

A JOURNEYMAN AND A GENTLEMAN: CONSTRUCTING ARISTOCRATIC IDENTITY
IN THE MEMOIRS OF JACQUES-LOUIS MENETRA

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ABSTRACT

NICOLE THERESE BAUER: A Journeyman and a Gentleman: Constructing Aristocratic Identity in the Memoirs of Jacques-Louis Ménétra
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Although this paper focuses on one individual who is unique and atypical in many ways, Ménétra's complex attitude towards aristocratic identity reveals how debates in the mid-eighteenth century around luxury, nobility and merit affected an everyday individual's identity formation, including the idea that he could construct his identity. Furthermore, the identity that Ménétra fashioned for himself challenged some of the prevailing hierarchies and values of his society even while he sometimes unknowingly reinforced them. I hope to illustrate this somewhat paradoxical idea by discussing the different aspects of aristocratic identity that Ménétra adopted for himself, namely aristocratic honor, the use of leisure time, libertinage, disinterest and waste; and lastly, the importance he places on his appearance and the gaze of others.

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Introduction

On a cold night in 1764, a half-dressed man, clutching a few articles of clothing, fled along the rooftops of Paris. Behind him was the bedroom of a young and pretty governess, and her angry employer, who had discovered them in the room. Only a moment ago, they had been alone together in “sweet intoxication”: in those moments, as he wrote in his memoirs, they felt themselves to be the equals of the gods.¹ The man in question was young, handsome to judge by the reactions of the opposite sex, and well-dressed when he could afford to be. He believed pursuing pleasure to be the best use of his time, and he wrote of his exploits in the mid-eighteenth century, but this was not Casanova. This was Jacques-Louis Ménétra, a journeyman glassmaker. He was a tradesman who took the time to write his memoirs, an artisan who lived like a libertine, a skilled worker who wasted time at table or in the boudoir, and a commoner who disdained the trappings of rank but dressed like a fop. He was a contradiction.

Though an artisan, Ménétra adopted via his behavior and attitude an aristocratic identity, and though from a working-class background with no formal education, he kept a journal, drew and wrote poetry. This is not to say that he attempted to portray himself as an aristocrat, but he was clearly conscious of a conflict within himself—a desire to live like the nobility, to adopt their values as his own, as well as a disdain for a system that valued birth so highly.

Some scholars have pointed out the cultural shift in terms of identity formation that took place in Europe after the Renaissance. With humanism came the idea that an individual had a

¹ Jacques-Louis Ménétra, *Journal de ma vie*, Daniel Roche, editor (Paris: Montalba, 1982), 164.

role and a responsibility in creating his own identity by living up to his God-given potential, despite everything that was out of his or her control, and also God-given—birth, family, sex. After the Renaissance, men and women were more conscious of this idea of self-fashioning, of constructing or fashioning an identity rather than receiving it passively.² French aristocrats in the seventeenth century, as one historian has argued, began to view selfhood as a construct rather than a given,³ even if they were the members of society with most to gain from the idea of identity as fixed, God-given and immutable. If this shift was indeed taking place in early modern Europe, and if it was even attractive to elites, or attractive to them in particular, then it is not unthinkable that it would have influenced those members of the reading public—ever-growing, especially in the eighteenth century—who did not belong to an elite but who found this idea more appealing than older, less dynamic concepts of identity. Elites in early modern France, especially the nobility, certainly exerted a great cultural influence on the rest of society.⁴ Jacques-Louis Ménétra served as an excellent example of that phenomenon.

Another memoirist of the mid-eighteenth century who came from humble beginnings but wished to live like an aristocrat was Giacomo Casanova. Using gambling as his access point to the aristocratic circles of Europe, Casanova socialized with and skillfully imitated the lifestyle of this elite,⁵ mastering but also internalizing their value system. When he arrived in France, he quickly ingratiated himself with the Parisian elite, calling himself the Chevalier de Seingalt-- an

² Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-fashioning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 2.

³ Jonathan Dewald, *Aristocratic Experience and the Origins of Modern Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), xi.

⁴ Norbert Elias discussed this phenomenon in his work, *The Court Society*. For example, he wrote that “court society, particularly in France, was with the increasing centralization of the state becoming the most influential social formation in the country.” See Elias, *The Court Society*, Stephen Mennell, ed. (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2006), 201.

⁵ See Thomas M. Kavanagh, *Dice, Cards, Wheels* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005)

entirely fabricated identity. But unlike Casanova, Ménétra was not interested in masquerading, in re-inventing himself. He did not want to pose as or be mistaken for a nobleman. He was defiantly unapologetic with regard to his non-illustrious birth and his unremarkable origins. Ménétra nevertheless constructed an identity for himself that came suspiciously close to aristocratic identity. He seemed to desire the lifestyle, the identity even, of the aristocrat, yet felt ambivalent about that desire, and frustrated that the premiere source of pride in his society—lineage--would always be denied him.

Pride, however, was one of Ménétra's most salient qualities. While he could not take pride in his birth, and ostensibly did not want to, he certainly took pride in adopting aristocratic values and spending his time as an aristocrat would and could afford to.⁶ Of course, the cultural expressions of identity and the ideologies of the French nobility were not static, monolithic entities. Many historians focus on the changing array of anxieties, motivations and activities of the French nobility in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For many scholars, facets of aristocratic identity such as the imperative for prodigality and the preservation of honor are constants that remain throughout the Old Regime, but they intensified or took on new forms with the societal changes of the eighteenth century. For example, sumptuary laws were in place for most of the Old Regime so that the nobility could continue to distinguish itself visually through finery and expensive clothing. However, in the eighteenth century a heated debate raged over the subject of luxury, to which both Rousseau and Voltaire contributed. Was luxury a necessity because of the economic benefits the consumption of the elite brought to all of society? Could

⁶ In his book on the eighteenth-century nobility, François Bluche explains that part of living nobly was living leisurely, or even, as was explicitly stated in the records of masonic lodges, doing nothing. But Bluche points out that this "negative notion" of the lifestyle of the nobility was also a bourgeois conception of noble life. In the eighteenth century, many still believed that elevated inclinations and grand sentiments were transmitted with noble blood. Bluche quotes Mirabeau as having described the nobility as "the part of the nation to which the prejudice of valor and fidelity is most particularly confined." See Bluche, *La Vie quotidienne de la noblesse française au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1973), 23.

luxury be luxury without inequality? Or was luxury, rather, the phenomenon of the bourgeoisie using their money to imitate their betters?⁷ One historian sees a moral economy of luxury for the nobility in the eighteenth century. Luxury was a necessity, a social self-affirmation.⁸ While a bourgeois value system would assign a negative moral judgment to waste and prodigality, waste as well as generosity was seen as a hallmark of aristocratic identity since it showed a disdain for money and material gain.

Another scholar argues that the constant vagaries of fashion among the eighteenth-century nobility were an attempt to differentiate themselves from wealthy non-nobles.⁹ Since more and more members of the bourgeoisie could use their money to buy luxury goods, aristocrats constantly changed what was in fashion so that others would be forced to play a sort of catch-up with the trendsetting elite. Many aristocrats were becoming alarmed by this disturbing trend: it had seemed that in times past, men and women dressed according to their station. In their century, people were no longer what they seemed. Others have argued that industries such as the silk trade promoted these volatile fashion trends for profit. They have shown how the market for fashionable goods expanded far beyond the aristocracy in the eighteenth century to include even artisans and servants as consumers, which was a reason for the fierce debates over luxury in mid-century. The phenomenon of the working classes imitating elites in fashion was flattering to said elites, but also had potentially “unsettling social and moral implications.”¹⁰

⁷ Renato Galliani, *Rousseau, le luxe et l'idéologie nobiliaire* (Oxford, The Voltaire Foundation, 1989), 124.

⁸ Natacha Coquery, *L'Hôtel aristocratique* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1998), 11.

⁹ Renato Galliani, *Rousseau, le luxe et l'idéologie nobiliaire*

¹⁰ See Cissie Fairchild, “The Production and Marketing of Populuxe Goods in Eighteenth-Century Paris” in Brewer and Porter (eds.), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London: Routledge, 1993); and William H. Sewell, Jr.

Aristocratic waste could also be understood through the social practice of gambling. Like the duel, gambling (usually) was a game of high stakes. The duel showed the noble's disregard for his own life in defense of honor; the game, especially the high-stakes game, showed the same disregard for large sums of money. Both involved taking a great risk with equanimity. Gambling was not at all about earning or losing. It was about having no concern for money, since, unlike a bourgeois, the aristocrat's worth and status did not come from money, and would not be lost without it.¹¹

Waste and disinterest went hand in hand for the aristocrat. He ought to be concerned with his honor, but willing to sacrifice his life, and certainly his wealth if need be. He could, and in fact ought to, waste his time and money pursuing pleasure because saving, and using sparingly, was a bourgeois activity. The idea of disinterest, so important in the debates of the eighteenth century, fell into one of the three categories that defined nobility: lineage, social connections and a nobleman's lifestyle.¹² Though an artisan, Ménétra embodied these characteristic values and lifestyle. He did not have a distinguished name, but he did have a wide network of friends, including a few aristocrats and even Rousseau. And like an aristocrat, Ménétra liked to be seen as a man of fashion. In one episode, he returned home dressed smartly and wearing a watch of zinc that everyone took for gold, to his delight. He was not ashamed of his false gold watch; he was proud that no one could tell the difference.

Conservative members of the French nobility became increasingly worried about the putative disparity between being and seeming. In their minds, people ought to look and seem as they actually were. Those who did not appear as their true selves, their true social condition,

"The Empire of Fashion and the Rise of Capitalism in Eighteenth-Century France," *Past and Present* no. 206 (Feb. 2010).

¹¹ Thomas M. Kavanagh, *Enlightenment and the Shadows of Chance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993)

¹² Kavanagh, *Enlightenment and the Shadows of Chance*, 40.

were living a lie. This was a terrible threat to the aristocracy's standing since, if appearance was meant to reflect inner dignity, then the fact that others could and did dress as well as they, meant that their superiority was ultimately put into question. This would lead to a loss of power—cultural, which was long prized, and eventually political. But for Ménétra seeming *became* being. Looking and acting the part was as good as being it, though he made no attempts to deceive anyone. If his watch of false gold drew the admiration of his family just as much as if it were real, who was to say that the false was worth any less than the true?

Although this paper focuses on one individual who is unique and atypical in many ways, Ménétra's complex attitude towards aristocratic identity reveals how debates in the mid-eighteenth century around luxury, nobility and merit affected an everyday individual's identity formation, including the idea that he could construct his identity. Furthermore, the identity that Ménétra fashioned for himself challenged some of the prevailing hierarchies and values of his society even while he sometimes unknowingly reinforced them. I hope to illustrate this somewhat paradoxical idea by discussing the different aspects of aristocratic identity that Ménétra adopted for himself, namely aristocratic honor, the use of leisure time, libertinage, disinterest and waste; and lastly, the importance he places on his appearance and the gaze of others.

Artisanal Pride, Aristocratic Honor

Ménétra's memoirs have been mined for the gems which shine light on artisanal culture in the eighteenth century, given his insider's perspective.¹³ But what has been hitherto little

¹³ In his book on popular culture in eighteenth-century France, Thomas Brennan makes use of Ménétra's memoirs as an example of journeymen's solidarity as well as sociability in taverns. For Brennan, Ménétra is the perfect example of a journeyman who identified with others who may not have shared his profession but shared his rank as a journeyman. Brennan also argues that Ménétra's frequent altercations resulted from this solidarity and artisanal

explored is his fascinating and complex struggle with aristocratic identity. Though openly displaying contempt for the privileges granted by birth in his society, Ménétra took pains to record the care, like a nobleman, with which he nurtured his own sense of personal honor, describing again and again moments in which he never let an insult go unanswered, as well as times where he exhibited uncommon valor, usually contrasted with the cowardice of others around him. His sensitivity to matters of honor could easily be interpreted as a sort of corporatist pride as a journeyman since many of the altercations he described involved insults to a group of journeymen, or journeymen fighting together to defend their interests. However, there are just as many instances in which Ménétra became involved in fights--duels even--that had nothing to do with other journeymen. He clearly adopted an aristocratic sense of honor for himself, despite, or perhaps because of, his disdain for a system that made pursuing honor the purview of a privileged few simply because of their birth. In adopting this facet of aristocratic identity for himself, he paradoxically reaffirmed and challenged the values of his society at the same time.

Along with luxury, the concept of honor became a subject of contention in the eighteenth century. As the idea of social or political equality surfaced in the debates of this period, some writers began to explore the meaning of honor and whether or not the nobility had an exclusive claim to it.¹⁴ Charles Rollin, rector of the University of Paris in the early eighteenth century, wrote on patriotism in Antiquity and the importance of civic virtue. He saw virtue as superior to the concept of aristocratic honor, and believed that virtue did not necessarily have anything to do

honor, where violence commonly resolved disputes. See Brennan, *Public Drinking and Popular Culture in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 58. James Farr argues that in a society like that of early modern France, the ruling classes demanded and placed high value on honor, but this did not keep artisans from developing “notions of their own about who possessed what degree of honor.” See Farr, *Hands of Honor: Artisans and Their World in Dijon, 1550-1650* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 178.

¹⁴ Jay Smith, *Nobility Reimagined: The Patriotic Nation in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 4.

with rank.¹⁵ These debates, of civic virtue and patriotism versus personal honor, merit versus birth, equality versus rank, continued through the century to the Revolution. While it is not clear how up-to-date Ménétra was with all of these discourses, it seems likely that he had ingested some of these ideas and interpreted them in his own ways by the time he wrote his memoirs.

In one passage, he described with obvious disdain the reverence and piety of the tenants of a bishop whose chateau he was helping to repair, situated between Bordeaux and Toulouse. Ménétra wrote of the bishop's tenants as "fanatical peasants" who brought the bishop partridges and pheasants every day.¹⁶ And when the bishop rode in his carriage pulled by six horses—a sign of his elevated rank when a coach could easily be pulled by four—another man rode beside him holding a cross.¹⁷ Then, whenever the bishop went out, "these wretches [the peasants] left their fields and ran to the road, bowing and offering a thousand blessings to Monseigneur for having received his."¹⁸ Clearly, some of the disdain that Ménétra expressed here came from a healthy, Enlightenment-era skepticism towards religion and superstition. He saw the peasants' religious devotion only as an unworthy use of time and resources that would be better spent on themselves. But there is also a critique here of rank and privilege. The bishop, who was also the seigneur and Comte d'Agen, accepted his peasants' offerings and blessings as his due, while Ménétra saw him as undeserving. The peasants, in his view, were foolish, but the bishop worse, since he took advantage of their foolishness, and no one could hinder him. Those were the privileges of his rank, but it was a rank he had done nothing, other than being born, to deserve.

¹⁵ Ibid., 54.

¹⁶ Ménétra, *Journal*, 73.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

In another passage, Ménétra told the story of a very different person, one of his own friends, who came to a sad end. But this short passage also shows some of Ménétra's feelings towards rank and self-worth. Once, when returning to Paris, he recounted meeting an old friend, Cordier. Ménétra described Cordier as having fallen into destitution, and at that point Cordier was shining shoes in order to earn a living. When Cordier offered his services to his friend, Ménétra initially refused. "I didn't want to let him do it," wrote Ménétra, "but then he said these words to me, 'There is no such thing as a stupid métier, only stupid people.' And so I let him. I didn't give him anything but a bottle of wine."¹⁹ This passage is significant because Cordier's words were certainly important to Ménétra. This was one of the few instances in all of his memoirs that Ménétra quoted one of his interlocutors directly. Given that he was, of course, remembering conversations from the past when he wrote them down, he was usually content with paraphrasing. Clearly, in this passage Ménétra was embarrassed for his friend, feeling that he was degraded in being forced to earn his living this way, but he accepted Cordier's services not to help him survive, but to return a little of his dignity to him. It is possible, of course, that Ménétra relented so as not to offend his friend, but it is also likely that he did so because he believed and accepted Cordier's words, that they rang true for him. He did not pay his friend, except with a bottle of wine, as if they had exchanged favors for each other as friends and equals. A few lines later, Ménétra described Cordier's death. He died poor; having gotten drunk one night and fallen asleep on a bridge, he fell into the water and drowned.²⁰ This "unfortunate friend" who "died badly"²¹ was probably not an intimate or long-time acquaintance of Ménétra's,

¹⁹ Ibid., 75.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

but his story was included not so much because Ménétra missed his friend and mourned his death, but because he could not forget his words.

Ménétra took his friend's words to heart. This idea of personal pride and worth regardless of rank seemed to be an unshakeable motto of his in all his dealings, especially conflicts, with others. His sense of personal pride arguably went beyond that of a sense of belonging and solidarity with other journeymen. This is clear in the way he sustained his personal pride, usually in the face of perceived insults or attacks, even when he was ostensibly defending the honor of the journeymen as a group. Of course, an insult to them was an affront to him, since he identified with the others, but he nevertheless took care to avenge personal affronts himself, and even to avenge the group as an individual as if he wished to distinguish himself. What's more, he often responded to a perceived attack on his honor with violent means that more than matched what he believed he had suffered, going out of his way to defend his pride in order to show how important it was to him, much in the same way a nobleman was meant to do. In one instance, during his travels, he was passing in front of a farmhouse and a dog ran after him and bit his leg. "The mistress of the house was at the door," he wrote. "I asked her to finish off her dog, but her response was to look at me with disdain and to say that the dog was doing its duty. Me, when I heard this, I pulled out my pistol and made it [the dog] bite the dust."²² The woman cried for her farmhands to go after him, but Ménétra threatened to shoot them as well if they pursued him.²³ Clearly, Ménétra felt he was justified in reacting in this manner to an insult added to injury, even noting with satisfaction the outrage of the occupants of the farm. Having been bitten as well as subjected to the woman's "disdain," he did not content himself with a simple retort, and had no

²² Ménétra, *Journal*, 62.

²³ *Ibid.*

qualms about the destruction of her property. He had even asked her, perhaps angrily, to kill the dog herself.

On another occasion, Ménétra was accosted by a man who was angry with the journeymen in the town he was visiting. A journeyman stonecutter had killed one of his peers, which Ménétra felt he was justified in doing, and all of the journeymen in the town, stonecutters or not, interceded on his behalf, but to no avail. On the day the man was to be executed, over a hundred armed journeymen rescued him from the scaffold. The man who accosted Ménétra took issue with this action on the part of the journeymen, but wanted to dispute the subject “particularly with [Ménétra].”²⁴ When this happened, Ménétra hit him several times with a stick, and was eventually taken to see the commissary. “I defended myself so well that [my opponent] was still in the wrong. That will teach him to scuffle with and insult the journeymen.”²⁵ This story exhibits the solidarity and loyalty that journeymen felt with and for one another across professional boundaries, taking violent action and even defying the law in order to protect one of their own. It also shows how Ménétra identified with them, and explained his own actions as motivated and justified by the interests of the group. He did not however explain very well why this man accosted him in particular. Seeing as that this man argued with him as a journeyman on account of the journeymen’s actions, it would be understandable if Ménétra had called on his comrades for help, but he did not. Fighting with this man, and punishing him for his insults, was a matter of personal pride for Ménétra, as was his ability to eloquently defend his case by himself. While he acted ostensibly on behalf of the group, he defended himself as an individual and made sure to make that clear. Similarly, when he had been bitten by the farm dog, his actions were a means of nurturing his personal pride. He could have sought justice with the authorities,

²⁴ Ibid., 68.

²⁵ Ibid.

or escaped while he only had a wounded leg to contend with and nothing else, but he shot the dog even though it was no longer a danger to him, purposefully provoking the woman and her farmhands and avenging himself for an insult. His sensitivity to what he perceived as insults, and his pride in his ability to avenge himself on his own, suggest that he cultivated a sense of honor resembling that of an aristocrat, that is to say, he went out of his way to avenge himself even if it meant putting himself at risk. Due to the many instances in which he made sure to defend himself on his own and to let no insult go unanswered, it would seem that his sense of honor went beyond that of being a journeyman and belonging to that group.

Even when the dishonored or offended party was his opponent, Ménétra was quick to assert himself, and often in a very aristocratic manner. One man accused Ménétra of dishonoring him after having found out that Ménétra was having an affair with both his wife and daughter, and attempting to hide it from him and to keep both women ignorant of his double dealings. At first Ménétra, who though quick to defend his honor rarely fought over a woman, offered to make peace over a glass of wine. But the offended husband and father replied that he would take the glass only to throw the wine in Ménétra's face. Ménétra refused to let him do so, and when the man threatened to hit him with a stick, Ménétra said, "Whatever I receive I give back."²⁶ When one of his friends deduced that a fight was about to begin, he immediately went to fetch two broomsticks for the men to fight with, thus making a brawl into more of a ritualized duel. Ménétra described the fight as if some skill were required, mentioning his agility as well as his superiority. He also pointed out gestures that he found dishonorable and out of place in such a fight. He wrote: "I defended myself [well] since he was more nervous than I was. All of a sudden he got me in the stomach. Everyone watching said that it was a treacherous thing to do. At the

²⁶ Ménétra, *Journal*, 190.

same instant I struck him on the wrist and with the same agility, got him on the arm...’’²⁷

Ménétra only threw his broomstick away when he saw the police coming to arrest him; his opponent had stooped so “low as to denounce [him] to the commissary.”²⁸ Obviously Ménétra saw involving the authorities as dishonorable, since their intervention would interrupt a fight over a question of honor that resembled nothing other than an aristocratic duel.

But as we have seen, the journeyman’s adoption of this identity was complicated by his feelings of contempt for a system of privilege and hierarchy based on birth. Sometimes he mocked or refused to follow the rules of rituals that were normally delineated along class lines. For example, in one passage he recalled how when he was younger, probably a teenager, he and a few other journeymen staged a mock stag hunt, playfully imitating a common aristocratic pastime. Only in this instance, Ménétra pretended to be the stag and the others chased him through the woods, laughing. A few “lords” who had happened to notice them, watched them “in amusement.”²⁹ For Ménétra, who certainly took his pride seriously, the laughter went both ways. While the hunt fell within the domain of the aristocrat’s activities, being comical or ridiculous did not. In fact, for the aristocrat, ridicule was often synonymous with dishonor.³⁰ Ménétra and his friends were, of course, young and carefree when they were playing this game, but he was nevertheless aware that he had an audience. Though they laughed at him, it did not appear to bother him, probably because he was mocking a practice that was both alien and silly to him. In laughing at this mock performance, his audience did not realize that the laughter was turned back towards them.

²⁷ Ibid., 190.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 154.

³⁰ One of La Rochefoucauld’s maxims held that: “Ridicule dishonors more than dishonor.” See François, Duc de la Rochefoucauld, *La Rochefoucauld, Maximes* (Paris: Flammarion, 2008).

Another example of this sort of inversion occurred when the journeyman had one of his many encounters with an angry man over the question of a woman's affections. In this instance, a nobleman attacked him, claiming that Ménétra was trying to steal his mistress. Ménétra was indeed having an affair with the woman in question, but she was most likely a casual prostitute like many of the women in Paris that he frequented. In fact, the young nobleman's father later had the prostitute imprisoned in a convent that served as a house of correction for loose women.³¹

Ménétra wrote that a young man, "rather well-dressed," accosted him and forbade him to continue seeing this woman. The journeyman replied that no living being could stop him. Then the young man, whom he later learned was the son of the Comte de Verthamont, a magistrate in the *parlement* of Bordeaux, threatened to beat him with the flat of his sword. When Ménétra still did not appear cowed, the nobleman drew his sword. At that point, the journeyman reacted swiftly. He stuck out his foot in order to trip his assailant, and then hit him with his fist. Though he sent the comte's son sprawling, he was not content with that. Ménétra then broke the sword and, at least according to the journeyman, hurled the pieces in the man's face.³² In this passage, the nobleman's behavior was not out of the ordinary. Gentlemen were meant to fight only with their equals, and if this nobleman drew his sword against someone of lower rank, it would not be to fight but to punish. Ménétra challenged this idea. He not only refused to be beaten, which was in keeping with his character, but he also broke the sword, the symbol *par excellence* of the nobility, and threw it back at the man who would have used it against him. Rather than using it himself, Ménétra destroyed it.

³¹ Ménétra, 152.

³² Ibid., 148.

Since he had already defeated his opponent, breaking the sword was a symbolic gesture more than anything else. He acted not out of self-defense. The gesture revealed both his contempt and his frustration; it was also a message to his assailant, rejecting his claim to superiority, even if Ménétra's victory was ephemeral. He had bested a nobleman and he had done it with his bare hands, but that did not mean he could then wear and use a sword. Nobility was still a status that he could not openly lay claim to, though he clearly felt, even if he never made it explicit, that he was more worthy of it than those who possessed titles.

That Ménétra adopted a sense of aristocratic honor for himself was also clear in his embrace of risk. He delighted in taking risks, which usually involved some act of courage that set him apart from others around him. Taking risks was an important component of aristocratic honor in Old Regime France. The duel was a perfect example of this since it affirmed an aristocrat's willingness to risk his life in order to protect his honor.³³ His ancestors having supposedly achieved noble rank as a result of bravery on the battlefield, a nobleman was supposed to take on risk "with equanimity" in order to uphold the honor of the rank he had inherited.³⁴ If he was not risking his life on the battlefield in the service of the king, an aristocrat affirmed his identity through risk in other forms; the duel was only one of those.

Ménétra enjoyed providing descriptions of his uncommon valor and willingness to take unnecessary risks. He volunteered as a firefighter, and gave an account of saving a man's important papers from a burning house whose owner was too afraid to enter. Even Ménétra's fellow firefighters were apparently too cautious to enter. He wrote: "I asked my comrades if any

³³ Kavanagh, *Enlightenment and the Shadows of Chance*, 44. See also François Billacois, *The Duel: Its Rise and Fall in Early Modern France*, Trista Salous, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

of them wished to come with me. No one followed me.”³⁵ He entered the room with the papers and threw them along with two sacks of silver into the street. “It was about time, too,” he wrote, “because two minutes later the floor fell through. I had attached a rope to the balcony and climbed down. I told the commissary that there was no longer anything to fear.”³⁶ In this self-congratulatory passage, Ménétra wanted to show his courage, quick thinking and authority. He went into a burning building when no one else would, and he told the commissary when things were safe again. He took a risk and distinguished himself—two imperatives of aristocratic identity. To add to that, he sought no particular recompense other than recognition. He did receive a few coins, but these he shared with his fearful, less active comrades. While his desire to distinguish himself through bravery or heroism was not necessarily a sign of pursuing aristocratic identity, this need, coupled with his sensitivity to insult and heightened sense of personal pride, reveals his adoption of an aristocratic concept of honor that went beyond his pride as a journeyman and pride in belonging to a group. To put it another way, although he had a robust sense of pride as a journeyman, he also wished to prove to himself, (as well as to his readers whoever they might be), that he could perform and fulfill that identity just as well or even better than a nobleman with a bona fide genealogy.

Man of Leisure

One of the most striking features of Ménétra’s memoirs is his almost constant pursuit of pleasure along with the importance he assigned to leisure. Although he worked for a living, he never showed a desire to earn more by working harder or longer. Even when working, the journeyman seemed to take pleasure from working quickly, but it is clear from his descriptions

³⁵ Ménétra, 183.

³⁶ Ibid., 184.

that he never felt pressed for time and frustrated in his work, and that he likewise never felt the need for efficiency and productivity. When he worked quickly it was for the pleasure of impressing others, the pride in his skill and the facilitation of hours of enjoyment. At one instant when he was installing the windows of a church, a woman told him “how impossible it was that this work be done in four or five days and yet I had done it alone in one night, that she knew that I was inspired by the devil, that everything I did was supernatural... I laughed at this nonsense... [Their] curé was an idiot and the tricks that I did for my pleasure resembled his religious mysteries.”³⁷ This was a man hardly concerned with efficiency. He clearly was skilled at his trade, but working quickly amused him because of the wonder it inspired in others whose superstition he despised. He was not lazy; it was simply that time for him would be best spent in the pursuit of pleasure. His free time was important to him; he observed that he liked to draw in his “hours of leisure.”³⁸ He took the time to cultivate another skill, a hobby, when he could have been using his time to make himself richer. This was clearly more important to him, and he even stated that he was not a man of ambition. The influx of money only served for him to be able to “enjoy [his] time marvelously” and to take coaches “from time to time so that [he] could amuse [himself] with girls at inns in order to pass the time.”³⁹ He did not feel as if he had too much time and no means to spend it, nor did he feel as if time were lacking and keeping him from his goals. What was very important, and what he took pride in being able to do, was enjoying leisure time.

Ménétra’s preference for pleasure over efficiency can be seen in the way he spent less than the normal amount of time on his work, apparently due to his skill, though his only ambition as a result of this was good times and good meals. In one passage, he mentioned a nobleman who

³⁷ Ibid., 48.

³⁸ Ibid., 94.

³⁹ Ibid., 48, 116.

hired him to replace the windows of his chateau. Ménétra wrote that “in eight days of time, I earned twenty-one écus from him. The only thing he could say was that if I continued in this manner I would end up richer than he.”⁴⁰ A little later, he mentioned that he worked on the windows in a monastery where he made friends with some of the monks there. Ménétra described their passion for gambling, saying that “since I had set up my workshop in the back, they went there to drink and gamble every night until matins.”⁴¹ He only mentioned his friendship with the monks, and never the displeasure or the inconvenience of having gambling going on in his room late into the night, and Ménétra certainly never hesitated to make a remark if he was annoyed with something. It seems plausible that he joined in the fun as well. At the same time that he was staying at this abbey, he vaguely described a powder that he supposedly invented and which cured fevers. He never asked for money in return for administering the powder, but mentioned how often he was welcomed by others and had the chance to eat “good chickens.” Because he was healing many at the abbey, the monks offered him a place as one of them, but Ménétra wrote: “I have never liked to be bothered and what’s more, I did not want to lose my liberty.”⁴² Freedom and pleasures were far better pursuits than income and efficiency. Furthermore, in the eighteenth century, money and efficiency were seen as bourgeois concerns. Freedom—an admittedly elastic term—and leisure—were related more to aristocratic privilege.

Ménétra’s memoirs are full of instances where he pursued pleasure with abandon. Usually when he mentioned the passage of time, especially when he was younger, it was in the context of amusement. (He wrote his memoirs at different intervals in his life: a large portion when he was in his twenties, and the latter part when he was middle-aged, had become a master

⁴⁰ Ibid., 76.

⁴¹ Ibid., 77.

⁴² Ibid.

glazier, and a witness to the Revolution.) A few pages later, Ménétra mentioned time again when he was enjoying himself. When he took another job in Châtillon, he wrote: “They give me thirty-five sols per day and fifty when I go to an estate called Montigny near Sens. I am fed... I pass my time agreeably. I go from time to time to Fontenay-aux-Roses. I make friends with the other glassmakers... I make a little acquaintance. That occupies me.”⁴³ In the next line he wrote that he went to Paris, and so he clearly did not stay long in the country, though he enjoyed his time there. When he mentioned being occupied, he offered no more description, but it is obvious that the situation was to his liking. It is also noteworthy that what occupied him was not his work. He devoted far more time to describing how he spent his hours of leisure than he did to his labors, only mentioning what he earned as if he were proud of what his skills brought him. And he liked it that way. He traveled often, made friends and found lovers easily, and did his best to have as much leisure time as possible.

The journeyman’s desire for freedom, constant travel and reluctance to commit himself to anything or anyone came out in the way he controlled his time, specifically his free time, even if it was to the detriment or chagrin of others. He maintained this sense of freedom and leisure, as often as possible, by spending no large amount of time with anyone or in any place, and by taking action or using delays to his advantage. Within a few paragraphs, Ménétra mentioned encounters with two different women, one with whom he spent the night and one with whom he did not, where both results were to his liking. When he was with the first woman, he wrote, “The time to go home having arrived, I procured a coach and we arrived at the door. She said goodbye, but I claimed that I do not make adieux at the door... She objected that it was late and

⁴³ Ibid., 158-9.

that I should go home. I insisted. I made it to her room and I wanted to stay... I finished as any good lad would finish since it is really only necessary to make the first step.”⁴⁴

A paragraph later, he mentioned a dinner he had had with an old friend, Rosalie, an occasional prostitute as well as lover of his father. After finding out about Rosalie’s relationship with his father, Ménétra wrote that he no longer wanted to spend the night with her, even if she retained her interest in him. He described an enjoyable meal: “We drank a bottle. The time passed. She wanted me to return home with her. [That had been] a vain promise on my part. I left her.”⁴⁵ In both instances, Ménétra used time to his own advantage, showing that he was in control, that in the end, he obtained what he wanted. With the first woman he took action, insisting until he had his way. With Rosalie, he delayed, he enjoyed the meal and the wine, knowing all along that he would disappoint her at the end of the evening. He did not seem to be bothered that he was leading her on, but managed his time masterfully, culling the most pleasure from the evening while avoiding anything he would not enjoy.

Ménétra’s lack of concern for wasted time also led to meandering, as in one private moment where he described how he had lost track of time because he was lost in his thoughts: “But the next morning—I, who when I arrived said that I would leave very early in the morning, was still abed at nine o’clock reflecting.”⁴⁶ Ménétra did not particularly regret this loss of time, but he seemed slightly surprised with himself for acting against his own previous intentions. He clearly tended to use time, even wasted time, with reflection, perhaps turning his gaze inward, rather than rising early to work.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 140.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 80.

Delay, idleness and long stretches of time at table, courting women or love-making took up far more of his memoirs than work and money. Even with a woman for whom he felt affection, unlike Rosalie, he used delay to his advantage and to her disappointment. Interestingly, this woman was of noble birth, belonging to the nobility of the sword, as indicated by the status of one of her family members who was a chevalier in the prestigious Order of the Saint Esprit, which required several generations of nobility. The cross of the order was famously suspended from a light blue ribbon—the *cordons bleu*. “I go often to visit,” wrote Ménétra. “I ask around. I know that her family can boast of a *cordons bleu*. Our interaction [*commerce*] lasts a long time, and it would have lasted longer if I were not deaf to the idea of marriage.”⁴⁷ Ménétra seemed hardly impressed with his lover’s pedigree, although he did mention it. He also referred to her formally as Mlle. de Beaufort, unlike his other mistresses who received only a first name or none at all in the text. It is difficult to imagine that she, let alone her family, contemplated making him a son-in-law. But even if he was exaggerating, it is significant that he would want to boast that he refused marriage, even to a noblewoman. This is yet another example of how freedom and free time were important to him and played a role in his forging of an aristocratic identity for himself. In Ménétra’s mind, that identity was not contingent upon lineage or alliances—the traditional backbone and social network of the aristocracy. Again, his desire to adopt that identity for himself seemed to come into conflict with the fierce disdain he felt for the dignities that were won only by birth. Though he might have had the opportunity, he seemed too proud to achieve an elevated rank through marriage.

The Aristocratic Libertine

⁴⁷ Ibid., 80.

Paired with his desire for leisure time was his constant pursuit of pleasure. Ménétra clearly wanted to show how successful he was in this pursuit. In eighteenth-century France, the pursuit of pleasure, especially sexual libertinage, was seen as one marker of aristocratic identity, but it was also a source of contention for those, many of them aristocrats, who debated notions of honor, virtue and how the aristocracy defined and differentiated itself from other social groups. Rollin, rector of the University of Paris, was a commoner, but he was very concerned with reforming the education of the nobility. Looking back to ancient Sparta as an inspiration, Rollin believed that noble sons should be encouraged to take pride less in lineage and honor, but rather taught to cultivate virtues such as courage and self-sacrifice like the disinterested, patriotic citizens of ancient Sparta.⁴⁸ He believed that educators needed to replace the love of pleasure in the young nobility which had unfortunately become the “dominant taste.”⁴⁹ Writing a decade or so earlier than Rollin, the Marquis de Vauvenargues had similar concerns. Like so many other authors in so many other historical moments, Vauvenargues lamented what he saw as a degeneration of morals in his own century compared to those of the past. Nevertheless, the debates over honor, virtue and luxury were an important feature of the French eighteenth century. Believing that the loose morals of the Regency had worsened the dearth of virtue in the nobility, Vauvenargues worried that many confused “elegance, sexual conquest, and infamy with legitimate social standing.”⁵⁰

While, according to Vauvenargues, libertinage should not be associated with noble status, the connection obviously existed in the minds of at least some of his contemporaries, including that of Ménétra; otherwise Vauvenargues would not have voiced concern over it. By the 1760s,

⁴⁸ Smith, 50.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 52.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 58.

the period during which the young Ménétra wrote the first large portion of his memoirs, the libertine novel was a well-established genre where many of the heroes were aristocratic libertines leading lives of debauchery.⁵¹ The journeyman's episodic memoirs are often centered around his travels, in which he focused on new acquaintances and new conquests. If anything was as important to him as his pride, it was his pleasures. He recounted, often with lively detail, the "wonderful moments" or "delightful instances"⁵² of dining with an attractive woman or lovemaking. In one episode, Ménétra met a middle-aged though attractive woman in the street and followed her to her door, which she allowed him to do. Once there, "she said her adieux and told [him] that if [he] wanted to spend some time with her, [he] should come the next day at eight o'clock sharp, that she would be alone, that at that moment her husband was at home..."⁵³ Ménétra wrote that the next day, he did not fail her. He seemed to be proud of his punctuality and made it clear that he came right at the appointed hour, not particularly because he was very disciplined or because he feared a delay, or because he wanted to display commitment, but because he was confident that he would meet with success, and probably because fulfilling his desires was worth the effort of being punctual. It was not so much that he feared having to forfeit his pleasure if he were late: the woman's husband would probably still be safely gone at a few minutes past eight. Rather, he arrived at the precise hour because it showed determination, and a lack of hesitation, to have what he came for. When he complained later that she "was acting the prude" once he was in her room, he raised his voice "as is necessary in order to make oneself

⁵¹ Well-known examples include Prosper de Crébillon's *La Nuit et le moment* (1745), and the Abbé Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* (1731). Choderlos de Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, perhaps the most well-known of these, was published in 1782. See Pierre Saint-Amand, *The Libertine's Progress: Seduction in the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, Jennifer Gage, trans. (Hannover: Brown University Press, 1994).

⁵² Ménétra, 40, 76.

⁵³ Ibid., 103.

understood... [He] extinguished the light and got down to business.”⁵⁴ Even faced with the danger of a husband returning home, or the second thoughts of his mistress, Ménétra ended up satisfied, and was proud of it. Thus, pride for him was linked to the pursuit of pleasure. He clearly pursued pleasure for its own sake, but he also pursued pleasure in order to affirm his own self-worth, as well as to perform, in a manner of speaking, the identity that he had constructed for himself.

It was also clear that he was proud of his conquests from the sheer number of them which he recorded. His pride, though, did not stop him from accepting clothing, money and lodging from his mistresses, even when he was being unfaithful. He probably saw it as a fair exchange: he brought pleasure and company to lonely women in exchange for the pleasure, and the material comforts and luxuries, he received from them. On an occasion like many others, a mistress was clothing him and paying his rent, but Ménétra quickly began an affair with the woman’s niece as soon as he saw that she was attractive and willing. The journeyman happily used the room, paid for by his mistress, in order to seduce her niece. He even thought himself clever and witty in the manner he used to describe his conquest. He wrote: “...she had a pretty, young niece who loved only pleasure. And so, I acquainted her with it. Thus, I have named my room the place of conquests since all sorts enter here.”⁵⁵ Like an aristocratic libertine, like Casanova, he counted off his conquests with glee. (He even referred to himself as “the god of pleasures.”⁵⁶) He quickly moved on to another lover as soon as a mistress began to talk of marriage, or as soon as a married mistress replaced him with another paramour.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 103.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 141.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 113.

He seemed to prefer married women, in fact, since they demanded so little and provided so much. When he ran into the wife of a man he had been working for at one point, she was the one who stopped and looked at him, inviting an interaction. “She looked at me,” wrote Ménétra. “I said hello. She told me that she was going to Mass. I said that I had just had a fine sermon from her husband. She told me that it was a waste of time to listen to [her husband], that she did as she pleased and that she was mistress of her own will. And so, I told her, if that’s how it is, why don’t you come and refresh yourself in my room? She pretended to hesitate like all women do, but I wasn’t her dupe... She came up [to my room], and promised to come often and hear Mass in this manner.”⁵⁷ After that, the journeyman proceeded to seduce the woman’s elder, and then younger, daughters, keeping each a secret from the other two. Ménétra skillfully took advantage of the older woman’s sexual desire as well as her desire to assert her independence. He also believed that, due to his ample experience, he could read the opposite sex well, that he knew every ploy and stratagem and could easily deflect them in order to have his way. But it is clear in this passage that she initiated the interaction, and that this was what she wanted as well as he. Thus, while he was feeding his own pride, he was feeding hers as well. His need for independence complemented hers, and all the while he was affirming his identity as a master seducer, and a libertine.

Ménétra and Money

While many writers at the time could not agree whether or not the pursuit of pleasure ought to be a feature of aristocratic identity, there would have been a general consensus that generosity and disinterest were important components of an aristocrat’s behavior and sense of

⁵⁷ Ibid., 189.

self. This was often interpreted as an imperative to waste time and money, to indulge in luxury and to be extravagant. This was because a nobleman was not supposed to be concerned with money; unlike the bourgeois, his status did not depend on money, nor would his status be lost without it. The noble's inherited sense of self brought freedom of thought and action; his identity was not at all tied to wealth.⁵⁸ Great expenditure was "glorious," and the refusal of luxury was seen as a kind of vice, even misanthropy, since living extravagantly was how an aristocrat kept up appearances and functioned in society.⁵⁹

The French nobility in the eighteenth century, of course, had many faces. There were court nobles and provincial nobles, nobility of the sword and nobility of the robe, wealthy nobles with many holdings and poor ones who were forced to work their own land. Certainly one voice did not speak for all, but there were many common threads in the discourse. François de La Mothe Fénelon, Archbishop of Cambrai and author of the famous *Adventures of Telemachus*, was the tutor to the Dauphin at the beginning of the century, and hoped to impart through this written work the values of justice, simplicity, disinterest and a clear social hierarchy where both the powers of the monarchy and the rising bourgeoisie were checked. Luxury was to be tolerated in moderation and limited to the aristocracy. He believed that the venality of offices was to blame for the ascendance of those newcomers to the nobility who were too self-interested. "How can you expect venal souls who have fattened themselves on the blood of the people to ruin themselves for [the people's] benefit? That would be expecting interested men to act without interest."⁶⁰ The Comte de Boulainvilliers linked the excesses of absolute monarchy to the rising power of the bourgeoisie, saying, "families of low origin, elevated in society through trade, or

⁵⁸ Kavanagh, *Enlightenment and the Shadows of Chance*, 48.

⁵⁹ Dewald, 154.

⁶⁰ Smith, 45.

worse, through dishonest means, can rarely produce men who have the qualities necessary to govern well.”⁶¹ The Duc de Saint-Simon voiced a similar lament: the king “found a way to satisfy his pride through a magnificent court and through a great confusion (by favoring the venality of offices) that destroyed natural distinctions more and more.”⁶² The Baron de Montesquieu wrote later in the century: “The lot of those who accumulate wealth and the recompense of that wealth is money itself. Glory and honor are for the nobility who only know and see glory and honor.”⁶³

Even Casanova, who was not an aristocrat but did so well posing as one, made sure that everyone saw his disdain for money. Casanova was a skilled gambler, and as Thomas Kavanagh has argued, gambling was as aristocratic as the duel since it involved risk and the opportunity to show one’s lack of interest in accumulating wealth.⁶⁴ The best way to gamble, the aristocratic way, was to wager great sums phlegmatically, and to win and lose with the same calm. When playing at cards, Casanova wrote, “...I was very lucky, and, in addition to that, my manner was easy and I smiled when I was losing and looked unhappy when I was winning.”⁶⁵ To an adversary, he said: “I play for pleasure because the game amuses me; while you play only to win money”⁶⁶—clearly, the less honorable goal of the two. At one point, Casanova won a bank note at a game of cards which was most likely worth a great deal of money to judge by the behavior of the man who had wagered it. But, to the astonishment of his onlookers, Casanova pocketed it

⁶¹ Galliani, 152.

⁶² Galliani, 159.

⁶³ Galliani, 170.

⁶⁴ Kavanagh, *Enlightenment and the Shadows of Chance*, 53.

⁶⁵ Kavanagh, *Dice, Cards, Wheels*, 93.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 97.

without looking at the sum.⁶⁷ As Kavanagh shows, Casanova had mastered the performance of aristocratic identity, especially at the gambling table.

Ménétra frequently showed his disdain for money, but unlike Casanova, this concept seemed to have a moral as well as an honorable dimension for him. The journeyman attached much importance to the notion of disinterest—his value of friends who were “disinterested,” and his efforts to show his own disinterest. Once, when he was working in Bordeaux, an order from the king called for a militia to be formed since war was brewing with England at the time. Ménétra complained that journeymen were forced to join since many inhabitants of the town had paid the intendant in order to have their sons exempted. And so, as Ménétra wrote, there were only “foreigners [people from out of town] who entered the militia since [the intendant] exempted those who had given him gifts, which we did not understand at all.”⁶⁸ The journeyman’s critique of this state of affairs is not unlike those of the noblemen cited above, who saw venality and the power of money as a corrupting influence which hampered patriotism and virtue. Ménétra was not particularly patriotic, but he did express disdain for the effects that money had on others.

He also made sure to show how little money meant to him. In the passage where he was working as a firefighter, and saved a man’s papers and silver from his burning house, Ménétra related how the homeowner gratefully paid him the silver. But the journeyman did not keep it for himself; he divided it amongst his friends, even though they, according to Ménétra, had done little to nothing to fight the fire.⁶⁹ On another occasion, when he saved a young man from drowning in the Seine, the man’s parents came to thank him and offer him money, which he

⁶⁷ Ibid., 96.

⁶⁸ Ménétra, 69.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 184.

refused, telling them that “humanity” had led him to act as he did and that he would always do the same.⁷⁰ This proved, at least to Ménétra, that his acts of heroism had nothing to do with earning money, that he was free of its influence and that his actions had nobler, purer motives. Similarly, when he broke the sword of the young nobleman who had attacked him, Ménétra in his fury left the scene still clutching its valuable hilt. When he realized its value and that he still had it in his possession, he made sure to return it to its owner. His friends had told him that the hilt was made of silver covered in gold, and he wrote, “I told them I was going to return it. They followed me. I found my man surrounded by people... Some blamed him; some thought he was in the right. I told him, I am a decent lad. Here’s the hilt of your sword and next time you want to give out blows with a sword, I’m your man... He told me he wanted to get to know me. –Gladly. We went to the tavern of the Vin Muscat on the rue de l’Arbre-Sec. He told me what he had done for [his mistress]... He cannot live without her. I laughed... He told me I was brave and that he wanted to be my friend.”⁷¹ Here, Ménétra earned his assailant’s respect, not only because he had bested him but because he had shown that he had no material interest in the affair. He demonstrated both generosity and disinterest, since, though he felt justified in breaking the sword and perhaps in keeping the hilt, he returned it rather than be seen as self-interested, as a man who valued gold more than honor.

The Gaze

The idea of generosity and prodigality as means for the aristocrat to re-affirm his or her identity was well-entrenched by the eighteenth century, but in this period, many aristocrats also vigorously debated the value of luxury and extravagance to the nobility as well as to society as a

⁷⁰ Ibid., 148.

⁷¹ Ibid., 149.

whole. Some firmly believed in disinterest, but argued against extravagance because it led to the corruption of virtue. Furthermore, as the nobility indulged in luxury, so did wealthy members of the bourgeoisie, and many nobles became very concerned about the difficulty of distinguishing between social ranks when so many consumed luxury goods. Though there were sumptuary laws, they were no longer strictly enforced by the eighteenth century, and some nobles wished for more stringent laws so that luxury would be confined to the nobility. They believed that “external magnificence” reflected their internal worth, and that the proper use of luxury ensured that the political order-- an order where the encroachment of the bourgeoisie was limited--was kept in place.⁷² As the Duc de Beauvilliers wrote in the early eighteenth century, railing against the supposed merits of luxury and against the confusion of social rank that he saw in contemporary society: “...since luxury has taken hold of our minds and a vain desire to appear as we are not reigns among us, all social ranks are mixed up; nothing suffices for each condition. The artisan wishes to appear as a merchant; the bourgeois raises himself to the level of a gentleman...”⁷³

Ménétra never wished to be confused with a merchant or a nobleman, but how he was seen was nevertheless very important to him. While he himself often had his eye out for a pretty face, he also concerned himself with how he appeared to others, sometimes specifically the opposite sex. He liked to dress well, and, as on the occasion when he returned home with the zinc watch, he took pleasure in the admiration of others. When he came home in a new suit, he wrote, “How astonished they were to see me smartly dressed, wearing a watch of false gold

⁷² Dewald, 170.

⁷³ Galliani, 150.

which they took for pure, silver buckles, a suit and a hat that I had had made in Lyon.”⁷⁴ The new suit, and the luxury goods—both imitation and authentic--surprised his family because they transformed him in their eyes. He almost took on a new persona, which was made possible by valuable objects such as the watch and the buckles, whether or not they were truly gold, or truly silver. These items and this suit were of no use to him without the gaze of others. Rousseau, with whom incidentally Ménétra had somehow struck up a casual friendship sometime in the 1760s, believed that luxury could not be disentangled from the gaze; luxury was not luxury without it. Rousseau wanted to heavily tax the “crowd of objects of luxury, of amusement and of leisure” that proliferated in his century, that “strike all eyes” and whose “sole use is to show themselves, since they would be useless if they were not seen.”⁷⁵ Though they were friends, Ménétra’s behavior was exactly the thing that Rousseau was warning about. Like many of the nobles who wished for reform, Rousseau believed that luxury was a source of corruption. Furthermore, because of luxury’s influence, one “no longer dared to appear as one truly was.”⁷⁶ Rousseau critiqued “riches” and the bourgeoisie far more than he did the nobility and the idea of birth. Like the other commentators on the confusion of rank and the harmful effects of luxury, Rousseau warned that “being and seeming are becoming two very different things, and from this disparity comes... a treacherous ruse and all the vices which ensue from [that ruse].”⁷⁷ For them, and for Rousseau, Ménétra was a perfect example of the problem; his behavior and attitudes were a source of their anxiety since these challenged the nobility’s exclusive claim to honor, the

⁷⁴ Ménétra, 108.

⁷⁵ Coquery, 123.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 120.

⁷⁷ Galliani, 296.

expressions of aristocratic identity, luxury, and ultimately, to the prestige and power that these items bestowed.

While the journeyman was very conscious of his appearance and wished to elicit admiration, he also was careful to avoid appearing in any way that could diminish his pride as well as his sense of the identity he had adopted for himself. He often worked in the homes of aristocrats who, pleased with his work or taking a liking to him in general, offered to take him into their service. But Ménétra always refused on the grounds that he did not want to have his freedom of mobility restricted and that he did not want to wear livery. Livery would have reduced his identity to that of a human accoutrement, a status symbol affirming another's identity. He did not wish to be seen as anything but an autonomous individual. When one nobleman offered him a position in his household, Ménétra rudely refused and walked away, "laughing at him."⁷⁸ The offer offended his pride so much that he wanted to give an insulting reply.

He could also, on occasion, become uncomfortable with too intense a gaze. When he was once invited to do some window reparations in a brothel, the madam offered to let him have his pick of the girls as recompense. He was led into a room where all of them were sitting. After a while, he became uncomfortable with being the object of so many female gazes. The madam said to the girls: "Here is a handsome glassmaker. I'll allow anyone who wishes, to be his lover tonight."⁷⁹ Upon hearing this, Ménétra wrote: "They looked at me and glanced at each other, and I felt ashamed since they all began to look me up and down intently. [The madam] told me to do

⁷⁸ Ménétra, 197.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 150.

my work and then [dine] with her... I did not fail to go.”⁸⁰ In this passage, he was uncomfortable with the gaze because he could not be certain of their estimation of him. He could not be sure if the gaze was admiring or judgmental, friendly or appraising.

But on the whole, this sort of occurrence was rare. He usually recorded instances in which he was clearly viewed with esteem or at least some form of admiration. During a brief stint in the navy, Ménétra wrote of his commanding officer, a lieutenant who “thought well of [him]” and once gave him a command of six men.⁸¹ He believed that the lieutenant was not mistaken in estimating his abilities-- he certainly thought of himself as clever and capable, but the lieutenant had clearly over-estimated his loyalties, since he deserted not long afterwards. His act of desertion was not meant to be seen by his friends as cowardly; Ménétra obviously believed he was a man of courage. His desertion stemmed more from his desire for freedom and mobility, as well as from his reluctance to receive commands from others.

Furthermore, from this passage and from others, it is clear that the journeyman saw himself as a natural and skillful leader. In the passage where the journeymen were coerced into joining the militia, Ménétra organized all of them in order to resist this order as unfair, at least according to his account, and due to his ability to write and speak well, served as their representative to the authorities. When the authorities came to negotiate, Ménétra made it clear that he was the ringleader. He wrote: “The third and fourth day two gentlemen arrived, sent by the Intendant... We were all thirty-one of us assembled in a circle of which I was at the center, seated on a rock and holding a pen and paper.”⁸² Ménétra, being one of the few who could write, was proud of this skill, and described the scene as if he were the center of attention. His physical

⁸⁰ Ibid., 150.

⁸¹ Ibid., 61.

⁸² Ibid., 70.

position at the center of the circle, the fact that he held a pen, made it clear to the visitors that he was the one to be dealt with. He was the one to whom everyone's gaze was turned, whether with trust or with suspicion. He nevertheless spoke eloquently, at least by his own account, to the visitors, and held his own. He was also proud of the fact that he was Parisian, which meant his French was often better than others', and he had the confidence and education to be able to write and speak to the authorities. He wrote: "It was decided that...I and another Parisian...would give a compliment [to the president when he came] that we had learned by heart." When the president of the *parlement* arrived to speak with the journeymen, Ménétra and the other Parisian were to give a customary, elaborate compliment before they began negotiations. Ménétra knew that the eyes of the important visitor were on him. He wrote: "The president had lifted his eyes in my direction. I saw that my companion hesitated to speak, and so I began my compliment."⁸³ While the journeymen felt sure that they were in the right, only Ménétra had the confidence not to falter when speaking to a powerful man. He knew that all eyes were on him, and he had the ability and the poise to state the journeymen's case well, which his peers as well as his interlocutors recognized. Writing and speaking well, however, were skills that were not necessarily prized for artisans. Rather, they were skills that indicated breeding and education. While, by eighteenth-century standards, Ménétra did not have much of either, he wanted to show that he could enact these skills as well as any aristocrat, and that he could look a nobleman in the eye, literally and figuratively.

Conclusion

In the preface to his memoirs, Jacques-Louis Ménétra wrote, "Believe me. Tear up everything and burn all this nonsense." He enigmatically dedicated his *Journal de ma vie* to his

⁸³ Ibid., 71.

own mind. Rather than dedicating the text to another person, he wrote a poem to his own wit, his own mind. In the poem, the sense of conflict is clear, and he addressed his own mind as if it were another person --or an adversary, unpredictable and irrational. "But if you are going to try, which I cannot believe," he said to his mind, "to pull yourself out of the lower classes/ You should hope, then, to see all these writings thrown in the fire."⁸⁴ Though his mind would reveal itself too much through clumsy writing, he nonetheless had written the preface in verse in order to show his finesse with language. To add to that, he began his journal with his name, a name that according to him was "without ostentation or reflection," with "neither coats of arms nor heraldry, forgetting who his ancestors were, and having no vain titles."⁸⁵ His preface and his title reveal his struggle with his desire to adopt an aristocratic identity as well as his disdain for a system that privileged birth over merit. There is a duality, a painful awareness of a desire and his frustration with it. Ménétra strove for nobility and yet was too proud to ever masquerade as a noble. His memoirs show how he performed aristocratic identity, all the while struggling with his desire to assume that identity. He internalized the values of a group for which he openly showed contempt, and perhaps also envied.

He continued in his preface, saying, "You must know, my mind, that man is born glorious... They will say that you are, my mind, a bad writer/ that you make known all your weaknesses, faults and errors/ All these flimsy papers are filled with errata.../ This is the thought of Ménétra."⁸⁶ The journeyman was certainly not someone who was comfortable with appearing weak, and yet his preface was full of self-doubt and ambiguity, revealing a psyche torn between desire and shame. Throughout his memoirs, Ménétra was proud of himself in a variety of ways,

⁸⁴ Ibid., 29.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 30.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 29.

all of which helped affirm the aristocratic identity that he had fashioned for himself. He brooked no insults, nurtured his pride but not his wealth, performed acts of valor, enjoyed his leisure time and pursued pleasures of all sorts, like an aristocrat. While he adopted this identity, he was also very conscious of his “defaults” in society, namely his obscure birth and low rank, which kept him from claiming the personal excellence that he believed he had achieved. But for all the vulnerability he felt, he did write, and he never burned his memoirs.

It is clear from his memoirs, that many in Ménétra’s social circle were illiterate. Since he was not, and thankfully did not burn his memoirs, they can serve as a means of understanding how intellectual trends of the mid-eighteenth century affected and were interpreted by those who not members of an elite. As historians of popular culture have shown, there are many ways to access popular attitudes without sources directly written by those being studied, but these, of course, always have to be approached with care, keeping in mind the assumptions of the authors of sources such as court testimony and police records. Similarly, one of the limitations in studies of intellectual trends is the problem of historical analyses being limited to the works of elites and intellectuals.⁸⁷ Those who could read and write, even if working class, were already set apart from others of their social station by virtue of that ability. Ménétra was unique, but his struggles with what he interpreted as an aristocratic identity, the importance he placed on his appearance, his attitudes, frustrations and aspirations probably were not. We have seen how his behavior was an example of the trends that prompted the debates over luxury and merit. Having lived in Paris, having even associated with Rousseau from time to time, Ménétra could not have been unaffected by these intellectual trends. But he also adapted them and reinterpreted them to fit his own conception of nobility. He rejected some of the assumptions and values of his society while

⁸⁷ Jay Smith, “Between Discourse and Experience: Agency and Ideas in the French Pre-Revolution” *History and Theory* no. 40 (Dec. 2001), 141.

nurturing others, constructing an identity for himself that was as unique and tailor-made to fit him as one of his new suits.

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