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The popular feminist *prise de conscience* in France that maps roughly on to the #MeToo movement in the English-speaking world has been marked by a number of key events comparable to the Weinstein ‘moment’ in the USA. In November 2019, Adèle Haenel revealed that she had been sexually abused between the ages of twelve and fifteen by the director Christophe Ruggia. In February 2020 Haenel stormed out of the Césars awards ceremony after the prize for best direction was given to Roman Polanski, convicted of the rape of a minor in the USA. In between these two events, the memoir of Vanessa Springora, *Le Consentement*, was published in January 2020, relating her grooming at the hands of Gabriel Matzneff when she was fourteen and the subsequent traumatic fallout in her psychic, sexual and professional life. Matzneff was denounced (one might better say ‘cancelled’) by the French and global media, many of his books were withdrawn from sale and he fled to Italy. Judicial proceedings were opened against him (although ultimately dropped) for the rape of a minor and for the promotion of paedophilia. Finally, in January 2021, Camille Kouchner’s book *La Familia Grande* denounced her stepfather, the esteemed political scientist and former member of the European Parliament Olivier Duhamel, for sexually abusing her twin brother when he was a teenager. Kouchner blames the abuse on the post-1968 ideology of individual liberty and sexual license that reigned in her extended family. Like Springora’s, Kouchner’s book became an immediate bestseller in France and led to Duhamel’s resignation from all his official posts.

The #MeToo movement in France thus bears some similarity to centrist and right-wing critiques of the perceived libertarian excesses of the left in the wake of May 1968 and
seems to imply the need for a greater recognition by the state judicial apparatus of the psychological damage inflicted by these excesses. Another of Matzneff’s victims, Francesca Gee, who self-published her own abuse memoir in 2021, laments the lack of real action undertaken in the wake of the Matzneff affair, seeing this as the result of a cover-up by the institutional figures implicated in the disgraced writer’s long and hitherto undisturbed career.³ Kouchner and Gee might be seen as representative of a kind of carceral feminism, seeking legal redress for the criminal victimization of women and children. This approach has been criticized by intersectional feminists, however, since the system of policing and prison tends only to reinforce existing inequalities of race and class, the ultimate victims of which are, above all, women. As Amia Srinivasan puts it, ‘Globally, most women are poor, and most poor people are women […] and] a feminist politics which sees the punishment of bad men as its primary purpose will never be a feminism that liberates all women, for it obscures what makes most women unfree.’⁴ By contrast, Vanessa Springora’s book, despite its undeniable performative impact on French culture, demonstrates a reluctance to take a firmer line on the question of sexual consent. This article interrogates the sense of Springora’s memoir, asking to what extent it might be seen as complicit with a post-feminist culture that celebrates women’s and girls’ sexual agency without fully acknowledging the structural inequalities that render that agency so unwieldy.

**Reading Consent**

As Hélène Merlin-Kajman points out with some regret, the context of #MeToo meant that *Le Consentement* was received in France as something closer to a legal document than a work of literature; it was read as a witness statement rather than a piece of creative writing, a self-(re)fashioning through words. ‘Les lecteurs lisent *Le Consentement* comme un livre de
témoignage et d’accusation instruisant un procès en différé, ce qui fait d’eux une sorte de jury populaire appelé à prononcer (ou à confirmer) la condamnation du pédocriminel.’

In *Le Consentement*, Springora describes herself as a perfect victim for paedophilic grooming, and for Matzneff in particular. Her father was absent, and her mother worked in publishing, making books her ‘terrain de jeu’. By her own admission, Springora immediately confused Matzneff’s desiring gaze with ‘un sourire paternel’ (p. 40). The similarities with regard to Gee’s account are striking and demonstrate the extent to which Matzneff made a strategic choice to target vulnerable, isolated young girls. Like Springora’s, Gee’s parents were separated, her father an urbane seducer who had himself recently taken up with a much younger woman. In a letter she wrote to the author after he began pursuing her, the young Springora offers a striking premonition of what is to follow: ‘je ne sais pas si t’aime m’apporterait quelque chose de merveilleux ou alors gâcherait ma vie! […] Veux-tu simplement profiter de moi sans attacher d’importance à ce qui m’arrivera ensuite?’ Having set herself up as the perfect victim, however, Springora repeatedly stresses that she consented to sexual activity with Matzneff: ‘G. ne me fait pas peur. Il ne me forcerait jamais à rester contre mon gré, j’en suis certaine’ (*Le Consentement*, p. 49). At fourteen, his attention makes her feel special: ‘J’ai le sentiment d’avoir été élue’ (p. 56). She buys wholeheartedly into Matzneff’s narrative of their rebellious passion (which I explore in more detail below), declaring, ‘De cette anormalité, j’ai fait en quelque sorte ma nouvelle identité’ (p. 113). She begins frequently skipping school to be with her lover, as though in a public demonstration of her outlaw status.

Springora denounces the many figures who enabled her relationship with Matzneff, from her mother, who allowed it (‘Peut-être est-elle trop seule pour réagir autrement’, p. 62), to the gynaecologist who made an incision in her hymen in order to render her *dépucelage* less painful. The fashion designer Yves Saint-Laurent paid for Matzneff to stay indefinitely
in a hotel situated around the corner from Springora’s school. Even the vice cops alerted to the liaison by anonymous letters showed little real interest in the possible abuse, accepting Matzneff’s stories at face value. In the aftermath, no one ever pointed out that Springora had the right to bring legal action against the author for using her letters in his books. When people around her are critical of Matzneff, the young Springora begins to realize that she has been placed ‘non pas dans le camp des victimes, mais dans celui des complices’ (p. 86) and she becomes aware that other men – her mother’s boyfriend, some of her teachers – see her as easy sexual prey. She is eventually expelled from school because her persistent absenteeism and burgeoning substance abuse constitute a bad example, but no doubt also because her relationship with a famous middle-aged writer is regarded as a provocation. Again, the similarities with Gee’s account are striking. Gee’s relationship with Matzneff leads to her being punished rather than protected by her mother, the writer gleefully playing them off one against the other. She becomes increasingly isolated from family and friends such that ‘l’abuseur devient mon seul recours’. Springora is traumatized by the relationship, alienated from her own sexuality. She writes: ‘je me sens comme une poupée sans désir, qui ignore comment fonctionne son propre corps, qui n’a appris qu’une seule chose, être un instrument pour des jeux qui lui sont étrangers’ (Le Consentement, p. 160). Gee likewise evokes her helplessness in the sexual encounters with Matzneff, comparing herself to a live butterfly pinned in a display case, or transformed into a camera, watching events unfold without participating in them. As a further manifestation of this alienation, in later adolescence, Springora would become anorexic and experience a breakdown. She notes that a vulnerable adolescent, in search of love and recognition, ‘acceptera de devenir un objet de plaisir, renonçant ainsi pour longtemps à être sujet, acteur, et maître de sa sexualité’ (Le Consentement, p. 164). Springora’s account makes clear that consent, especially among adolescents, is far from straightforward. While she never denies that an intimate relationship
with Matzneff is what she (thought she) wanted at the time, her retrospective narrative unequivocally illustrates that she did not have the emotional or even perhaps the physical maturity necessary to entertain a passionate affair with an experienced and manipulative older man. The young Vanessa, no doubt influenced by a proto-feminist discourse of female sexual agency absorbed through her single mother, is convinced of her inalienable right to live out her desire; the adult Springora, recovered with difficulty from decades of psychic trauma and self-doubt, sees that she was failed, as a child, by an incautious or complicit Parisian adult society. How, then, does the author’s discourse fit within contemporary feminist debates about sexual agency and consent?

**The affaire Matzneff and the elusive ‘age of consent’**

*Le Consentement* became an immediate bestseller in France, its initial print run of 10,000 copies selling out in just three days. The press seized upon the story, delightfully extending Springora’s metaphor of the paedophile predator as an ‘ogre’. One former admirer of Matzneff repented, comparing the author to the Pied Piper of Hamelin: ‘Il n’y a qu’un appétit qui le captive: le sien; enrobé de délicatesses doucereuses mais diaboliques, aux pouvoirs d’attrape-nigauds.’\(^{10}\) The material and discursive support that Matzneff received from the French literary establishment was denounced: it was revealed that he had enjoyed regular grants from the Central national du livre and the Académie française as well as a monthly salary from Gallimard up until 2004. He was awarded literary prizes (Prix Renaudot essai, 2013; Prix Cazes, 2015) and lived for twenty-six years in a rent-controlled apartment in the Latin Quarter without ever having to provide the evidence of income typically required of HLM tenants.\(^{11}\) Again following Springora’s lead, many papers located the origins of Matzneff’s long-condoned paedophilia in the sexual license of the years after 1968, citing the open letter he wrote for *Le Monde* in 1977 calling for the decriminalization of sex between
adults and minors, famously signed by most of the prominent intellectuals of the era. *Le Monde* carefully distanced itself from ‘une époque lointaine dont la langue nous est désormais inconnue’ while *Les Échos* spoke of a ‘choc générationnel’ to express the current era’s horrified rejection of the perceived errors of the past.¹²

Within a few days of the publication of Springora’s book, charges were brought against Matzneff for ‘apologie de crime’ and ‘provocation à commettre des infractions et des crimes’. This legal action was supported by the paedophile rehabilitation organization L’Ange bleu who recruited ‘abstinent paedophiles’ to testify that Matzneff’s work had allowed them to ‘déculpabiliser leurs fantasmes’.¹³ This legal action was eventually dropped because of a procedural error.¹⁴ In the back-cover blurb for her book, Francesca Gee complains that the hue and cry around the Matzneff affair ultimately gave rise to little tangible change: no criminal charges were brought nor was any sustained enquiry made into the networks of power and influence that allowed Matzneff to pursue his sometimes criminal lifestyle with apparent impunity for several decades. Gee describes the affair, ultimately, as an ‘opération de démolition contrôlée’, a public shaming of a single scapegoat that left a complicit milieu essentially unscathed.¹⁵ Indeed, the backlash against the author spread to the literary quality of his work, accused – sometimes by critics who clearly had only a glancing awareness of the author’s extensive publications – of being ‘d’une pauvreté littéraire affligeante’.¹⁶ Beyond the prurient fascination with its transgressive content, Matzneff’s work, readers were confidently assured, held little interest but was instead endlessly repetitive: ‘Matzneff rabâche ses monomanies et enferme le lecteur dans son subconscient obsessionnel.’¹⁷ Isolated voices expressed hesitation over the violence of the press reaction, such as Philippe Tesson, Matzneff’s editor at *Combat* in the 1960s, who judged ‘déplacée la curée dont il est l’objet’.¹⁸ Others insisted that it was hypocritical for the French media establishment suddenly to discover its indignation over Matzneff’s lifestyle when the facts
about his sexuality had been public knowledge for over forty years. Dominique Fernandez wrote that ‘tous s’achètent une bonne conscience en attaquant un homme à terre’. On the whole, however, the consensus was overwhelming.

The commotion caused by *Le Consentement* led to widespread discussion, at home and abroad, of French laws around the question of sexual consent. It is often misleadingly suggested that ‘there is no age of consent in France’. It is more correct to say that any kind of sexual contact (*atteinte sexuelle*) with young people under the age of fifteen is considered a *délit* rather than a crime. This can be escalated to a charge of sexual assault if it involves violence, constraint or surprise, and rape if there is penetration. But there is no equivalent to the charge of statutory rape that exists in the UK, whereby any sexual act with a minor can be regarded as rape. As Springora’s title implies, her book constitutes a lengthy, if often implicit, reflection on the problem of consent. She recognizes that the ‘skill’ of a serial sexual predator like Matzneff ‘se borne à ne pas faire souffrir sa partenaire. Et lorsqu’il n’y a ni souffrance, ni contrainte, c’est bien connu, il n’y a pas de viol’ (*Le Consentement*, pp. 162–3). The French legal position suits an ephebophile like Matzneff since, so long as his partners are at least fifteen and the sex ‘consensual’, he is legally untouchable. As an added bonus, however, he cannot remove the adolescent from the authority of her parents without risking a charge of *détournement de mineur*, which means that no young person may move in to the jealously guarded private space of Matzneff’s apartment and he can timetable his love life for a couple of hours in the afternoon, leaving his mornings free for writing and his evenings for *dîners en ville* with his well-connected friends.20

The clear implication of Springora’s narrative is that, although at fourteen she consented to her sexual relationship with Matzneff, in retrospect she understands that she did not have the emotional or psychological maturity to give informed consent and it was the responsibility of adult society – largely neglected in her experience – to protect her from a
sexual predator. We might, then, expect Springora to call for tougher legislation in France to safeguard young people in her position, for instance by more tightly enforcing an age of sexual consent. Francesca Gee, for instance, never concedes the validity of any feelings she may have had for Matzneff when she was fifteen: instead, she insists that she was manipulated into a simulacrum of consent through ‘un tour de passe-passe’ that left her feeling trapped and guilty ‘puisque je l’ai laissé faire’.21 Gee is indeed highly critical of the liberal judicial culture around adolescent sex that has made of France, in the words of one unnamed ‘specialist lawyer,’ ‘l’eldorado des pédocriminels’.22 It comes as something of a surprise therefore to read Springora’s assertion that ‘L’amour n’a pas d’âge, ce n’est pas la question’ (Le Consentement, p. 130). She insists that an affair of this kind could have been ‘sublime’ if the older man had previously had relationships with women his own age but ‘sous l’effet d’un coup de foudre irrésistible, aurait cédé, une fois, mais la seule, à cet amour pour une adolescente […] , si j’avais été celle qui l’avait poussé à enfreindre la loi par amour’ (p. 129). Is there a danger here, redolent of a post-feminist ideology, that Springora valorizes the sexual agency of young girls over and above the wider questions of inequality at stake? If sex with under fifteens is to be allowed, then how could we inculpate recidivists in a neoliberal culture where serial monogamy is the norm? Why should this preference be any more objectionable than a taste for blond hair or dark skin, for instance? Springora’s complaint risks being reduced to a lament that she wasn’t made to feel sufficiently special.

This is the irreverent conclusion of Marc-Édouard Nabe who declares, ‘Ce n’est pas l’adulte qui a gêné Springora, c’est l’adultère!’23 Worse, doesn’t this discourse of an outlaw coup de foudre suggest a credulity for the same notion of amour-passion that has nourished the entirety of Matzneff’s life and work? This concept of love and desire as a rebellious passion is bolstered by some of the oldest myths of the western literary imagination and has particularly deep roots in France where, from the Troubadours, through Racine and Stendhal,
and up to the twentieth-century avant-garde canon of Breton, Bataille and Duras, it provides an almost unbroken romantic narrative on which Matzneff regularly draws to justify both his illicit liaisons and his indiscreet celebration of them in print. For Matzneff, love is ‘toujours coupable’ but it constitutes a kind of ‘transgression sacrée’. In an illustrative assertion, he writes: ‘La tension paroxystique de l’amour est incompatible avec l’organisation de la vie quotidienne. C’est l’excès même de nos passions qui les rend intolérables à la société et invivables pour nous.’

**Conflicting accounts: the difficulties of consent discourse**

This, for instance, is precisely how Matzneff frames his affair with Springora in his own diary account of the relationship, published in 1993. Matzneff sets up his narrative as the story of a remarkable transformation: his own. In the prologue, he writes: ‘Ce livre aurait pu s’intituler la Conversion de Don Juan. On y assiste en effet à la métamorphose d’un homme.’ By his love for Vanessa, he claims, he is changed from a dissolute libertine into a faithful lover. He loses interest in his (many) other girlfriends, stressing: ‘Vanessa, c’est tout à fait spécial, c’est une autre planète’ (p. 35). This apparently miraculous transformation takes on a religious character in the text, Matzneff comparing the revolution of his love for Vanessa to the restoration of sight in a blind man: ‘Soudain, la vue m’a été rendue, l’obscurité qui envahissait mon cœur s’est dissipée’ (pp. 71–2). When, during their relationship, the author successfully recovers from a fungal infection that threatens his eyesight (and that is rendered further ominous by the fear that it could be AIDS-related), Matzneff takes it as another sign from God, ‘un avertissement dont je dois tenir le compte vigilant’ (p. 215). *Contra* Springora, Matzneff insists from the very beginning on the uniqueness of this relationship: ‘tout m’imprime dans le cœur que Vanessa est, sera, le grand amour de ma vie’ (p. 60) and it is true that he behaves with her, at times, like a bashful
teenager, his account betraying far more anxiety and investment than is usual in the litany of
his serial seductions that otherwise constitutes his journal. That said, one of Matzneff’s long-
term girlfriends, Marie-Élisabeth F., who, on the basis of what we can glean from his own
diary, has been one of the most lucid observers of his behaviour, tells him, in 1986, at the
beginning of his liaison with Springora: ‘Avec vous c’est toujours spécial et c’est toujours la
même chose’ (p. 53), a line that will resonate with Springora’s own disabused view later.

Where Springora denounces the complicity or complacency of the adults around
them, Matzneff constructs around their relationship a heroic narrative of resistance to the
persecution of parents, police and adult friends. He is dismissive of the ‘psychanalyse de
bazar’ that suggests Vanessa’s infatuation with him could be related to her absent father (p.
80), and he insists that when grown men object to this union, it is out of jealousy, ‘parce
qu’ils enragent de n’être pas à ma place’ (p. 91). When called in for questioning by the
brigade des mineurs, he pointedly stops in for a manicure before the appointment: ‘une
manière de me prouver à moi-même qu’en une si fâcheuse circonstance je gardais ma liberté
d’esprit, ma capacité de désinvolture’ (p. 92). In Springora’s account, the relationship falls
apart as she gradually comes to understand that she is just one in a long line of young girls
(and boys) used by Matzneff and subsequently described in his self-aggrandizing journal. For
Matzneff, the relationship is destroyed by Springora’s ‘hysterical’ jealousy, ironically
directed at him at one of the few times in his life when he is sexually continent. Still, the fact
that the faults he laments in his girlfriends – possessiveness, jealousy, a refusal to let each
live their life outside the other, to have other friends, etc. – are more or less exactly the same
as the faults they see in him implies that he is likely to be guilty of double standards in this
regard, as in many others. Finally, where Springora describes the on-going torture of having
to see her relationship described and dissected in Matzneff’s subsequent books, he repeatedly
condemns, in works published right up until 2019, the perceived hypocrisy and cruelty of
Vanessa and other ex-girlfriends in their insistence on forgetting the past, what he calls ‘l’aspect nazi, Nacht und Nebel, de leur désir d’effacer les traces’. Matzneff sees this as a constitutional disregard for truth on the part of women and argues that, by contrast, he – ‘le scribe de notre mémoire’ – is honest about the role women have played in his life. ‘Nous nous aimions à la folie et Vanessa a eu tort de rompre, elle le sait, elle ne peut pas ne pas le savoir; mais les femmes ont horreur d’avoir mauvaise conscience, elles lui préfèrent la mauvaise foi.’

In Matzneff’s short, indignant response to the Affair of 2020, published in a very limited print run funded by friends but subsequently translated into Italian, the author even claims, with an astonishing self-righteousness and absence of empathy, that Springora’s ‘existential difficulties’ that led to her requiring psychoanalytical therapy, were caused by regret over her ill-advised decision to leave him.

If there is some evidence that Springora, as a naïve fourteen-year-old, may have experienced her relationship with Matzneff as a mutually destructive romantic passion, no doubt largely under the influence of her lover’s own characterization, there is no suggestion that the mature author of Le Consentement persists in this view. ‘Consent’ provides the title of Springora’s book not in order that it might be accorded greater weight in discussions of teenage sexuality, but precisely to draw attention to its problematic status as a guarantor of sexual well-being. As Springora writes: ‘comment admettre qu’on a été abusé, quand on ne peut nier avoir été consentant?’ (Le Consentement, p. 163; original italics). Feminist critics have highlighted several problems with using a discourse of consent to safeguard women in intimate relationships. Consent is difficult to define with any precision (making it weak as a basis for legal action) since sexual activity can be consented to but still be, to a greater or lesser degree, unwanted, such that ‘consent’ easily shades into ‘compliance’ or ‘acquiescence’ in what Nicola Gavey has called ‘the cultural scaffolding of rape’. This is further complicated by a heteronormative culture in which there is an ‘eroticization of
dominance’ and a ‘normalization of coercion’ in the representation of straight sex. Sex becomes a kind of currency that is not infrequently traded, particularly by women, ‘for love, intimacy, and commitment from men’, further muddying the waters of consent. On the other hand, as Amia Srinivasan points out, given the feminist injunction to take women at their word, we must sometimes ‘take it on trust that a particular instance of sex is OK, even when we can’t imagine any way it could be’.  

The transactional model of consent, as Emily Owens argues, ‘banks on the promise that the tenets of liberal contract will save us’. The enthusiastic promotion of a discourse of consent, Owens goes on, ‘reproduces the fantastical imaginary of American liberalism, in which equality simply exists’. Consent discourse disavows the complex power dynamics that necessarily exist in sexual relationships (and that might be of gender, class, age or race, or simply, but less tangibly, of relative sexual experience or self-esteem), as well as choosing not to see the sometimes unpalatable reality that, as Kadji Amin bluntly puts it, ‘power is sexy’. As such, consent discourse, under the guise of protecting the vulnerable from unwanted sexual contact, ignores the erotic pleasures that can derive from choosing (or accepting) a vulnerable or submissive subject position and, in the process, it all too easily stigmatizes certain non-normative expressions of sexuality such as explorations of queer desire and, especially, inter-generational sex.

It also risks making women feel beholden to a desire expressed in an earlier moment since the expression of desire is seen to constitute a kind of contract and, as we know, ‘breach of contract [has] negative consequences’. As Katherine Angel has argued, the culture of consent belies a social, psychic and emotional reality in which we may often not know with clarity what we want, and it neglects the pragmatic truth that ‘our desires emerge in interaction’ rather than ‘[lying] in wait, fully formed within us’. Yet consent culture throws responsibility back on to women to ‘perform a confident sexual self’ as part of the wider
post-feminist ‘confidence cult(ure)’ that has been criticized by Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad. \(^\text{39}\) Gill and Orgad see confidence culture as a Foucauldian ‘technology of self’ that includes, but is not limited to, what other feminist critics have called ‘technologies of sexiness’ and ‘sexual entrepreneurialism’, all of which are ‘making [feminism] safe for a corporate and neoliberal culture’. \(^\text{40}\) Post-feminist culture – in particular popular audiovisual culture – paints a picture of attractive, proficient young women confidently choosing who they want to sleep with and when, a picture that arguably bears little relation to the complex and fraught reality of contemporary sexual relations and, in any case, has little pertinence beyond the minority world of the privileged global North. As Srinivasan remarks, the discourse of choice tends to preclude a more radical feminist model that would look ‘beyond the right to choose and keep focusing on the fundamental questions. Why do we choose what we choose? What would we choose if we had a real choice?’ \(^\text{41}\)

**Cancelling Matzneff: compulsion, creativity and consent**

The title of *Le Consentement* thus stands more as a warning of the inadequacy of consent discourse than as an appeal for it to be respected. Springora does not condemn her fourteen-year-old self for wanting a relationship with the forty-nine-year-old Matzneff (although she describes at length how the interiorized blame for this inappropriate liaison made it difficult for her to enjoy sexual intimacy for many years afterwards). Nor, as we have seen, does Springora deny the possibility of a mutually rewarding sexual relationship between a middle-aged man and a pubescent girl. Her account is thus framed rather less as a general indictment of a society that condones, or even encourages, the predation of older men on very young girls, and ultimately reads more as a therapeutic working-through of her traumatic encounter with one man’s pathological desire. What revolts Springora is the fact that she was only one in a long line of teenage conquests and that Matzneff wrote about them all: ‘Il avait fait
profession de n’avoir de relations sexuelles qu’avec des filles vierges ou des garçons à peine pubères pour en retracer le récit dans ses livres’ (*Le Consentement*, p. 130). It is this that makes Matzneff ‘un ogre’ and made their relationship ‘une violence sans nom’ (pp. 130–1).

Francesca Gee had the same sentiment a decade earlier: ‘J’ai seize ans,’ she recalls in her memoir, ‘je suis la maîtresse d’un violeur d’enfants professionnel auquel son vice sert de raison social et de gagne-pain, et tout le monde trouve ça normal.’ Matzneff claimed that the young Francesca was the inspiration behind his notorious paedophile manual, *Les Moins de seize ans* but, as Gee herself notes, if this was the book of their ‘love,’ then ‘pourquoi le pluriel du titre?’ She had wanted to believe that ‘c’était la femme, même très jeune, même en formation, qui l’attirait en moi. Ce nouveau livre m’oblige à voir l’évidence: ce qui lui plaît, c’est ma classe d’âge.’

In this sense, the *affaire Matzneff* can ultimately be seen less as a reflection of women’s banal experience of low-level sexual harassment (#MeToo) and more as a burgeoning critique of the gendered representation of sexual agency in French culture. It is not so much – or not only – Matzneff’s seduction of them at a tender age that enrages Gee and Springora but rather the persistently prurient and self-aggrandizing way in which he wrote about those ‘conquests’ (to adopt a terminology favoured by the ephebophile diarist himself).

But should we therefore conclude that writers are forbidden from discussing their private lives in print? Matzneff is not the first, or the last, writer to use his sex life as literary fodder (compare, for instance, the 2300 pages of Arthur Dreyfus’s *Journal sexuel d’un garçon d’aujourd’hui!*). If Matzneff’s partners were all consenting adults, would he merit the same scorn? Philippe Sollers, one of Matzneff’s long-time enablers (several volumes of the journal, including *La Prunelle de mes yeux*, were published by Sollers’s ‘L’Infini’ imprint at Gallimard), noted in the aftermath of the affair that ‘S’il n’avait rien écrit, rien ne se serait passé’ and he cited Sartre on Genet who said: ‘La société pardonne plus facilement de
mauvaises actions que de mauvaises paroles.’ ‘Un écrivain est toujours coupable,’ Sollers concludes, picking up the romantic vision of the writer as outlaw genius that has been a part of Matzneff’s self-conception since he began writing his diary at the age of sixteen.

Matzneff wrote in 1984: ‘Il y a deux races de créateurs: ceux qui nourrissent leur œuvre de leur vie, et ceux qui la fabriquent avec les fantômes des passions qu’ils sont trop lâches, ou trop pusillanimes, ou trop moches, pour vivre.’ Two of his literary heroes are Byron and Casanova, models precisely of this tendency to live a reckless, adventurous life the better to write about it. In his work, there is a constant interweaving of the same (autobiographical) material into his ‘private’ letters, his diary, his novels and his essays. For instance, one day in 1974, he notes: ‘… j’écris [une lettre] à Francesca. J’écris surtout mon livre, mais c’est presque la même chose.’ In Springora’s merciless assessment, ‘Toute son intelligence est tournée vers la satisfaction de ses désirs et leur transposition dans un de ses livres. Seules ces deux motivations guident véritablement ses actes. Jouir et écrire’ (Le Consentement, p. 146). As early as July 1986, only a couple of months after they get together, Matzneff is already taking notes for what will become a novel based on their affair, Harrison Plaza. In Francesca Gee’s case, the author begins publishing extracts from his diary in Les Nouvelles littéraires while the pair are still together, referring to his young mistress as ‘F.’ ‘S’agit-il vraiment de moi?’ she wonders, noting, ‘Déjà, je me sens abstraite.’ In this way Matzneff constructs the narrative of their relationship: ‘C’est lui qui décide que nous vivons une histoire d’amour prodigieuse, une passion à laquelle je ne saurais me dérober. Qui suis-je pour le contredire?’ As Springora and other ex-girlfriends have observed, he inevitably gives himself ‘le beau rôle’ while reaching angrily for his pen the moment any young woman presumes to criticize him. As Hélène Merlin-Kajman comments: ‘Le Consentement est en fait moins un livre sur l’abus sexuel qu’un livre sur l’abus de la littérature – ou de ce que Matzneff en faisait. C’est, plus exactement, un livre qui se bat avec le halo littéraire qui fond
des personnes réelles dans des personnages, selon une équation aux fondements culturels puissants.\textsuperscript{52}

In other words, the close proximity between Matzneff’s life and work means that there is always a temptation to regard real people like fictional characters he can manipulate. One such manipulation is the ‘extortion’ and use of his girlfriends’ love letters.\textsuperscript{53} The existence of these letters, Matzneff boasts, constitutes ‘mon meilleur avocat, mon plus efficace intercesseur’.\textsuperscript{54} For Springora, this is a cynical ploy deliberately set up as a defence against accusations of rape or child abuse. Matzneff insists that he grants his lovers a kind of immortality through his books, but Springora protests that the love letters published are all oddly similar, as though not really the words of teenage girls at all: ‘G. nous les souffle en silence, les insuffle dans notre langue même. Nous dépossède de nos propres mots’ (\textit{Le Consentement}, pp. 90–1). None suffered from this dispossession more than Francesca Gee, whose letters were interspersed throughout \textit{Les Moins de seize ans} as a spurious guarantor of the consensual nature of the author’s relations with minors. She describes how Matzneff encouraged her letters by sending her poems, casting her as his muse: ‘il m’engage à me couler dans le moule que phrase après phrase son auteur façonne. À répondre à ses attentes. Il faudra l’inspirer, le rassurer, le sauver, prévenir son moindre besoin.’\textsuperscript{55} When she re-reads her own letters in adulthood, Gee feels they were written by ‘un zombie, une coquille colonisée par un Bernard-l’hermite, et dans la dépossession langagière je retrouve la gamine apeurée, incapable de se défendre’.\textsuperscript{56} It is striking that, even much later in life, when Matzneff is in his mid-seventies, a long-term girlfriend, now herself in middle-age, writes in a text: ‘Si je ne vous raconte pas grand-chose c’est parce que je me méfie de l’écrivain.’\textsuperscript{57} Yet still, in \textit{Vanessavirus}, his petulant comeback against all these accusations that seems entirely to miss their emotional import, Matzneff insists that, after his death, when the archive of his
correspondence is consulted, Springora’s letters to him will corroborate everything he wrote in *La Prunelle de mes yeux*.\(^{58}\)

In 2013, Matzneff expressed his surprise that none of his exes had yet written a book about him, ‘comme si le génie littéraire qu’elles manifestaient dans les lettres que j’ai reçues s’était évanoui dès qu’elles entrèrent dans l’âge adulte, tournèrent (et, pour certaines, grattèrent, tentèrent d’effacer) la page Gabriel…’\(^{59}\) Francesca Gee comments that she understands only too well the fear and shame that would prevent the author’s victims from seeking to tell their story. She herself submitted a manuscript about their affair in 2004 but found it rejected by French publishers, one of whom commented, ‘Il y [avait] plus de coups à prendre que de gains à en tirer.’\(^{60}\) According to Gee’s account, Grasset, the publisher behind *Le Consentement*, gave her misleading encouragement only to reject her manuscript after several re-writes. Even after the success of Springora’s book, Gee found herself unable to place her own manuscript with a mainstream French publisher and resorted to self-publishing, concluding that ‘tout a été fait pour m’empêcher de le publier’ and surmising that a network of powerful figures within the French literary establishment continue to protect Matzneff and, thereby, to safeguard their own reputation that might otherwise be tainted by association.\(^{61}\) Springora remarks that she only found peace when she realized the ‘solution’ to her trauma: ‘prendre le chasseur à son propre piège, l’enfermer dans un livre’ (*Le Consentement*, p. 10), though it took nearly thirty-five years for her to feel capable of this, and only when she was herself a senior executive at a Parisian publisher. One is entitled to wonder how many of Matzneff’s other victims have never had access to the social or cultural capital that make this kind of self-expression possible.

The ‘problem of consent’ identified in Springora’s book is not so much that Matzneff had sex with her when she was fourteen (she wanted him to), but rather that she thereby became, without initially realizing it, one small piece in the baroque scaffolding of his self-
legitimizing representative project. As she describes the dawning realization: ‘Je me surprends maintenant à le haïr de m’enfermer dans cette fiction, perpétuellement en train de s’écrire, livre après livre…’ (Le Consentement, p. 134). ‘Les écrivains,’ she adds, picking up an image that has been popular literary currency since the nineteenth century, ‘sont des vampires’ (p. 171). It’s an image that Matzneff would probably not refuse, and indeed is arguably complicit with the peculiarly French romantic view of the writer as a breed apart. Matzneff himself writes: ‘Tant agitée que soit sa vie, l’artiste ne cesse pas de se regarder vivre, et ce perpétuel dédoublement a, j’en conviens, quelque chose de monstrueux.’

The scale and the consistency of the self-portraiture in Matzneff’s writing – what many have dismissed as its repetitive quality (‘ce n’est que mécanique autistique en roue libre,’ wrote the novelist Alexis Jenni) – works systematically to normalize the author’s paedophilic desire. All of the obsessively rehearsed themes of his voluminous work (he had over fifty titles in print prior to his effective indexing in 2020) – the belief in l’amour-passion, the fascination with classical Rome, an ethics of non-attachment to people or objects but fidelity to values, the association between adolescence and revolt, the contempt for bourgeois family life, the insistence on the exceptional status of the artist – can be seen as so many elaborate justifications for his compulsive seduction of very young girls and boys. In the process of constructing this consistently self-regarding edifice, the voices of women and girls (and young boys) are lost, and their effective status as collateral damage in the all-important project of reinforcing the writer’s ego goes largely unrecorded. As Springora puts it, with bitter irony: ‘que vaut la vie d’une adolescente anonyme au regard de l’œuvre littéraire d’un être supérieur?’ (Le Consentement, p. 135). Hence the just recognition of Springora’s book as an overdue redressing of the discursive balance in this affair. And, while Springora has refrained from any such comment, it is tempting to see a kind of natural justice in the way in which her single book has achieved a level of acclaim and an extra-literary
impact that has eluded the prolific Matzneff. For all his sexual promiscuity and compulsive publishing, for all his unshakeable conviction that ‘ma vraie place […]', parmi les écrivains français de ma génération, est une des premières,' Matzneff has never achieved the sales of Le Consentement nor struck a chord with a generation in the way that Springora has done. The ironic truth is that, beyond the closed world of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, he was largely unknown prior to Springora’s exposé. Vanessa Springora’s Le Consentement is a milestone in the progression of so-called fourth-wave feminism in France and, given the book’s success in translation, in the wider world. The superficial media reception of the memoir casts it as an indictment of liberal (and neoliberal) French culture’s dubious fascination with young girls and the complicity of its cultural institutions in facilitating this predation. However, this is to miss the subtlety of Springora’s account which never entirely disqualifies her own adolescent desire or denies the possibility of inter-generational romance even as it demonstrates the ruinous effect that her consensual affair with Matzneff had on her subsequent life and emotional health. Awkwardly poised between the sex-positive agency of post-feminist womanhood and the unfortunate victimization and virtue-signalling of the abuse memoir, Le Consentement walks a carefully balanced tightrope across feminist discourse that serves to demonstrate the inadequacy of a ‘culture of consent’ to account for the complex interplay of multiple inequalities that continue to organize both the pleasures and the perils of the sexual encounter.

3 See Francesca Gee, L’Arme la plus meurtrière (Fleurance: La Bocca della verità, 2021).
6 Springora, Le Consentement, p. 25. Subsequent references will be given in parentheses in the text.
8 Gee, L’Arme la plus meurtrière, p. 72.
9 Gee, L’Arme la plus meurtrière, pp. 53, 39.
17 Perraud, ‘Mes 40 ans d’aveuglement’.
21 Gee, L’Arme la plus meurtrière, p. 55.
22 Ibid., p. 231.
25 Ibid., p. 32.
26 Gabriel Matzneff, La Prunelle de mes yeux, p. 9. Subsequent references will be given in parenthesses in the text.
32 Ibid., p. 459.
33 Srinivasan, The Right to Sex, p. 83.


Gee, *L’Arme la plus meurtrière*, p. 117.

Ibid., p. 110.

Ibid., p. 113.


Matzneff, *La Passion Francesca*, p. 25.


Gee, *L’Arme la plus meurtrière*, p. 46.


Ibid., p. 191.


Matzneff, *Vanessavirus*, p. 36.

Matzneff, *Mais la musique soudain s’est tue*, p. 462.


Matzneff, *La Jeune Moabite*, p. 163.