 678; trans., 427.

⁵³ EN, 233–34; trans., 138.

⁵⁴ Fénelon, *Traité de l'existence de Dieu et de ses attributs*, ed. Émile Lafranc (Paris: Jules Delalain et fils, 1868), in particular the chapter "Preuves de l'existence de Dieu, tirées de la considération des principales merveilles de la nature," 7–78.

application of this method is nearly unparalleled in the history of modern thought and, at times, leads him to embrace theoretically weak or scientifically dubious conclusions. His strenuous defense of final causes is both original and anachronistic in an era during which the debate surrounding finality in nature was considered to be long over.⁵⁵ Following the methodical exclusion of final causes introduced by Bacon, finalism received two formidable attacks from Descartes and Spinoza. In his *Ethica*, Spinoza dismissed *tout court* the notion of a final cause as a mere illusion that resulted from applying to nature the same perception that we have of some of our actions.⁵⁶ Descartes, in turn, was an ardent opponent of anthropocentrism. As a consequence, he rigorously delimited human knowledge to the means of nature instead of its end: “We must not examine the final causes of created things, but rather their efficient causes. And so, finally, . . . *we shall entirely reject from our Philosophy the search for final causes.*”⁵⁷

This Cartesian idea of an unknowable finality, whose revival in conjunction with the dramatic earthquake in Lisbon left eighteenth-century dreams of theodicy in ruins, is Bernardin’s true polemical target. He, in fact, aims to overturn a fundamental position in Descartes’s epistemology, one which involved condemning the use of final causes in physics based on the finiteness of our intellect with respect to divine infinity. According to Bernardin, however, it is the very weakness of human cognitive abilities that causes us to know only the ends of nature, which coincides with the greatest general good as Providence would have it. Since the discovery of efficient causes is impossible, and the search for them is threatening to both science and religious sentiment, it is necessary to turn to the study of final causes: “Though Nature employs an infinity of means, she permits man to know only the end she has in view.”⁵⁸

From this perspective, Virginie’s death appears to be not only understandable, but also justifiable. Indeed, its senseless injustice paradoxically

⁵⁵ The originality of Bernardin’s position had been already noticed by Étienne Gilson, *L’esprit de la philosophie médiévale* (Paris: Vrin, 1989), 106.

⁵⁶ “Nature does nothing for the sake of an end. . . . A final cause, as it is called, is nothing, therefore, but human desire, in so far as this is considered as the principle or primary cause of anything,” Spinoza, *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata*, 4, *Pre.*, in *Opera*, 4 vols., ed. Carl Gebhardt (Heidelberg: Winters, 1924–26), 2:206–7; *Ethics*, trans. William Hale White and Amelia Hutchison Stirling (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2001), 162.

⁵⁷ René Descartes, *Principes*, 1, 28, in *Ceuvres complètes*, 11 vols., ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: Vrin, 1964–74), 9:37; *Principles of Philosophy*, trans. Valentine Rodger Miller and Reese P. Miller (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1982), 14.

⁵⁸ *EN*, 328; trans., 225.

demonstrates the existence of an infinite justice, whose symbol is harmony in nature:

Ah! How ever happy Virginia may have been with us, she is now much more so. There is a God, my son. It is unnecessary for me to prove it to you, for the voice of all nature loudly proclaims it. . . . Do you, then, believe that he will leave Virginia without a recompense? Do you believe that the same Power which enclosed her noble soul in a form so beautiful,—so like an emanation from itself, could not have saved her from the waves?—that He who has ordained the happiness of man here, by laws unknown to you, cannot prepare a still higher degree of felicity for Virginia by other laws, of which you are equally ignorant?⁵⁹

It is Virginie who more than once brings the eschatological system that animates the world to Paul's attention, both when she is still alive and, more importantly, when she is a ghostly apparition: "O Paul! life is but a scene of trial. I have been obedient to the laws of nature, love, and virtue. . . . I am placed far above the reach of all human evils, and you pity me! I am pure and unchangeable as a particle of light."⁶⁰

VI. A DOUBLE THEODICY: FROM THE "ÉTUDES" TO THE "HARMONIES"

The harmony of the present becomes the promise of a future order, and the spectacle of unjust death presages a transition to infinite bliss: "Somewhere, then, without doubt, there is another world where virtue will receive its reward. Virginia is now happy."⁶¹ The counterpoint to this model of individual eschatology is its collective extension. Anthropocentric providentialism can thus be expanded to involve the entire universe: "Does God, like man, need this little globe, the earth, as a theatre for the display of his intelligence and his goodness? . . . What! is there no supreme intelligence, no divine goodness, except on this little spot where we are placed? In those innumerable glowing fires,—in those infinite fields of light which surround them, and which neither storms nor darkness can extinguish, is there nothing but empty space and an eternal void?"⁶²

⁵⁹ *PV*, 304–5; trans., 285.

⁶⁰ *PV*, 306; trans., 288–89.

⁶¹ *PV*, 305; trans., 288.

⁶² *PV*, 305; trans., 286–87.

This project of cosmic eschatology, briefly alluded to in the authoritative version of the novel, occupied a significantly larger space in its drafts. In particular, the “Premier essai autographe de la conversation de Paul et du Vieillard” contains several significant elements helpful for understanding Bernardin’s project of theodicy, further confirming its fundamental duality. A considerable portion of Bernardin’s work, which has yet to receive adequate scholarly attention, is devoted to his astronomical interests. These are treated in the “Fragment sur la théorie de l’univers”—a dialogue between a young sailor and an experienced helmsman drawn from the unpublished novel *L’Amazonne*⁶³—and, most importantly, in the ninth and final book of *Harmonies de la nature*, notably entitled *Harmonies du Ciel, ou les mondes*.⁶⁴

A Monsieur Mustel (the name of the elderly narrator in the preparatory draft of the “Premier essai”) explains to Paul how Providence’s design becomes comprehensible by systematically applying the principle of analogy to the natural world, since it is the only principle which permits final causes to be known. Analogy, as Leibniz had already suggested, is the only effective discursive and conceptual expression of harmony, since it enables the rediscovery of general harmony—which can be fully grasped only from God’s vantage point—in particular harmonies: “Every portion of matter can be thought of as a garden full of plants, or as a pond full of fish. But every branch of the plant, every part of the animal, and every drop of its vital fluids, is another such garden, or another such pond.”⁶⁵ Building on the observation that “there is a relationship and a rapport between all the members of man to all the bodies that are on the earth,”⁶⁶ Paul is able to revisit the complex concatenation of harmonic expression (there are twelve fundamental harmonies, six physical and six moral), and achieve comprehension of the highest harmony: celestial harmony. Here the microcosm and the macrocosm—the destiny of man with that of the stars—reunite:

⁶³ See *Théorie de l’univers*, OC, 11:335–426.

⁶⁴ On this text, see Racault, “La cosmologie poétique des *Harmonies de la nature*,” *Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France* 89 (1989): 825–42 and Menin, “La morale des Étoiles: Pluralité des mondes et providentialisme anthropocentrique dans la pensée de Bernardin de Saint-Pierre,” *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 98 (2014): 705–31.

⁶⁵ Leibniz, *La Monadologie*, §67, in *Die philosophischen Schriften*, cit., 6:618; *Monadology*, in *Philosophical Texts*, ed. Richard Francks and Roger S. Woolhouse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 277.

⁶⁶ “Comme il y a une relation et un rapport de tous les membres de l’homme à tous les corps qui sont sur la terre,” Cook, “Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, *Paul et Virginie*: Premier essai autographe de la conversation de Paul et du Vieillard,” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 9 (1997): 149–60, at 153.

“Just as you see through the shape of your eye as it opens or dilates according to your will, a similar chain of intentions exists between the sun of the earth and the eye: everything belongs to the same plan, everything is arranged and related, from the imperceptible points of the eyes of the inhabitants of earth to the immense sphere of the sun.”⁶⁷ As Malcolm Cook observes, “it might be regretted that this draft was not used in the novel, as there is a wealth of poetic language and a philosophical depth in the draft which the conversation between Paul and the Vieillard in the final version lacks.”⁶⁸ Not only does this draft confirm Bernardin’s faithful application of the Leibnizian precept *naturam cognosci per analogiam*, it also reveals additional aspects of his religiosity, which often straddle the shifting border between orthodoxy and heterodoxy.

In the *Harmonies*, Bernardin would write lines in praise of the sun in a manner that could be construed as heliolatry. For him, the sun is not simply the center of the system that bears its name; it is its perpetual generating impulse and eschatological end: “Heart of the world, eye of Nature—living image of Deity! Glow with thy fires within me; illumine me with thy light! Teach me the order in which thou dost develop matter.”⁶⁹ The history of the earth is presented as a simple stage of the greater cosmos, which, beginning with the appearance of the sun, ends in a progressive return to it, until culminating in the reconstitution of the original cosmic egg. Terrestrial evil, therefore, can be coherently explained in terms of final causes. All of the planets, as Monsieur Mustel reminds Paul, must in fact be inhabited since human beings are the ultimate end of all the finalities interlaced within nature. Thus it is not possible to postulate the existence of a world devoid of beings which can consciously extract advantages from it.⁷⁰ The human soul, then, must traverse—in a consecutive series of reincarnations—all of the different planets, until reaching paradise. Yet, according to Bernardin’s “materialistic” spiritualism, paradise is not a supplementary locale, but rather is a place situated within our universe. It is the sun itself: “From here

⁶⁷ “Ainsi vous voyez par la forme de l’œil qui s’ouvre ou se dilate à la volonté qu’une chaîne d’intention la même existe entre le globe du soleil de la terre et l’œil: tout est du même plan, tout est disposé et rapporté depuis les points imperceptibles des yeux des habitants de la terre jusqu’au globe immense du soleil,” Cook, “Bernardin de Saint-Pierre,” 153.

⁶⁸ Cook, “Bernardin de Saint-Pierre,” 154.

⁶⁹ *Harmonies de la nature*, OC, 9:419; *Invocation to the Sun*, trans. Marx Edgeworth Lazarus, in *Passional Hygiene and Natural Medicine: Embracing the Harmonies of Man with his Planet* (New York: M. D. Fowlers & Wells, 1852), 219.

⁷⁰ On the question of extra-terrestrial life, see Duffo, “Les habitants des autres planètes dans les *Harmonies de la nature* de Bernardin de Saint-Pierre,” *Archives de Philosophie* 60 (1997): 47–57.

[the Earth] we will pass onto the brilliant Venus and Mercury, the nearest to the sun, where we will perfect our ideas and our virtues. In the end, after having moved through all the stages of human existence, we will be cleansed by the star [the sun] from which movement, the forms, loves and generations originate.”⁷¹

The traces of cosmic eschatology to be found in *Paul et Virginie* illustrate how, for Bernardin, creative fiction is not simply a means for illustrating philosophical and theological positions. It is also a workshop for theoretical innovation. Thus the pastoral novel can be considered to be both the fourteenth book of the *Études de la nature*—whose principles of anthropodicy it faithfully applies—and the basis for the *Harmonies de la nature*, whose design corresponds to its model of eschatological theodicy. The two-sided solution to the enigma of evil presented in *Paul et Virginie* reflects a shift from the terrestrial perspective to its complement, the celestial—a shift that characterizes the transition from the *Études* to the *Harmonies*. Indeed, when emphasizing the overall coherence of his project, Bernardin did take pleasure in defining the latter text as the “*secondes Études*.”

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⁷¹ “D’ici [la Terre] nous passerons dans la brillante Vénus et dans Mercure, voisin du soleil, où se perfectionneront nos idées et nos vertus. Enfin, après avoir parcouru tous les étages de l’existence humaine, nous arriverons purifiés dans l’astre [le soleil] d’où jaillissent sans cesse le mouvement, les formes, les amours et les générations,” *Harmonies de la nature*, OC, 9:422–23.