

THE MARQUIS DE SADE

An Essay by

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With Selections from His Writings

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At first glance, it seems paradoxical that this man who was so self-centered should have given such prominence to theories which deny any significance to individual peculiarities. He asks that we make a great effort to understand the human heart better. He tries to explore its strangest aspects. He cries out, "What an enigma is man!" He boasts, "You know that no one analyzes things as I do," and yet he follows La Mettrie in lumping man together with the machine and the plant and simply does away with psychology. But this antinomy, disconcerting though it may be, is easily explained. It is probably not so easy to be a monster as some people seem to think. Sade, though fascinated by his own personal mystery, was also frightened by it. Instead of expressing himself, he wanted to defend himself. The words he puts into Blamont's mouth⁹ are a confession: "I have supported my deviations with reasons; I did not stop at mere doubt; I have vanquished, I have uprooted, I have destroyed everything in my heart that might have interfered with my pleasures." The first of these tasks of liberation was, as he repeated countless times, to triumph over remorse. And as for repudiating all feelings of guilt, what doctrine could be surer than that which undermines the very idea of responsibility? But it would be a big mistake to try to confine him to such a notion: if he seeks support in determinism, he does so, like many others, in order to lay claim to freedom.

From a literary point of view, the commonplace-ridden speeches with which he intersperses his debauches finally rob them of all life and all verisimilitude. Here, too, it is not so much the reader to whom Sade is talking, but himself. His wearisome repetitions are tantamount to a purification rite whose repetition is as natural to him as regular confession is to a good Catholic. Sade does not give us the work of a free man. He makes us participate in his efforts of liberation. But it is precisely for this reason that

⁹ *Aline et Valcour*.

he holds our attention. His endeavor is more genuine than the instruments it employs. Had Sade been satisfied with the determinism he professed, he should have repudiated all his moral anxieties. But these asserted themselves with a clarity that no logic could obscure. Over and above the facile excuses which he sets forth so tediously, he persists in questioning himself, in attacking. It is owing to this headstrong sincerity that, though not a consummate artist or a coherent philosopher, he deserves to be hailed as a great moralist.

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 "Extreme in everything," Sade could not adapt himself to the deist compromises of his time. It was with a declaration of atheism, *Dialogue entre un prêtre et un moribond*, that in 1782 he launched his work. The existence of God had been denied more than once since the appearance in 1729 of *Le Testament du curé de Meslier*. Rousseau had dared to present a sympathetic atheist, Monsieur de Wolmar, in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. In spite of this, the Abbé Mélégan had been thrown into prison in 1754 for having written *Zoroastre*; and La Mettrie was obliged to take refuge at the court of Frederick II. The atheism vehemently espoused by Sylvain Maréchal and popularized by Holbach, in *Le Système de la Nature* of 1770 and by the satires collected under the title *Recueil philosophique*, was nonetheless a dangerous doctrine in an age which placed the scaffold itself under the aegis of the Supreme Being. Sade, in parading his atheism, was deliberately committing a provocative act. But it was also an act of sincerity. I feel that Klossowski, despite the interest of his study, is misinterpreting Sade in taking his passionate rejection of God for an avowal of need. The sophism which maintains that to attack God is to affirm Him finds a great deal of support these days, but this notion is actually the invention of those to whom atheism is a challenge. Sade expressed himself clearly on the

radical
atheism

matter when he wrote, "The idea of God is the sole wrong for which I cannot forgive mankind."

And if this is the first mystification he attacks, it is because he proceeds, like a good Cartesian, from the simple to the complex, from the gross lie to the more misleading error. He knows that in order to free the individual from the idols to which society has bound him, one must begin by ensuring his independence in the face of heaven. If man had not been terrorized by the great bugbear to which he stupidly pays worship, he would not so easily have surrendered his freedom and truth. In choosing God, he denied himself, and that was his unpardonable offence. Actually, he is responsible to no transcendent judge; there is no heavenly court of appeal.

Sade was not unaware of the extent to which the belief in hell and eternity might inflame cruelty. Saint-Fond toys with such hopes so as to extract pleasure from the limitless suffering of the damned. He diverts himself by imagining a diabolical demiurge who would embody the diffuse evil of Nature. But not for one instant did Sade consider these hypotheses as anything more than intellectual pastimes. He is not to be recognized in the characters who express them, and he refutes them through his mouthpieces. In evoking absolute crime, his aim is to ravage Nature and not to wound God. His harangues against religion are open to reproach because of the tedious monotony with which they repeat timeworn commonplaces; but Sade gives them still another personal turn when, anticipating Nietzsche, he denounces in Christianity a religion of victims which ought, in his view, to be replaced by an ideology of force. His honesty, in any case, is unquestionable. Sade's nature was thoroughly irreligious. There is no trace of metaphysical anxiety in him; he is too concerned with justifying his existence to speculate on its meaning and purpose. His convictions on the subject were wholehearted. If he served at mass and flattered a bishop, it was because, old and

broken, he had chosen hypocrisy. But his testament is unequivocal. He feared death for the same reason that he feared senility. The fear of the beyond never appears in his work. Sade wished to deal only with men, and everything that was not human was foreign to him.

And yet he was alone among men. The eighteenth century, in so far as it tried to abolish God's reign upon earth, substituted another idol in its place. Atheists and deists united in the worship of the new incarnation of the Supreme Good: Nature. They had no intention of forgoing the conveniences of a categorical, universal morality. Transcendental values had broken down; pleasure was acknowledged as the measure of good; and through this hedonism, self-love was reinstated. For example, Madame du Chatelet wrote, "We must begin by saying to ourselves that we have nothing else to do in this world but seek pleasant sensations and feelings." But these timid egotists postulated a natural order which assured the harmonious agreement of individual interests with the general interest. A reasonable organization, obtained by pact or contract, would suffice to ensure the prosperity of society for the benefit of all and each. Sade's tragic life gave the lie to this optimistic religion.

The eighteenth century often painted love in somber, solemn, and even tragic tones; and Richardson, Prévost, Duclos, and Crébillon, whom Sade quotes with respect, and, above all, Laclos, whom Sade claimed not to know, created more or less satanic heroes. But their wickedness always has its source, not in spontaneity, but in a perversion of their minds or wills. Quite the contrary, genuine eroticism, because of its instinctive character, is reinstated. Natural, healthy, and useful to the species, sexual desire merges, according to Diderot, with the very movement of life, and the passions it brings are likewise good and fruitful. If the characters in *La Religieuse* take pleasure in "sadistic" viciousness, it is because instead of satisfying their

appetites they repress them. Rousseau, whose sexual experience was complex and largely unhappy, also expresses this in edifying terms: "Sweet pleasures, pure, vivid, painless, and unalloyed." And also: "Love, as I see it, as I have felt it, grows ardent before the illusory image of the beloved's perfection, and this very illusion leads it to enthusiasm for virtue. For this idea always enters into that of the perfect woman."¹⁰ Even in Restif de la Bretonne, though pleasure may have a stormy character, it is nonetheless rapture, languor, and tenderness. Sade was the only one to reveal selfishness, tyranny, and crime in sexuality. This would suffice to give him a unique place in the history of the sensibility of his century, but from this insight he derived even more remarkable ethical consequences.

There was nothing new in the idea that Nature is evil. Hobbes, with whom Sade was familiar and whom he quotes freely, had declared that man is a wolf to man and that the state of Nature is one of war. A long line of English moralists and satirists had followed in his steps, among them Swift, whom Sade used and even copied. In France, Vauvenargues continued the puritan and Jansenist development of the Christian tradition which identifies the flesh with original sin. Bayle and, more brilliantly, Buffon established the fact that Nature is not wholly good; and though the myth of the Noble Savage had been current since the sixteenth century, particularly in Diderot and the Encyclopedists, Emeric de Crucé had already attacked it at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Sade had no trouble finding any number of arguments to support the thesis which was implied in his erotic experience and which was ironically confirmed by society's imprisoning him for having followed his instincts. But what

¹⁰ Cf. Sade: "It is horror, vileness, the frightful, which give pleasure when one fornicates. Where are they more likely to be found than in a corrupt object? Many people prefer for their pleasure an old, ugly, even a stinking woman to a fresh and pretty girl."

distinguishes him from his predecessors is the fact that they, after exposing the evil of Nature, set up, in opposition to it, a morality which derived from God and society; whereas Sade, though rejecting the first part of the generally accepted credo: "Nature is Good; let us follow her," paradoxically retained the second. Nature's example has an imperative value, even though her law be one of hate and destruction. We must now examine more closely the ruse whereby he turned the new cult against its devotees.

Sade conceived the relation of man to Nature in various ways. These variations seem to me not so much the movements of a dialectic as the expressions of the hesitation of a thinking that at times restrains its boldness and at others breaks completely loose. When Sade is merely trying to find hasty justifications, he adopts a mechanistic view of the world. La Mettrie affirmed the moral indifference of human acts when he declared, "We are no guiltier in following the primitive impulses that govern us than is the Nile for her floods or the sea for her waves." Similarly, Sade, in order to excuse himself, compares himself to plants, animals, and the elements. "In her hands I am only a tool that she [Nature] manipulates as she pleases." Although he constantly took refuge in similar statements, they do not express his real thoughts. In the first place, Nature, for him, is not an indifferent mechanism. There is such significance in her transformations that one might play with the idea that she is governed by an evil genius. Nature is actually cruel and voracious, informed with the spirit of destruction. She "would desire the utter annihilation of all living creatures so as to enjoy her power of recreating new ones." However, man is not her slave.

Sade had already pointed out in *Aline et Valcour* that he can wrest himself free and turn against her. "Let us dare do violence to this unintelligible Nature, the better to master the art of enjoying her." And he declared even more decisively in *Juliette*,

“Once man is created, he is no longer dependent upon Nature; once Nature has launched him, she has no further hold on him.” He goes further. Man, in his relation to Nature, is comparable to “the froth, the vapor which rises from the rarified liquid in a heated vessel. The vapor is not created; it is a resultant; it is heterogeneous. It derives its existence from a foreign element. It can exist or not, without detriment to the element from which it issues. It owes nothing to the element and the element owes nothing to it.” Though man is of no more value to the universe than a bit of froth, it is this very insignificance which guarantees his autonomy. The natural order cannot control him since he is radically alien to it. Hence, he may make a moral decision, and no one has the right to dictate to him. Why then, with all the paths open to him, did Sade choose the one which led, through the imitation of Nature, to crime? To answer this question, we must understand his system in its totality; the aim of this system was precisely to justify the “crimes” which Sade never dreamed of renouncing.

We are always more influenced than we realize by the ideas we fight against. To be sure, Sade often uses naturalism as an *ad nominem* argument. He took sly pleasure in turning to evil account the examples which his contemporaries tried to exploit on behalf of the Good, but no doubt he also took for granted that might makes right. When he tries to demonstrate the fact that the libertine has the right to oppress women, he exclaims, “Has not Nature proved, in giving us the strength necessary to submit them to our desires, that we have the right to do so?” One could find many similar quotations. “Nature has made us all equal at birth, Sophie,” says La Dubois to Justine, “If Nature wishes to disturb this first stage of general laws, it is for us to correct her caprices.” Sade’s basic charge against the codes imposed by society is that they are artificial. He compares them, in a particularly significant text, to those that might be drawn up

by a community of blind men.¹¹ “All those duties are imaginary, since they are only conventional. In like manner, man has made laws relative to his petty knowledge, his petty wiles, and his petty needs—but all this has no reality. . . .When we look at Nature we readily understand that everything we decide and organize is as far removed from the perfection of her views and as inferior to her as the laws of the society of blind men would be to our own.”

Montesquieu had advanced the idea that laws were dependent on climate, circumstances, and even the arrangement of the “fibers” of our bodies. It might be concluded that they express the various aspects assumed by Nature in time and space. But the indefatigable Sade takes us to Tahiti, Patagonia, and the antipodes, to show us that the diversity of enacted laws definitively negates their value. Though they may be related, they seem to him arbitrary. And it should be noted that for him the words “conventional” and “imaginary” are synonymous. Nature retains her sacred character for Sade: indivisible and unique, she is an absolute, outside of which there is no reality.

It is obvious that Sade’s thinking on this point was not quite coherent, that it was not at all times equally sincere, and that it was constantly developing. But his inconsistencies are not quite so obvious as one might think. The syllogism: Nature is evil, and therefore the society that departs from Nature merits our obedience, is far too simple. In the first place, society is suspect because of its hypocrisy. It appeals to Nature’s authority even though it is really hostile to her. And besides, society is rooted in Nature, despite its antagonism to her. Society manifests its original perversion by the very way in which it contradicts Nature. The idea of general interest has no natural basis. “The interests of individuals are almost always opposed to those of

¹¹ *Pensée* printed by Maurice Heine, *Le Marquis de Sade* (Paris, 1950). See below pp. 200-203.

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society." But the idea was invented in order to satisfy a natural instinct, namely, the tyrannical will of the strong. Laws, instead of correcting the primitive order of the world, only aggravate its injustice. "We are all alike, except in strength," that is, there are no essential differences among individuals, and the unequal distribution of strength might have been offset. Instead, the strong have arrogated to themselves all the forms of superiority and have even invented others.

Holbach, and many others along with him, had exposed the hypocrisy of codes whose sole purpose was to oppress the weak. Morelly and Brissot, among others, had shown that the ownership of property has no natural basis. Society has fabricated this harmful institution out of whole cloth. "There is no exclusive ownership in Nature," wrote Brissot. "The word has been struck from her code. The unhappy starveling may carry off and devour his bread because he is hungry. His claim is his hunger." In *La Philosophie dans le Boudoir* Sade uses almost the same terms to demand that the idea of possession be substituted for that of proprietorship. How can proprietorship claim to be a universally recognized right when the poor rebel against it and the rich dream only of increasing it by further monopolizing? "It is by complete equality of wealth and condition and not by vain laws that the power of the stronger must be weakened." But the fact is that it is the strong who make the laws for their own profit.

Their presumptuousness is odiously apparent in their arrogation of the right to inflict punishment. Beccaria had maintained that the aim of punishment was to procure redress, but that no one could claim the right to punish. Sade indignantly spoke out against all penalties of an expiatory character. "Oh, slaughterers, gaolers, and imbeciles of all regimes and governments, when will you come to prefer the science of understanding man to that of imprisoning and killing him?" He rebels particularly against the

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death penalty. Society tries to justify it by the *lex talionis*, but this is just another fantasy without roots in reality. In the first place, there is no reciprocity among the subjects; their existences are not commensurable. Nor is there any similarity between a murder committed in a burst of passion or out of need, and coldly premeditated assassination by judges. And how can the latter in any way compensate for the former? In erecting scaffolds, society, far from mitigating the cruelty of Nature, merely aggravates it. Actually, it resists evil by doing greater evil. Its claim on our loyalty is without foundation.

The famous contract invoked by Hobbes and Rousseau is just a myth; how could individual freedom be recognized in an order that oppresses it? This pact is to the interest of neither the strong, who have nothing to gain in abdicating their privileges, nor the weak, whose inferiority is thereby confirmed. There can be only a state of war between these two groups; and each has its own values, which are irreconcilable with those of the other. "When he took a hundred louis from a man's pocket, he was committing what was for him a just act, though the man who had been robbed must have regarded it quite otherwise." In the speech which he puts into the mouth of Coeur de Fer, Sade passionately exposes the bourgeois hoax which consists in erecting class interests into universal principles. Since the concrete conditions under which individuals live are not homogeneous, no universal morality is possible.

But ought we not to try to reform society, since it has betrayed its own aspirations? Cannot individual freedom be put precisely to this use? It seems not improbable that Sade may at times have envisaged this solution. It is significant that in *Aline et Valcour* he describes with equal indulgence the anarchic society of cannibals and the communistic society of Zamé in which evil is disarmed by justice. I do not think that there is any