Alessandra Aloisi, *The Power of Distraction: Diversion and Reverie from Montaigne to Proust*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. 2023, 202 pp., ISBN 9781350342958

Alberto Parisi (Kobe University)

Its packaging notwithstanding, Alessandra Aloisi's *The Power of Distraction: Diversion and Reverie from Montaigne to Proust* is far more than just another book of French Studies. Indeed, it would be a mistake to turn to it only for new interpretations of the role of distraction in the modern French literary canon – though those insights are certainly present. This is, first of all, a book of philosophy or theory (or philosophy and literature, if this was considered a real discipline). Aliosi's theoretical claims are bold: they are both profoundly philosophical and acutely relevant to contemporary thought. Aloisi's main argument can be summarized as follows: our contemporary world, still deeply shaped by Christian-Augustinian traditions (Aloisi is also an Augustine scholar) is obsessed with attention spans and disorders. Consequently, it banishes – as it has always done – distraction from society as the metaphysical and moral negative of attention. Yet, as Aliosi asserts, distraction is "by no means the negative or the opposite of attention."[1] It is instead a "power," an ability, an ethical, rather than moral, capacity more profound than attention and intrinsic to humans, animals, and who knows what else.

In Agambenian terms, Aloisi wishes to make the "attention-distraction" dichotomy inoperative by showing that distraction is not the opposite of attention but rather its impotentiality. Distraction does not occur when we are not attending to something but when our attention has become inoperative, which is to say, when our attention is present but not focused on anything in particular. Rather, it diffuses over everything. Distraction – Aloisi concludes – is a different kind of attention: it

[1] Alessandra Aloisi, *The Power of Distraction: Diversion and Reverie from Montaigne to Proust* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 7.

is a "diffuse, poly-vocal, and multidirectional"[2] kind of attention.

Aliosi unfolds this argument by distractedly, but never disgracefully, exploring the French literary tradition and beyond, vaguely following the role of the metaphysical power of distraction in three ideas. First, she explores the concept of *divertissement* from Montaigne through Pascal to Leopardi. These simple "amusements," which for the Augustinian Pascal were nothing other than this-worldly distractions from what should be our proper object of attention—namely, God—are revealed to be a natural tendency intrinsic to humans (and the rest of nature). For Aloisi, these distractions provide fleeting pleasures that enable humans to forget their inborn desire for endless pleasure, the real cause of their original boredom.

Second, she investigates what she calls "the power of flies." This is another expression for the power of all those little sensations that can or are supposed to distract us but that, even in Augustine and Pascal, end up leading us to a revelation, which is none other than our own life. Through Aloisi's subtle analysis of Proust's works, we discover that what he calls "involuntary memory" has more to do with distraction than with memory: what we are allowed to experience through involuntary memory is our real life—all those little sensations we were not paying attention to. In this sense, distraction preserves for us this original life that we believed was completely lost.

Finally, the last idea Aloisi considers is that of *reverie*, namely that specific kind of mental wandering that characterizes those who are distracted. Indeed, *reverie*, like *rêve* in French, "is said to derive from the Latin *exvagus*, composed of *ex* (outside) and *vagus* (vagabonding, wandering about)."[3] Moving between Flaubert, Rousseau, Leopardi, and Bergson, *reverie*, understood as a distracted mental wandering outside of oneself into the world, becomes a full-fledged power always available to the mind, an inexhaustible reserve of pleasure that no one can take away from us. Here, distraction emerges as politically significant too: the distracted person, half-mad and half-idle, escapes societal norms, which are nothing other than the requirements put on everyone's "ecology of attention," to use Yves Citton's formula.

The book concludes with Bergson's account of laughter as the means whereby society strengthens its grip on and punishes the people

[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid., 96.

who, because of their distraction, have done something they should not have done. The most famous example is the philosopher who, distracted by looking at the stars, fell into a well. However, laughter can also become a way to identify with the distracted person: suddenly, we do not laugh at them but with them, "at the senselessness of the codes they have unwittingly broken."[4] Thus, distraction, while often being thought of as the enemy of all *civilization, is simultaneously* the power at the basis of all *culture* and *thought*.

[4] Ibid., 138.