

AN EYEOPENING OF ENLIGHTENMENT CONTRADICTIONS: SADE AND NATURE

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Part 1 - Portrait of the Marquis de Sade

LV: Hello Colas Duflo. Sade is a scandalous author whose reputation has long hindered the reading of his work. However, should we only remember the scandals of the life of the “great evil lord” who was banned and censored for a long time?

CD: Indeed, Sade's works have long been read as testimonies of psychiatric anomalies to which his name, sadism, has been given. But when we return Sade to the 18th century, if we remember that he spent a good part of his life locked up, reading the literature and philosophy of his time, we will not be surprised to find in his works a great recapitulation of the age of Enlightenment, marked by the climate of historical upheavals, political violence and intellectual freedom that characterised the revolutionary years.

Sade read all the novelists of his time. He testifies to this in a particularly interesting critical text entitled *Reflections on the Novel*. He puts this text at the head of his great collection of short stories, *The Crimes of Love* and in it he praises Voltaire's *Candide* and *Zadig*, Rousseau's *New Héloïse*, Marmontel's *Bélisaire*; he celebrates Prévost, he expresses his admiration for the English writers Richardson and Fielding, who, and I quote, “have taught us that the profound study of man's heart, a true maze of nature, can only inspire the novelist”. In short, it reflects the novel's ambition to be philosophical and moral. It also reflects his critical interest in new trends such as the English roman noir.

Part 2 - Aline and Valcour or the Philosophical Novel

LV: As it happens, can we find a trace of this interest in his own fictional production?

CD: Yes, of course, the great novel he began writing in the Bastille just before the Revolution and finally published in 1795, after many historical upheavals, *Aline and Valcour or the Philosophical Novel*, testifies to Sade's anchoring in 18th century literature. It is presented as an epistolary novel with a philosophical ambition, a bit like *The New Héloïse*.

Aline and Valcour, who are sensitive characters and who seem to have come straight out of a Rousseauist fiction, love each other like novel heroes. But Aline's father, Monsieur de Blamont, who is an evil libertine, opposes their marriage. These characters and those around them therefore exchange letters in a somewhat confined atmosphere that is not without reminding us, through this epistolary framework, of *Dangerous Liaisons* by Laclos.

When two new characters meet, Léonore and Sainville, a couple of lovers who have travelled around the world in search of each other, come along and tell their stories in two very long letters that occupy almost half of the novel and that look much more like novel-memoirs in the Prévost's form.

Cannibal peoples, utopian territories, evil Spanish inquisitors, a troop of bohemians, all the exotic romanticism is summoned in adventures that spare neither surprises nor coincidences. All in all, we are dealing with a novel that alone resembles a great recapitulation of all the novels of the 18th century.

Part 3 - The major philosophical questions eating away at Sade

LV: I imagine that this great reader also inherits the great questions that haunt the philosophers of the Enlightenment.

CD: Yes, Sade did not only read the novelists of his time in his years of imprisonment. He also read all about the philosophy of the Enlightenment and, in particular, that of the heretical Enlightenment. In some of his works, he copies entire pages of Voltaire, La Mettrie, Freret or d'Holbach. He was also concerned about the same philosophical problems as the men of his time. Are we free? Do we have a soul that's independent of the body? Is there a god? He puts his discussions in the mouths of his characters and to all these questions, these libertines always answer negatively.

But the great philosophical problem that obsesses Sade is the question of evil. The undeniable presence of evil on this earth and the scandal that virtue is not rewarded. This problem is not unique to Sade, it obviously goes back to Antiquity, but it particularly works with the philosophers of the 18th century from Leibniz and Bayle until the beginning of the century, to Kant via Voltaire, Rousseau or Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. This is the concern about the relationship between morality and happiness. What is the use of virtue if it does not make you happy?

Part 4 - A paradoxical answer to the question: what is the point of virtue if it does not make you happy?

LV: And how does he answer that question?

CD: He responds with a paradox for which he has the genius to make an excellent fictional script at the same time. He had the idea very early on, which he summarised in his notes as follows: "Two sisters, one very libertine lives in happiness, abundance and prosperity. The other, extremely wise, experiences misfortunes that eventually lead to her ruin." It is an embryonic scenario. These two sisters are Juliette and Justine.

There is a cruel comic dimension to this story. Every time Justine manifests a virtue, she is punished by Romanesque Providence. Every time Juliette commits new crimes, she gets rich. This narrative opposition of *The Misfortunes of Virtue* and *the Prosperity of Vice* obsessed Sade so much that he wrote three versions, each one longer than the last. First, a long short story around 1787 entitled *Les Infortunes de la vertu*, which was then developed into a short novel published in 1791, *Justine, or Good Conduct Well-Chastised*. In both versions, it is Justine, the virtuous heroine, who tells the sad story of her misfortunes.

Finally, in the last years of the century, Sade published a complete rewrite in two main parts, "*The New Justine, or Good Conduct Well-Chastised* followed by the *History of Juliette* her sister." This represents about 1800 pages in an edition like the one of the Pleiade, decorated with 100 engravings. Justine's ordeal is no longer told by herself but by an often-ironic narrator, who, in the second part, gives the floor to Juliette who tells her own story in a great picaresque novel-memoir that celebrates *The Prosperity of Vice*.

In a mixing of Sade's characteristic genres, the novel alternates pornographic scenes with philosophical essays, in which Sade recopies the most subversive elements of Enlightenment philosophy and diverts them into a celebration of evil, vice and violence.

LV: In conclusion, Colas, how can we file an author as unclassifiable as Sade?

CD: We could say that Sade is both an heir to Enlightenment's critical state of mind, and that he is at the same time to systematically betray it. Nevertheless, Sade thus creates a work that is fascinating by its subversive and disturbing dimension and, which for this reason, has been celebrated by all the literary avant-gardes of the 20th century, from the Surrealists to the Tel Quel group, passing by Georges Bataille or Michel Foucault, for example.

LV: Thank you very much Colas.

CD : Thank you, Laurence.