The Marquis de Sade

A LIFE

Neil Schaeffer

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NEIL SCHAEFFER

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FOR

Susan

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As if a man were author of himself
And knew no other kin.

Coriolanus *5.3.36–37*

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A NOTE ON TRANSLATION

ALL TRANSLATIONS of Sade are my own. I have also translated all other French texts, except on the rare occasion when one is both available and more convenient in English, and in those cases I have indicated the translator in the endnote and the bibliography. Most of Sade's writing has not been translated, and this lack is particularly felt in the matter of his correspondence, of which only a tiny fragment is available in English. My practice in translation has been to strike a compromise in modernizing Sade's orthography and punctuation, so that the translation retains some flavor of his style and of eighteenth-century conventions without sacrificing readability.

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CHAPTER I

Son and Heir

THE SMALL, picturesque village of La Coste rises steeply through very narrow cobbled streets and cubist stone houses attached to the face of one of the hills in the Lubéron range of Provence. On the brow stand the jagged stone walls of the ruin that once had been the Marquis de Sade's château of La Coste. Inside, the floors and ceilings have long since fallen, although there are hints—a bit of fancy molding here, a touch of antique and faded paint there—to suggest the life that once animated these rooms. Now the inside is a hollow, open to the pale, intense heat of the Provençal sky. Even as ruins, the thick stone walls are magnificent. Together, these walls and the hollow they protect are a perfect emblem of the castle's former owner.

It is inevitable that one comes to picture Sade behind walls. He lived to be seventy-four, but he spent almost twenty-nine years of his adulthood in various prisons and at the insane asylum at Charenton. What caused the series of imprisonment-release-imprisonment that constituted most of Sade's adult life? What crimes are hidden behind the prison walls, behind the asylum walls, behind the grotesque mask of evil that most people imagine when they try to picture the Marquis de Sade? Behind the ruined walls of La Coste, behind the cruel mask Sade is made to wear in everyone's imagination, there is a mystery, a hollowness, that this book will aim to explore.

When Sade was thirty-eight years old, he himself opened a window that sheds light into the darkness within. During the night of February 16, 1779, asleep in his prison cell in the fortress of Vincennes, he had a vivid dream. He had fallen asleep reading late into the night, as was his habit. All winter, the thick stone walls had kept in the damp and the cold, and because his cell had no chimney, he could make no fire. For two years, he had endured imprisonment in this royal fortress, but not for crimes committed. Rather, he was being held at the pleasure of the King, under a lettre de cachet granted to his mother-in-law, Mme de Montreuil. Thus, at thirty-eight years of age, Sade spent his days sitting in his cell, feeling sorry for himself, wondering what he

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had done to deserve his fate, and writing angry letters about his predicament to his patient wife, Renée-Pélagie de Montreuil. His sole consolation, he wrote to her, came from reading the recently published life of Petrarch, written by Sade's uncle, Jacques-François-Paul-Aldonze de Sade (the Abbé de Sade). Sade had been sent at the age of four and a half to his uncle's château at Saumane, near La Coste, where he remained until the age of ten, when he left for school in Paris.

On this wintry night in a cold prison, Sade took to bed his uncle's acclaimed life of Petrarch. He then fell asleep over the book and dreamed of the mysterious Laure, the woman whom Petrarch celebrated as the inspiration of his life and poetry. In his book, *Mémoires pour la vie de François Pétrarque,* Sade's uncle made a plausible case for identifying Petrarch's Laure as an ancient member of the noble house of Sade: Laure de Noves, wife of Hugues de Sade. Sade described his dream in a letter to his wife the next day:

> It was around midnight. I had just fallen asleep, his *Mémoires* in my hand. Suddenly, she appeared to me. . . . I saw her! The horror of the grave had not at all altered the radiance of her charms, and her eyes still flashed as brilliantly as when Petrarch celebrated them. A black veil enveloped her completely, and her beautiful blond hair loosely floated above. It seemed as if Love, in order to keep her still beautiful, sought to soften all the lugubrious array in which she presented herself to my gaze. "Why suffer in the world?" she asked me. "Come and be reunited with me. No more pain, no more sorrows, no more distress, in the endless space where I abide. Have the courage to follow me there." At these words, I prostrated myself at her feet, I said to her: "Oh my Mother! . . ." But sobs choked my voice. She extended a hand to me, which I covered with my tears. She shed them as well. "It gave me pleasure," she added, "when I lived in this world that you detest, to turn my eyes toward the future. I multiplied my descendants as far as you, *and I did not imagine you so miserable.*" Then, overcome by my despair and my affection, I flung my arms around her neck to hold her back or to follow her, and to bathe her in my tears, but the phantom disappeared. All that remained was my sorrow.
>
> *O voi che travagliate, ecco il cammino*
> *Venite a me se'l passo altri non serra.*
>
> [O you who suffer, come, this is the way,
> Come to me, if you can see your way free.]
>
> Pétr., son. LIX.[1]

At first, it may be startling to realize that this poignant vision, so sad and piteous, was the product of the mind that wrote *Les Cent Vingt Journées de Sodome*, "the most impure tale," Sade himself boasted, "that has ever been written since the world began."[2] It may be surprising to realize that, behind Sade's mask of perverse sexuality and obdurate violence (a myth that he himself helped cultivate), there existed an emotionally needy, tender sensibility that revealed itself in his dream. Tears came to Sade (if only in this dream) as easily as they poured from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that man of exquisite feeling. In the dream, Sade's humiliations and sufferings had suffused him in a flush of self-pity, as warm as a blush, as passionate as the tears that choke his voice. In this dream—even at the age of thirty-eight—Sade yearned for the embrace of a mother. "Oh my Mother!" he cried out to Laure, prostrate at her feet, as if he were one of the tortured victims of his own fictional erotic fantasies. But when, in his dream, he reached to grasp her, she disappeared and abandoned him to his lonely suffering. If Sade's conscious fantasies turned to erotic violence, especially directed against women, we may ask where and why those underground rivers of rage and sexuality met. Where was the first abandonment, disappointment, even betrayal that lurks behind the beautiful, compassionate Laure of the dream?

The dream's insistence that Laure's beauty was in no way affected by "the horror of the grave," that "the radiance of her charms" was as bright as ever, and that "her eyes still flashed as brilliantly as when Petrarch celebrated them," gives the beginnings of an answer. Oddly, Sade's dream, which denies reality—Laure was dead and decayed—makes Laure's true state all the more evident. Like Faustus' Helen, Sade's Laure is a gaudy ghost imperfectly hidden behind an illusion of glowing beauty. Despite her sparkling eyes and seductive hair, she is an exhalation of the grave. "Oh my Mother!" Sade had cried when he saw her. In life, Sade's mother, like Laure, was impossible to grasp. Remote, embittered, disillusioned with her husband, grieving over the death of her first child, and for the third one, who died soon after its birth, when Sade was just six years old, Sade's mother might as well have lived, like Laure, in some "endless space" where he could not reach her. Indeed, she was to die in the Carmelite convent on the rue d'Enfer in Paris, to which she had retreated perhaps as early as 1747, when her son was seven years old.[3] There is a profound loneliness at the bottom of what may be called the sweet Sade—a loneliness that he could find no way to fill except with rage.

If the sweet side of Sade is focused on some idealized mother figure like Laure, the rest of his dream implies a competition with men of authority, Christ foremost among them. Laure's injunction, "Why suffer in this world? . . . Come and be reunited with me," parodies the excerpt in the

sonnet by Petrarch that Sade quotes, in which it is Christ who says, "O you who suffer . . . / Come to me. . . ." Sade would make a painful career for himself by challenging the laws of man and God. Moreover, sacrilege and incest always held an erotic allure for Sade, and these themes are also evident in his dream about his married relative Laure de Noves. In Sade's dream, Laure is the apex of a love triangle. The second position is taken up by her husband. The third position is occupied by a variety of interlopers: Petrarch, Sade's uncle, the Abbé de Sade, and, of course, Sade himself. It is no accident that two books play such an important role in the dream: Petrarch's sonnets and the Abbé's biography of Petrarch that Sade was reading with great admiration as he fell asleep. Laure is complexly attractive, not only as a sexual and familial figure, but also as a muse. In his dream, then, Sade sought to steal the inspirational figure not only of Petrarch, but of his uncle, the Abbé de Sade. Like Prince Hamlet, Sade was enamored of his uncle's beloved. By theft, by incest, by his own rapt will, Sade would make Laure his own muse. His drive to write, precisely like his feverish and often perverse sexuality, was bound together with a powerful need to compete with or attack whatever was forbidden, limited, sanctified.

The Abbé de Sade had a genetic and climatic theory to explain *his* own feverish sexuality. "The passions," he wrote, "take the shape of the head where they are formed." Our sexual nature is a genetic endowment and is therefore "beyond our control." Climate, moreover, can affect the strength of one's original sexual energy. For example, the Abbé wrote, "The sun incites the blood of a man from Provence."[4] Perhaps the Abbé was right. Perhaps the heat of Provence fired the blood.

Under the brilliant sun of Provence, everything is hot. The stones of the earth give off the odors of spice. The valleys are lush and green, and the terraced fields climb the lower slopes to the fortified towns that guard them, towns like Bonnieux, Céreste, Ménerbes, La Coste. From a distance, these villages perched near the tops of the mountains look like the bastions they are, heating up and glowing in the heat. They are reached by roads, once paths, that switch back and forth on their way up to the fortified gate. Inside the walls, spiraling up from the central square with its well or fountain, narrow stone stairways seem gouged between the stone houses. On a bluff above the town of La Coste stood the ancestral home of the Sade family.

On this strategic site, overlooking what had once been crucial Roman roads, stood a fort—in Latin, *castrum*—which may have provided the name "La Coste." During the Middle Ages, La Coste became the possession of the Sade family, who made their fortune in the cloth trade. Possibly one of the most notable was Hugues de Sade, mentioned earlier, who, in 1325, more than

four hundred years before Sade's birth, married Laure de Noves. Over the centuries, each heir prospered in his turn, and the château grew in size and changed as architectural styles changed. In Provence, the Sades continued to hold important military and ecclesiastical positions. Sade's father, Jean-Baptiste de Sade (born 1702), was first a captain of dragoons, and later performed ambassadorial missions to Russia, to England, and finally to the Elector of Cologne, where he took up his post six months after his first and only son, Donatien-Alphonse-François, was born on June 2, 1740. At the time of Sade's birth, his mother, Marie-Éléonore de Maillé, who was related to the Prince de Condé, was serving as a lady-in-waiting to the Princesse de Condé. The Sades were especially fortunate, therefore, to have an apartment in the Condé Palace in Paris. Sade's first years would be spent in a scene of magnificence and royal luxury almost unmatched in all of Europe.

On June 2, 1740, Sade was born in the large apartment occupied by his mother in the Condé Palace. The next day, he was brought for baptism to the Church of Saint-Sulpice. His mother and father were not present. Sade was taken by their proxies, an officer in his father's regiment and the wife of another officer. These two, or the servants who carried the infant to church, managed to garble his Christian names. Instead of Donatien-Aldonse-Louis, he was baptized Donatien-Alphonse-François. If Sade resented this muddling of his name, he never commented on it. Throughout his long life, he would use several variants of both his intended and actual Christian names. After the Revolution, for example, he prudently suppressed his noble title and styled himself simply as Citizen Louis Sade. The variety of the names he used on official documents may have saved his life following the Revolution, when, in 1793 and 1794, he spent ten frightful months in several Paris prisons. In the end, his nature was no more fixed than his name. As the times changed, so did he. He appeared to be malleable, a creature of shifting surfaces. But it would be his destiny to become—to turn himself into—a being of myth, a force in the consciousness of humanity, known by only one name: "Sade."

The infant Sade would spend his early years in the splendor of a great palace. Until around the age of four, he was often in the care of nurses. His father was away in Germany. His mother had duties to perform for her patron, the Princesse de Condé, who, four years before Sade saw the light of day, had given birth to an heir, Louis-Joseph de Bourbon. Like many a noble house, the Palace de Condé was often swept by intrigues. Sade's parents had to practice prudence. The year before Sade was born, Minister of Foreign Affairs d'Argenson noted in his *Journal* that the Prince de Condé was very angry with Sade's father because he had not informed him of the Princesse's infidelity, a fact that Mme de Sade, as the companion of the Princesse, would

likely have known.[5] Then, in fairly quick succession, two events occurred that would make Sade's mother's position far more precarious. On January 27, 1740, the Prince de Condé died; a year and a half later, on June 14, 1741, his wife died. This left the young Prince de Condé an orphan, and Mme de Sade without a patron. During this time, the young Prince was supervised by his uncle, the Comte de Charolais, a notorious libertine and a homicidally brutal man. His actions were vastly more horrifying and extreme than any the Marquis de Sade would ever commit in his lifetime. Mme de Sade could provide an essential maternal presence for the orphaned Prince in the Palace de Condé, and her new son, four years junior to the Prince, could become his playmate. Her powerful patrons were dead, and she believed that it would be useful later if her son cemented a strong relationship with the young Prince.

Perhaps Mme de Sade too strongly revealed her hopes for her son. Her first child, a daughter, Caroline-Laure, had been born in 1737, and died at the age of two. Her son, born a year after that tragedy, must have seemed heaven-sent. He would make up for her loss. With her influential social connections, he might do very well. Mme de Sade's husband was away; she must have been pleased with her management of affairs in the wake of the mortal crises that beset the palace. Her scheme to attach her only child to what she believed would turn out to be the glorious career of the young Prince de Condé deserved, she thought, to succeed. It was *her* blood relationship to the Condé family that had brought this branch of the Sade family, as important as they may have been in Provence, to Paris, where they had a free apartment in the palace, and where her husband had prospects for posts of distinction. In the end, perhaps it would not matter if her husband could not manage to stay out of debt, or if he would have to be recalled from the Court of Cologne, questions of mismanagement and scandal tainting his ambassadorial mission there.[6] At least her son would have his chance.

But, as with so many instances of good fortune that came to Sade throughout his long life, he found a way to turn this into a savage misfortune that almost destroyed him. Abruptly, around the age of four, he was sent from the palace to be raised in Provence, first by his grandmother, and then by his uncle, the Abbé de Sade. Some forty years later, imprisoned in the Bastille, Sade would write a novel, *Aline et Valcour,* that contains an account of his expulsion from what must have been the paradise of the Palace de Condé:

> Allied, through my mother, to the most important people in the kingdom; related, through my father, to the most distinguished people of the province of Languedoc; born in Paris in the lap of luxury and plenty, I believed, as soon as I was able to reason, that nature and for-

> tune had conspired to inundate me with their bounties; I believed it because they were foolish enough to tell me so, and this absurd presumption made me arrogant, tyrannical, and fierce; it seemed that everyone was supposed to give in to me, that the whole universe was supposed to flatter my whims, and that all I needed to do was think them to have them satisfied; I will recount for you but one event of my childhood in order to convince you of the dangerous principles that were, with such negligence, permitted to take root in me.
>
> I was born and raised in the palace of the renowned Prince to whom my mother had the honor to be related and who was nearly my own age; they hastened to join me to him, so that, being known to him from my childhood, I would later on be able to obtain his support at every stage of my life; but my pride, at that time, which had as yet heard nothing about this scheme, one day taking offense during our childish games at his arguing with me about something, and something, moreover, to which, for undoubtedly very considerable reasons, he believed himself entitled by his rank, I took revenge for his opposition by repeated blows, and not the slightest respect stopped me, and only force and violence succeeded in separating me from my rival.
>
> This occurred around the time when my father was sent to conduct the negotiations; my mother joined him there, and I was sent to my grandmother's in Languedoc, whose extreme coddling fostered in me all the faults that I have just admitted.[7]

Sade's account focuses on the pride, obstinacy, and combativeness that seek satisfaction heedless of the consequences. In fact, he makes a point of insisting that, at the age of four or so, he was unaware of the consequences of his outburst. At that time, he "had as yet heard nothing" about his mother's "scheme" to profit from his relationship to the Prince. Even if his mother's scheme had been made known to him before he took offense at the Prince's prerogatives, would he, at four, have suppressed his impulse to drub the older boy with such fury that he had to be pulled from him by the palace staff? Would he have behaved better? Sade's pride, his hypersensitivity to insults (real or imagined), his tendency to overreact are at the center of this memory. Self-pride would have been sorely tried in any boy whose family lived by sufferance in another boy's house. Sade tells us that he was a proud, tyrannical, and autocratic child because he had been spoiled, and this spoiling continued when he was sent down to his grandmother's house in Avignon. Perhaps his life would have turned out differently had his father not been absent during those early years in Paris.

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