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# THE MARQUIS DE SADE AS A KEY FIGURE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

*How His Crystal Genius  
Still Speaks to Today's World  
and Its Major Problems*



*Currents in Comparative  
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# I. INTRODUCTION

## Preliminary

When hearing names of writers whom we admire, the usual reaction of most readers is one of interest in what is to be said about them and their work, possibly their lives, relevant upcoming publications, or even works in progress. Unfamiliar production (of those writers) yet to be known and enjoyed creates the most interest, as one envisions building an expertise on them. But for writers whose work did not prove interesting enough to us, owing to what we already 'know' of it, too little if any interest becomes manifest. Thus there often-times is a tendency to interrelate writers' works based on what we first learn about them through various sources, including critical reviews.

While, after all, it is our direct knowledge of their work that should build our attitude towards an author, this factual experience is ironically the one which also opens a credible door to judgment through potentially hasty generalization. We might inaccurately assume that a writer, whose one work we did not like, is unable to produce another that we like. Likewise, we might wrongfully consider that a writer, whose one work we read with admiration, is going to produce even more interesting ones. Although little necessity is there to delve into the reasons for such anticipations, it is worth noting that this logic is not always valid. It is so, because there is little evidence that a good book is the product of constant, regular results and not just a captured high moment in the creative and analytical life of its writer; or that one less appreciated book, which might have sprung from the lower end of the writer's performance, determines the total nature, i.e., intellectual and aesthetic incompetence, of its author.

As we engage in readership, many a temptation to generalize on an author, from what we first feel, set out to tease our sense of reason and consistency. Thus, it is the realization that a second or third book from one writer fails to fit in our previous opinion of the author that we come to face the complexity of writing, but also of reading. However, if there is continuity in our appreciation of the books of the writer, which proves a consistency away from chance, then, we feel that our earlier favorable judgment is in fact a just assessment. By now, a pleasant author is likely to be idealized before the task of textual creation, while a less appreciated one stands to be seen as a potential nuisance to readers. This reality partially gives us an idea of the deeper difficulty of being a writer and the easiness of being a (judgmental) reader, and maybe rightfully so.

Knowing clearly the difficulty of being an acceptable, creative writer, let us engage the hypothesis of the relative easiness of being a reader, because therein dwell the interesting facts about writing as a whole—with its human dynamics.

Why does it appear easier to be a reader, in a general sense? So it is, because one is not being judged on the task; instead, one is enjoying, assessing, promoting or disapproving as one likes, the product in use. This position makes the reader some kind of a 'boss' in relation to the writer. Yet, depending on the

text and the academic circumstances, reading may not always provide the reader with so much of that theoretical power. If one goes to a book with many preconceived conclusions on its author, on the book itself, or has had a strongly biased interpretation of either—which would be a reading before the fact or without the book—then, no matter how easy the reading turns out to be or look, one is not a ‘boss’ for s/he would have given that distinction to the (first) influence that predetermined one’s judgment. In such a case, it is hard to know whether the reader would have had the same or a similar reaction if rid of the potential ‘counselor,’ the influential intermediary who ‘directed’ one’s attitude.

In such contexts of influence, various mediating agents such as reviewers, commentators, critics/analysts, biographers, etc. come to share and promote the easiness of readership and the judgmental privileges that go with it. Hence, the easiness of reading (being a reader) hides its own difficulty when intermediaries have decided the course, when we lack the level and knowledge required to understand by ourselves, or lack the time, resources and discipline to read thoroughly and within the lines. An individual in that situation would fit in Nietzsche’s second point on his critique of the scholar in *Schopenhauer as Educator*, when he says that “because he [the scholar] is incapable of viewing it [the text] as a whole, he judges a piece of writing based on a few sections or sentences or errors”. (Nietzsche, p. 226) The easiness of being a reader equates that of making *just* an opinion, thus of being prone to prejudice and ignorance. Simulating Nietzsche’s comment on the scholar, and possibly imitating Sade’s aggressive reactions to schooled society and sophistic politicians, Georges Bernanos wrote, in his striking *Scandale de la vérité* that critics are not the ones who make books (“Ce ne sont pas les critiques qui font les livres”). (Bernanos, 16) The preceding affirms that academic reading has to be serious and real in order for the reader to get the point(s) out of a text, and a valid idea of its writer. It should be at least as difficult as the demands on writing, in order for one to go past the limits of middle commentators and put that theorized position of difficulty onto the writer: showing actual inconsistencies in the writing(s), to deserve the nature of ‘judge’—even without playing a ‘boss’.

This is not meant to exclude the validity of other people’s comments and reactions—expert or otherwise—to the same (piece of) writing; it only genuinely helps the reader to belong *truly* in the debate about the writing.

In light of this reflection, it turns out that neither writing nor reading is easy, and that none definitely settles for flat, quick conclusions oblivious to the complex facts they quietly carry. This test on being a *true* reader is as onerous as escaping ignorance, stereotyping, illusion and pretentiousness. While this demanding attitude may not be needed in all instances of writing and reading, it is very much a necessity in academic literature, especially in cases of complex writers such as the one under consideration here.

### **Sade: The Person, the Writer, the Scholar, the Character, the Philosopher, his Mission, his Fate, his Influence...**

The reason why engaging the difficulty of writing and reading is paramount here is that the case under consideration bears either activity to the extreme. It is Donatien-Alphonse-François, the “divin” Marquis de Sade (1740–1814). We already know that the conditions to being a writer were not just intelligence, literacy, logistics, but also contextual (social, political), determination, and all that comes into acquiring the power to create, to ‘talk’ or tell as one sees things. If “The novel is the form of mature virility” (Lukács, 85), Sade’s may well have been the epitome from which this conclusion could be drawn. And the easiness of readership in all of its components has never had a better expression when we consider the case of the Marquis de Sade: the least-read of analysts often has a ready-made conclusion about his work, even when the theorized difficulty of being a writer and that of being a reader meet in the common space of the relatively limited availability of the material that is his writings. Peter Weiss noted that “he [Sade] wrote seventeen plays in addition to his large prose works” in prison when he was 33 through 46 years of age, and “brought out a further dozen tragedies, comedies, operas, pantomimes and one-acters in verse” afterwards. Yet, as he continued, “Out of all these pieces only one, *Oxstiern ou les malheurs du libertinage* was performed in a public theatre during his years of liberty 1790–1801—and taken off at once after a scandal.” (Weiss, 105)

In fact, in Sade’s case, easy readers are mostly prejudiced literate people in the sense that they accumulate the abundant biases of mediators such as Messieurs des Débats—whom Sade energetically refuted—but also other individuals who more aggressively attacked his genius for their own interests. Of those people, the journalist Villetterque, whom Sade called “*folliculaire*” because he compiles pieces of writing, prints them and lies about books that he did not even read, is most notable. Sade appears to have been unable to hide or contain his anger at that very easy reader: in a corrective letter, he bitterly explained how their fallout came to be. He hinted at the fact that Villetterque was probably given even the isolated sentences (as Nietzsche’s critique of the scholar suggested) which he distorted to serve his dishonest intent. A further hint to that critic’s prejudice can be seen in Sade’s following reaction about *Justine*.

With the foolish account that Villetterque gives of *Les Crimes de l’Amour*, for it is clear that he has not read it; if he read it, he would not make me say that about which I have never thought; he would not isolate some sentences that were probably dictated to him, so that, by truncating them as he liked, he can then give them a meaning that they never had. However, without reading it (I have just proved it), Villetterque starts by treating my work as being DETESTABLE and by assuring CHARITABLY that that DETESTABLE work comes from a man suspected of having written one that is even more HORRIBLE. (CdA, 240)

We will see what *Les Crimes de l'Amour*, one of his major works, is about later on through ample discussion of its content; but it is important to notice how easy readers make hasty conclusions based on previous writings of the same person; and worse in this very case, the rumor about what the person might have written. Neither did the journalist (Villetterque) know for sure what book Sade might have written that he was accused of, nor did he read him enough to know what his real point was. Similarly, without reading *Les Crimes de l'Amour*, he associated what it might reveal to rumor about the “accused” author of a hated book. One can argue that, failing to know that “Wisdom can be expressed through the act of form-giving: it can conceal itself behind the forms and does not necessarily have to surmount itself, as irony, in the work” (Lukács, 84), Villetterque made little effort to find it. Continuing the defense of his book (CdA), Sade affirmed that “those who read it agree, on the contrary, that the most purified morals constitute its main basis,” and went on to make this wise suggestion: “A truly honest man proves, names and does not suspect.” Feeling that trend, Sade set out to refute distortions and bad rumor about his writings in general. In a way, he was categorically ‘kicking’ Villetterque and his like out of the way so that *actual* readers can judge his work for themselves:

In any case, I said and affirm that I have not made immoral books; that I will never make any; I repeat it here again, and not to the penny-a-liner Villetterque—I would seem to be jealous of his opinion—but to the public whose judgment I respect as much as I despise that of Villetterque. (CdA, 241)

Here sprouts the complexity of Sade’s thinking in the sense that, in his mind, the nobility of his aim minimizes or even ‘erases’ the strong immorality of some of his characters. Instead of feeling the power of his mind as unique to him, he expected everyone to be at the same level; hence his anger at being seen as immoral (how he describes immorality) instead of being recognized as moral (his intent to criticize and condemn the immorality he depicts).

For that reason, there is still much necessity to pursue this archaeological review of Sade’s fight to be judged on actual, careful readership, because there is some persistence of Villetterque’s vantage point even nowadays. For instance, Joe Queenan mentioned what seems to be a justified surprise about Sade’s claims to morality through the celebration of virtue as the provider of happiness (*The Malcontents*, 519). Given that almost no one currently seems to present a strong academic alternative, and that so few from his days until ours did so, our only credible chance to know better would be to dig back and hear him.

Similar to his response to Villetterque, Sade reacted to his fierce critics in *Idée sur les Romans* (regarding *Aline et Valcour*) by insisting that only good intentions to the benefit of women did he have when he made his criminal characters so frightful as to be hated and quickly unmasked by their potential victims:

I must finally answer the reproach which was made to me when *Aline et Valcour* was published. My brushes, they say, are too strong; I lend vice too odious strokes; do they want to know why? I do not want people to like vice; I don't have, like Crébillon and Dorat, the dangerous project of having women love the characters who deceive them; I want them, on the contrary, to hate them; this is the only way for them not to be duped; and to succeed at that, I made those of my characters who follow the career of vice so frightful that they will certainly inspire neither compassion nor love; through that, I dare to say it, I become more moral than those who believe that they are allowed to embellish them; the pernicious works of those authors resemble those fruits from America, which, under the most shining color, carry death in them; this betrayal of nature, the motive of which is not up to us to expose, is not made for man; never at last, I repeat, never will I describe crime but with the colors of hell; I want it to be seen bare, to be feared, hated, and I do not know any other way of getting there than to show it with all the horror which characterizes it. (CdA, 40-41)

This confusion explains how difficult it is for easy readers to really get the point in Sade's work when they lack the depth and caution needed to have a full understanding of given texts. It is important to realize that Sade does not deny the negativity in his themes, which to him is merely the reality of the time. Indeed, whoever studied 18<sup>th</sup> century French or European history would have little to disagree with Sade in this case. But one would notice the thread that has been dispatching the narrow, negative view of Sade: most books on Sade, especially nowadays, are not only biographical but given a slant of scandal calling for entertaining curiosity; which indirectly ignores or minimizes his literary, academic, intellectual contributions. While Rikki Ducornet's 1999 *The Fan-maker's Inquisition: A Novel of the Marquis de Sade* has been summarized as "a brilliant novel about the Marquis de Sade that will forever change the way we regard one of history's most notorious men," a reviewer of Francine du Plessix Gray's 1998 *At Home with the Marquis de Sade: A Life* spoke for the trend of 'displacement towards entertainment,' when affirming that "Ironically, the writings on Sade are more interesting than those by him". Sade had fought against that in his days, but to little avail. For those who force his personal mistakes into his literary mentality, Sade had confessed in the first version of *Idée sur les Romans* that his personal limits in practicing virtue did not hinder his telling of the truth: "if I have not always been very virtuous, at least I have always been true." (CdA, 255)

Besides, well informed readers would agree that it is mentally demanding to read the literary and seriously philosophical Sade—just as it would have been to understand the complex facts of his times and environment. While "scholars" (who, according to Nietzsche, "can never become [...] philosopher[s]") judged him with that limited 'scholarly' view, Sade was, beyond irony, far into a philosopher; "for a philosopher is not merely a great thinker, but also a genuine human being." (Nietzsche, 239) Determined readers, however, do find the way to not only understand him, but feel that "genuine human being" side of him. For