

## **Education, Mastery and the Marquis de Sade**

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**Abstract** *Nihilism is not escaped by decree. Its subjective frameworks remain with us. To those educators who remain wedded, despite everything, to the idea of mastery – and this represents most of us – it is worth considering how an exit might look, one that operates through, rather than in spite of, the promise of mastery. This would be an exercise in Sade’s Reason, as Maurice Blanchot would have it. This would be an attempt to practice mastery without enslavement, passing through enslavement to its opposite. So let us imagine education as mastery, as its fulfilment, and see how that might look.*

**Keywords** education, mastery, Marquis de Sade, nihilism, failure

### **By the Throat**

Mastery has us by the throat. Unable to bring things up, prevented from taking things down—if we swallow, we do so without conviction. Mastery catches and keeps us mid-gasp.

In pursuit of mastery, education fell before its promised transcendence. Mastery claimed to elevate the educated philosopher above the quotidian, even make the philosopher immune to the world below and its persecutions. Yet mastery was yoked to its opposite: the enslavement of the philosopher to a philosophical doctrine. Mastery required discipline and self-control. It subordinated the self to a philosophical doctrine, wagering the self to an ordinance that promised future sovereignty but demanded present obedience.

Seeking spiritual direction, early philosophers enslaved themselves to their chosen philosophical school. Consultations were offered to non-philosophers too, for a fee. Whether a school was joined or merely visited, the spiritual direction on offer was intended, in its final effects, to allow each candidate to “take control and become master of [her]himself.”<sup>i</sup> With Christianity and its selective adoption of ancient philosophy, self-mastery became “an instrument of subordination” of more complete effect.<sup>ii</sup> Its voluntary dimension was reduced as spiritual training came to occupy the whole life of the Christian subject. The purpose of Christian guidance was to develop a form of introspection that would “fix more firmly the relationship

of subordination”; it would attach its recipients to a regime of power that would take care of their entire life in all its detail and for the rest of its duration.<sup>iii</sup> At the same time, the promise of transcendence became ever more spectral, dependent ultimately on God’s will, against which the strength of will exhibited by the self-denying Christian was of secondary importance. For at the gates of heaven, God decides. On earth, the early Christian monk is warned against practising any self-denying ordinance to excess. We find Cassian recalling tales of monks casting themselves down wells, fasting excessively, or crossing deserts without food in an effort to demonstrate just how catastrophically they had achieved self-mastery, purging themselves of natural inclinations and desires.<sup>iv</sup> These were not acts of extreme piety; they were symptomatic of pride. And pride is of the devil.

With extreme asceticism the old but sinuous link connecting the promise of mastery to the necessity of enslavement calcified, and then broke. Early Christian ascetic practitioners, those Cassian warned against, so perfected their self-denials that they became increasingly indifferent to pain and discomfort, removing themselves beyond the grasp of power. Through enslavement they reached its opposite denying themselves so completely that little remained for power to attack. In this advanced form asceticism posed a challenge to Christianity, delivering its practitioners beyond the influence of its institutions and teachings. The most potent ascetics effectively reversed the self-denials of monastic obedience, transforming these denials into a form of “egoistic self-mastery” that denied access to external power.<sup>v</sup>

To secure their foothold monastic and ecclesiastical institutions had to bring self-mastery back within their control. They would purge themselves of all vagrant, self-sufficient, ascetic heresies, and bring all miracles, marvels, punishments and self-flagellations back into the orbit of their influence. Eventually self-mastery would slip its “doctrinal moorings” and migrate to a secular context.<sup>vi</sup> Education remains in awe of mastery. It preaches denial, yokes its members to the pursuit of mastery, but will not allow that mastery to become realised as such. Mastery haunts education as its most enduring spectral promise.

Just what exactly education promises mastery of, changes: from ancient self in pursuit of wisdom, to medieval body desiring knowledge of God, to modern subject of autonomous reason, and finally, to the promise that we might one day master our own performativities. By definition such mastery is rarely, if ever achieved. Our nihilism is the product of this framework, this belief that education requires higher objectives, a belief so well entrenched that as each objective comes under attack another is substituted in its place. When substitutes are left wanting, we are launched into overproduction. For we scarcely know how to operate let alone educate without the promise of mastery. Once described as the “destiny of two millennia of Western history,” nihilism is our unavoidable affliction.<sup>vii</sup> Those educators claiming to exist beyond its reach are in denial. There is no quick and

easy escape. We are trapped in the digestive tract of Western history. Attached to a promise that is never delivered, we are its disappointments, you and I. We are debased and we debase ourselves, desiring mastery through our enslavement.

### **Sade as Educator**

Nihilism is not escaped by decree. Its subjective frameworks remain with us. To those educators who remain wedded, despite everything, to the idea of mastery—and this represents most of us—it is worth considering how an exit might look, one that operates through, rather than in spite of, the promise of mastery. This would be an exercise in *Sade's Reason*, as Maurice Blanchot would have it.<sup>viii</sup> This would be an attempt to practice mastery without enslavement, passing through enslavement to its opposite. So let us imagine education as mastery, as its fulfilment, and see how that might look.

*Justine; Juliette; Philosophy of the Boudoir; The 120 Days of Sodom*, these are scandalous books and scandalise us still.<sup>ix</sup> And yet, whilst there is “no better symbol of scandal” than the Marquis de Sade, “the scandalous audacity of his thought has remained long unknown.”<sup>x</sup> This was Blanchot’s analysis. Sade’s books were excessive in every sense, that much we perceive, but what we fail to see is how in their excess they exaggerate our own basic attachments. We find ourselves confronted with work of horrific, “unsurpassable monstrosity,” though “rationalist in construction” and “pedagogic in genre.”<sup>xi</sup> Sade’s offence, in short, was to follow through; it was to express the idea of mastery inherent in reason, and the idea of education inherent in mastery. It was to bring education, mastery and reason to their conclusion.

These are educational texts. They are relentlessly, tediously educational, perhaps unrivalled in their singular commitment to the course of instruction. Juliette, their most accomplished student, must surpass, then abandon, perhaps even sacrifice each teacher she encounters in her pursuit of mastery.<sup>xii</sup> Initially Juliette misunderstands, hoping that her teacher will be her protector in crime and debauchery. But as Noirceuil explains, “one must learn to manage by oneself, to rely upon one’s own solitary resources.”<sup>xiii</sup> Juliette must learn to practice mastery alone, eventually becoming master of herself. Her education demands absolute commitment to vice. Failure is inexcusable. Even the slightest indication of failure will invoke severe reprisal, if not an attempt on her life from those who were formerly her teachers.<sup>xiv</sup> Only later does she realize that, by extension, her “whole ambition shall be someday to surpass my teacher.”<sup>xv</sup>

One might expect that in attempting to surpass her teachers in mastery Juliette would aspire to become the most exemplary teacher herself. Indeed, this is what Juliette first assumes:

I keenly sense my need of instruction, I no less keenly desire to educate someone: I must have a teacher, yes, and I must have a pupil too.<sup>xvi</sup>

By the time Juliette finally acquires her pupil, however, she is on the road to becoming such an accomplished libertine, so apathetic to the plight of others that she loses all interest in teaching those far beneath her.<sup>xvii</sup> Juliette so bores of her assigned pupil Alexandrine that she dispatches of her, and her biography, in a mere paragraph so as to avoid ever having to mention her again.<sup>xviii</sup> Rather significantly, Alexandrine's swift demise is attributed to the very poor instruction she received from her tutor, Juliette.<sup>xix</sup> Hence, in Sade we discover how the desire to outdo one's teachers in mastery could be fatal to teaching, and so to education. The desire to achieve mastery certainly does not breed a desire to surpass one's teachers in teaching, to become a better teacher.

If Juliette's teachers are ever annihilated, this only occurs once they are found wanting from the perspective of her own developing supremacy. She respects her teachers as long as their libertine mastery is assured. They are heeded for as long as they can teach, and teach by example. Otherwise Juliette would have "bled them white", as she puts it, at the first opportunity.<sup>xx</sup> Overcome here, then, are centuries of Christian toleration, where mastery is to be diligently pursued but never presumed to become fully manifest, even in the most holy, for that would lead to a dangerous asceticism. Overcoming all tolerations, the libertine student will no longer suffer the teacher who does not in all completeness bear out his philosophical teachings in his actions. Through education, the libertine adopts that ancient logic of mastery found inherent in education, unshackles it, and drives the pursuit of mastery to its hilt.

On the nature of libertine mastery some clarification is necessary, since in the context of Sade's writing we might associate it with and perhaps reduce it to a form of phallic supremacy. Or we might find ourselves reminded of Greek pederasty in its aboriginal relationship to philosophy (so many of Sade's victims are children), where, in one reading, we observe how over and again "a greater man penetrates a lesser man with his knowledge" (according to what some see as a classic paradigm in Western pedagogy).<sup>xxi</sup> Such conclusions are too easy, however. Though Sade's texts are all about penetration, the penetrating agent is not singular in its form, nor is it always modeled on the phallus. The libertine often "socratizes" (as Sade calls it) by other means, and does so not merely for pleasure, or to dominate, but for purposes of examination in both a medical and educational sense. The libertine will enter the body by any means, cutting into it if necessary. And in so doing, the better libertine, like the better educator, does not simply "put in"; the libertine also "leads out" from what is already there.<sup>xxii</sup> Libertine mastery depends upon an investigation into the internal consistency of human kind, of what makes us tick, of how our

juices flow, of how we err. The libertine renders Man in the abstract sense entirely material, destroying the conceit of Man by making Man the object of study, which leads to the most intimate and base observations. Libertine investigation is at once an inquiry into what we are in body and of what must be overcome.<sup>xxiii</sup> Hence mastery of this kind is less assured, and more intricately with the problems of an “irrational bodily materiality” than we might otherwise assume.<sup>xxiv</sup> With Sade, mastery eventually confronts the impossibility of its realization. It destroys itself in the attempt.

The libertine’s self-mastery reaches towards complete egoism, complete in the sense that the libertine remains unaffected by the effects of his or her crimes. Self-possessed, deracinated, the libertine ego can indulge itself without consideration. The libertine’s crimes obey no external logic or internal demand; they are an expression of the libertine’s own prolific creativity. Becoming inaccessible to others, the libertine asserts his or her will without appeal.<sup>xxv</sup> In this sense the libertine’s mastery is complete; the libertine wilfully creates, even destroys him or herself for no other reason. But this exalted state is only achieved at great expense, by defeating Man, God, and even Nature (though not necessarily in that order). The libertine must overcome each framework of appeal through force of will alone, exaggerating each metaphysical attachment to the point of its own annulment. Through the pursuit of mastery, even mastery itself must eventually expire.<sup>xxvi</sup>

### **Mastery to Excess**

In Blanchot’s view, Sade remains a “prodigious enigma” so long as we fail to interrogate the logic exemplified in his work.<sup>xxvii</sup> Perhaps last of all will we permit a confrontation between Sade and education, for Sade threatens education as he threatens reason, not by stepping outside its boundaries, but by exaggerating its own inherently debauched tendencies to dramatic effect.<sup>xxviii</sup>

With Sade we find depicted “sovereign man,” inaccessible because nothing can hurt him.<sup>xxix</sup> Women frequently appear in Sade’s writing, of course, but only in relation to Man’s dominion, specifically that is, in relation to the gendered idea of mastery, that which involves mastery of himself and others. Sovereign man is then, in Sade’s work, an exaggerated representation of that gendered epithet ‘man’ which still defines the thinking of Western modernity. For all its evils, Sade’s work at least keeps that presence, the existence of a conception of man behind the conception of mastery upon which so much violence is built, in constant view.

A sovereign of this cast of mind dominates others and tortures them with such delight in order to experience just how dispassionate he has become. What is murder to him? Nothing but “a little organized matter disorganized; a few compositional changes, the combination of some molecules disturbed and broken...tossed back into the crucible of nature.”<sup>xxx</sup> This libertine will, as Juliette’s first teacher explains: “execute every atrocity, great and small, with a constant and

inviolable serenity.”<sup>xxxii</sup> He or she knows “how to turn all distaste into tastes, all repugnance into attractions.” This libertine “sets about accomplishing the enormous task of completely enumerating every anomaly, every distraction, every human possibility. Sovereign man must experience everything in order to be at the mercy of nothing.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> The libertine even welcomes the gallows with pleasure.<sup>xxxiii</sup> “Against such a Power, what can the law do? It intends to punish such a man, but it rewards him, and it thrills him by demeaning him.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> The libertine is sovereign for that reason. But he or she is sovereign in the more complete sense that each time a victim is sacrificed, the libertine decides “to sacrifice a thousand more.” The libertine is not tied to the victim in a relation of dependence. A libertine does not derive meaning from the individual he or she annihilates; this victim barely exists for her or him as a distinct sentient being. Each victim is “but a simple component, indefinitely exchangeable, within an enormous erotic equation.”<sup>xxxv</sup>

Mastery of such monstrous proportions is not achieved without considerable effort. The libertine becomes sovereign man only after passing through all prior stages of debauchery. In the less practised libertine we discover he or she who derives pleasure from aggravating the plight of others. His or hers is a “pleasure of comparison”—where the suffering of others only brings out, by way of contrast, his own happiness.<sup>xxxvi</sup> The libertine’s mastery is dependent on the subjugation of others, which brings into question the libertine’s own strength, for “by comparing his situation with that of the wretched, the fortunate man ineluctably identifies himself with the wretched one.” At this intermediate stage, the mind of the libertine “remains riveted on the reality of the other, which it seeks to deny... The debauchee remains attached to the victim of his lusts.” He or she is obsessed with the victim’s suffering and this is the libertine’s weakness. This debauchee has not yet achieved sovereignty. The libertine’s pride and his sense of self-worth is dependent on the defeat of others. Sovereign man by contrast “does not attach himself to any object; caught up in the perpetual motion of nature, he obeys his impulses and looks upon nature’s creatures as no more than its foam.”<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Sovereign man may have succeeded in detaching himself from the pleasure of comparison, and yet, the pursuit of mastery has him enslaved to a destructive, ultimately self-destructive path of voluptuous annihilation. Like the extreme ascetic so feared by Cassian, the soul that wishes to become free must first destroy all pleasure, removing every last temptation. Unlike the ascetic, the libertine does so by pursuing all temptation, destroying all pleasures, and in so doing destroys everything else besides. Hence Sade’s writings are “littered with the corpses of libertines, struck down at the height of their glory.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> Sovereign man may have achieved mastery, but he does so by annihilating all things, including himself. By reducing all he touches to nothing, the most practised libertine “only makes this nothingness manifest.” The world in which he lives “is a desert; the beings he encounters there are less than things, less than shadows. While studying them,

tormenting them and destroying them, he does not seize upon their life, but verifies their nothingness. He becomes master of their nonexistence, and he draws great pleasure from this.<sup>xxxix</sup> Quite literally the libertine realises his nihilism. He follows through that tradition in Western metaphysics which associates being with a higher realm, denigrating this world below by associating it with a process of transient (if not grubby) becoming. This world is nothing by comparison to the world above, a prejudice that Sade takes great pleasure in exploiting. Sade pursues that “disavowal of reality” (and of women in particular) upon which “the language of the West” was built,<sup>xi</sup> by treating its members as they conceptualise themselves, by approaching them as if they were “already dead,” as if they were already worth nothing.<sup>xli</sup>

In Sade’s world those seeking mastery achieve it through an enormous, monstrous negation. Blanchot again: “This negation, which is carried out on a massive scale, which no individual instance is enough to satisfy, is essentially destined to surpass the plane of human existence.” This transcendence by negation is achieved with a kind of boldness that no philosopher has managed to achieve hitherto (despite it being the philosopher’s secret desire).<sup>xlii</sup> Sadean man frees himself in relation to his victim because he wishes to exist independently. He wishes to become the perfect philosopher by virtue of his separation from worldly things. Admittedly, he does so by engaging in carnal acts, but he is never consumed by the act. For all his commitment to bodily perversion he remains a philosopher. As Simone de Beauvoir once put it, sovereign man never “looses himself in his animal nature”; his perversions are so premeditated and cerebral that “philosophic discourse, far from dampening his ardor, acts as an aphrodisiac.”<sup>xliii</sup> With Sade we find the wildest hope of philosophy realised; “a lucid mind inhabits a body which is being degraded into matter.”<sup>xliv</sup>

But Sadean man does not stop there. He reduces God to nothing also, and thereby reveals not only the monstrous negation upon which Western philosophy is built, but also what Nietzsche describes as the “empty fiction” that once justified such negation.<sup>xlv</sup> For the world was denied in the name of otherworldly beings and ideas, in the name of spectres that finally coalesced, with Christianity, in the figure of God. With Christianity, knowledge of God and access to heaven became dependent on practices of Christian self-denial. And yet, as Sade portrays it, this monstrous order of discourse will itself eventually crumble, for nihilism entails the “death of God” too, in a final painful, drawn-out negation.<sup>xlvi</sup> Again in Sade’s hands this death is too much even for today’s atheist to stomach. Sovereign man hopes to first negate but eventually become indifferent to God. He no longer derives strength, as many atheisms do, from a rejection of God.

Sade fulfils Western metaphysics by “founding man’s sovereignty on the transcending power of negation, a power that depends in no way upon the objects that it destroys, which in order to destroy them, does not even suppose their existence beforehand.” But then, as Blanchot argues, he goes one further. Sade

rejects the idea of God as the “inexpiable fault of man, his original sin, the proof of his emptiness.”<sup>xlvii</sup> Sade again:

The very conceiving of this so infinitely disgusting phantom is, I confess it, the one wrong I am unable to forgive man. I excuse him all his whims, his ironies, and his eccentricities, I sympathize with all his frailties, but I cannot smile tolerantly upon the lunacy that could erect this monster, I do not pardon man for having himself wrought those religious chains which have so dreadfully hobbled him and for having crept despicably forward, eyes downcast and neck stretched forth, to receive the shameful collar manufactured only by his own stupidity. There would be no end to it, Juliette, were I to give vent to all the horror waked in me by the execrable doctrine based upon a God’s existence; mere mention of him rouses my ire, when I hear his name pronounced I seem to see all around me the palpitating shades of all those woebegone creatures this abominable opinion has slaughtered on the face of the earth. Those ghosts cry out beseechingly to me, they supplicate me to make use of all I have been endowed with of force and ingenuity to erase from the souls of my brethren the idea of the revolting chimera which has brought such rue into the world.<sup>xlviii</sup>

This chimera Sade rejects is “what justifies and authorizes” those crimes he imagines “for we cannot be too forceful in our efforts to annihilate a being who is willing to bow down and prostrate himself before God.”<sup>xlix</sup> The idea of God reduces man to nothingness, Sade perceives, since man conceives of himself as owing everything to that idea however vaguely it may be expressed. Indeed, the idea of God derives its strength from the fact that God must remain unknown, from the fact that “his ineffable ways surpass understanding, that he waxes wroth as soon as anyone has the temerity to pry into his secrets.”<sup>li</sup> Those seeking mastery have, then, no option but to make God manifest, to give definite form to man’s conception of divine sovereignty and reign over men like Gods. To remove the last vestiges of religious faith, Sadean man “momentarily becomes God, so that, when in his presence, other men become inconsequential and then realize exactly to what extent a being before God is sheer nothingness... Being God can only mean one thing: crushing men, annihilating creation.”<sup>li</sup> Thus Sadean man finally destroys any last vestige of God by assuming His image, and destroys men by acting out the consequences of their image of themselves as reflected in their conception of God, showing how in creating God they inaugurated their own destruction.

Sade finally rejects God in the spirit of negation, for in God “he hates the nothingness of man—who created such a master for himself.” Though Sade would temporarily “work with God to sanction this nothingness”—to express the

destructive logic in the idea of God and bring it to its conclusion—he does not become Godlike for more time than is necessary.<sup>lii</sup> Sade eventually gives up even hating God, or so Blanchot's argues, for in hating God, Sade affirms God by negation. Hence his hatred of God must finally mature until it "liberates hate from God."<sup>liii</sup> Sade's hate is "too great to be contained by just one object." He identifies instead with that "spirit of destruction" he associates with Nature.<sup>liv</sup> Yet Nature too becomes unbearable. By aligning himself with Nature, Sade finds himself "constantly confronted" with its "insurmountable and sovereign presence."<sup>lv</sup> Nature as conceived by Man (that gendered construct of Western modernity), dooms us to a pursuit we can never fulfil. We are formed, Sade tells us, so that we would wish to outrage her, but as Nature herself is a spirit of destruction, there is no outrage, no act of destruction, that can escape her embrace. As the libertine Pope explains, addressing Nature:

Thou, unreasoning and reasonless force of which I find myself the involuntary result, Thou who hurled me into this world with the desire that I offend Thee, and who hast however denied me the means to do so, inspire in my blazing soul those crimes which would serve Thee better than these poor melancholy things Thou hast put inside my reach. I would obey Thy laws, since they require horrors of me and for horrors I have a fiery thirst; but provide me better to do than Thy debility has given me so far. When I have exterminated all the creatures that cover the earth, still shall I be far from my mark, since I shall have merely served Thee, O unkind Mother, for it is to vengeance I aspire, vengeance for what, whether through stupidity or malice, Thou doest to men in never furnishing them the means to translate fairly into deeds the appalling desires Thou dost ever rouse in them.<sup>lvi</sup>

This is how Sadean man "gradually becomes aggravated" by Nature.<sup>lvii</sup> His sovereignty will not bear comparison when set against the supremacy of Nature. Nature too must studied, and subjected to libertine probing,<sup>lviii</sup> but it must also be finally negated. And so we find imagined a great cataclysm that would destroy the very laws of Nature. Sade imagines an engineer of such accomplishment that he creates a machine to "pulverize the universe."<sup>lix</sup> But even this, for Sade, would not suffice.

By his imagined defeat of Nature, Sade's mastery once again becomes dependent upon, and presumes the existence of, that which he destroys. What he "pursued by pushing the spirit of negation to its limit is sovereignty."<sup>lx</sup> He sought after that sovereign mastery which does not depend upon its ability to defeat once superior forces, that mastery which creates and destroys without appeal. Through

the pursuit of mastery and after so much destruction, Sade eventually sacrifices mastery itself, travelling beyond good and evil, and beyond value itself. He realises that it is not sufficient to ensure that the other is reduced to nothing through its destruction. For, as Klossowski argued in *Sade My Neighbour*, “if the other is *nothing* for me... I am not only *nothing* for him but also *nothing* before my own consciousness—and in fact that consciousness is no longer still *mine*.”<sup>lxii</sup> Here we are left with the last effects of *Sade’s Reason*, mastery (and hence education) destroys itself; it reduces sovereign man to nothing since if he is something he must exist in dependent relation to something else. We arrive at the “negation of destruction itself.”<sup>lxiii</sup>

The destruction of objects belies the dependence of the destroyer on those things he annihilates. So what better way to remove that dependence, Sade decides, than to depreciate it by becoming apathetic to destruction itself. Now the simple “quantity of the objects sacrificed, becomes the object of these acts.” Deriving little from their destruction, these acts being too numerous to count or even notice, the “reality of the other and of the self are dissolved.”<sup>lxiii</sup> As Horkheimer and Adorno put it, little but a “tense, purposive bustle prevails” in which “no moment is unused, no body orifice neglected, no function left inactive.”<sup>lxiv</sup> The libertine disappears “in an endless reiteration of acts.”<sup>lxv</sup> He romps without purpose, remaining active for no other reason. Like today’s educator yet shorn of all romantic illusion sovereign man in his last iteration operates “devoid of any substantial goals,”<sup>lxvi</sup> everything he touches is apprehended “in terms of manipulation and administration.”<sup>lxvii</sup> As Sade’s Chief of Police declares:

It does indeed seem that the lamp of reason does not begin to enlighten us until such time as we are no longer able to profit from its rays, and not before stupidity has been added to stupidity that we arrive at the discovery of the source of all that ignorance has caused us to commit.<sup>lxviii</sup>

Let us treat this remark with the seriousness it deserves. Once Sade’s reason has run its full course and mastery has emptied itself of all content, there is nothing left to say. After so many lessons we find ourselves stripped bare, piling stupidity upon stupidity. This is what education for mastery becomes.

### **Mastery or Failure**

Sade’s direction of travel is also our own, insofar as we too are suffering the effects of “European nihilism.”<sup>lxix</sup> But our collective travel is less deliberate: we kill Man, God and Nature without fully intending to. This killing of each is built into the pursuit of mastery that we (unlike Sade) disavow. Sade only brings to the surface that brutalism inherent in Western education, which negates and negates

monstrously, in order to affirm. It is perhaps conceivable that, if this tendency were fully acknowledged, if the grotesque nature of our dream, our pursuit of mastery were fully manifested, we might develop the strength to reject it as our educational objective; and not by returning to that dirty compromise of mastery through enslavement which kills though it does so quietly; rather we might pursue its opposite, which is failure, a failure to master others and ourselves.

Mastery or failure, these are the options given us by education. Mastery is promised through a sleight of hand that prevents its delivery (we become enslaved to the pursuit of something that is rarely if ever realised), whilst failure of a kind is guaranteed. Educational failure is far more common and systematically produced than we would like to admit. In short, if one did not fail, another would not succeed; the mastery of those who succeed is dependent on the existence of those multitudes that fail. We are in a position similar to that of the debauched libertine still reliant on the “pleasure of comparison”—educational success remains dependent on educational failure, on negation (and educational failure remains dependent by comparison with educational success). We are not simply waiting for the “right” pedagogy to be applied “successfully” so that failure can be removed.<sup>lxx</sup> Described as the “traumatic real” of contemporary education, failure belies the barbarism of educational mastery and the fantasy of an educational good.<sup>lxxi</sup> In a perverse cycle of affirmation, education is offered as the solution to the problem, that of systemic failure, which education creates. Failure is the necessary consequence of that nihilism which attaches us to promises that are never delivered, which makes us its inevitable disappointments. The educated nihilist would not retreat from failure, then. This figure would not seek to heal education of that affliction, since failure constitutes education. Yet even for the educated nihilist this is difficult to fully admit: It really is traumatic for the educator who is by profession wedded to an ideology of educational success.

Our options are limited by our histories and appear radically opposed. We might affirm mastery and redefine it as Sade once did so that our mastery is no longer dependant on the failure of others. Or we might pursue its opposite, failure. This, too, might constitute a route through nihilism. Accordingly we would embrace failure, learning to fail better. We would seek to fail without appeal, attempting to fail on our own terms. Our failures would fall outside the shadow of a promised mastery. This affirmation of failure would raise the devil, that “Spirit of Heaviness” through which “all things fall.”<sup>lxxii</sup> It would give homage to that metaphysical ghost which nihilism both produces and suffers. It would confront that spirit in its incorruptible substance, and understand how it was first and forever since conjured by man. Having nothing in common with matter, this Spirit of Heaviness leaves us with the sensation of falling. We are confronted by things that will no longer be suspended aloft. These things fall, we fall with them, and in our descent we begin to

accomplish our nihilism.<sup>lxxiii</sup> This fallout we perceive as the necessary outcome of that unnecessary belief in spectral things, ideas, Gods.

Our affirmation of failure would be deliberate, giving expression to our nihilism, revealing its downward tendencies so they are better negotiated. We would no longer kill Man, God and Nature without fully intending to. Rather, we would seek to understand how this killing is brought about as a consequence of our education.<sup>lxxiv</sup> We would investigate our nihilism, so as to acknowledge it, better express it, and confront our downgoing.

## References and Notes

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- <sup>iii</sup> Ibid. p. 182.
- <sup>iv</sup> See: Foucault, Michel. *On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France 1979-1980*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014 [1980]. p. 291.
- <sup>v</sup> Ibid. pp. 207-8.
- <sup>vi</sup> Hunter, Ian. *Rethinking the school: Subjectivity, bureaucracy, criticism*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1994. p. xxi.
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- <sup>x</sup> Blanchot, *Lautréamont and Sade*. p. 39.
- <sup>xi</sup> Lingis, Alphonso. Translator's Introduction. *Sade My Neighbour*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1991. p. x.
- <sup>xii</sup> The educational intent of Sade's work is not only modeled internally. *Juliette*, according to one footnote, is intended for lady readers: "Hot-blooded and lewdly disposed ladies, these are words to the wise, hark attentively to them: they are addressed not only to Juliette but to yourselves also; if your intelligence is in any sense comparable to hers, you'll not fail to extract great benefit from them" (Sade, Marquis de. *Juliette*. New York: Grove Press, 1968 [1797]. p. 340.). Though it is a woman, Juliette, who is the libertine hero of the book of the same name, and

though the book is addressed to lady readers, our heroine rarely encounters her match in libertine women, and finds she has much to teach most of the women she meets. So, for example, to Princess Borghese she remarks: “Among libertine women I have never encountered your superior... But there are...scores and scores of little habits, dirty and furtive ones, loathsome and ugly ones, crapulous and brutal ones, which, perhaps, my gentle dove, you are still to make acquaintance of” (ibid. p. 709.). For lessons in mastery, it must be pointed out, and with the exception perhaps of the sorceress Durand, Juliette looks more often, and more beseechingly to men. Thus despite Sade’s heroine, Juliette, we encounter in his work a form of mastery that owes everything to men.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid. p. 181.

<sup>xiv</sup> Saint-Fond, Juliette’s greatest sponsor, abandons her and has her quit Paris (and later France) leaving behind all she has acquired through his largesse and protection, the moment he detects her falter and recoil before his imagined crimes. And this is after so much success, after Juliette has given him so much cause to admire her grotesque affinity for libertinage. But for her moment of weakness, Juliette had otherwise reached that exalted and most libertine state of “numbed indifference”. It is at this point, once so much has been achieved in crime and horror, Juliette recalls, “that virtue makes a final effort inside us... this is the moment, beware of it, when long-forgotten prejudices reappear” (ibid. p. 548-9.). Juliette eventually rises to power once more, whilst Saint-Fond falls foul of her accomplice, Noirceuil.

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid. p. 285. Juliette is frequently upbraided by her teachers, but is on the lookout too for inconsistencies and weaknesses in those who instruct her. She questions Saint-Fond’s mastery on more than one occasion, for allowing himself to be in debt to others (ibid. p. 245.), and for allowing himself to believe in some form of afterlife (ibid. p. 370.). Meanwhile, she accuses Clairwil (who will eventually die by her hand) of a weakened atheism (ibid. p. 451.).

<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid. p. 263.

<sup>xvii</sup> There is little patience for teaching those who do not swiftly acquire libertine mastery. The libertine educator is, like the libertine Pope, so we are told, under an obligation “to make fools of the simple” (ibid. p. 757.). Fellow libertines wanton enough to deserve some respect, such as the Countess Donis who, Juliette narrates “was already almost a match for me in wickedness” do, however, still manage to incite Juliette to teach (ibid. p. 634.). This is because Juliette finds in those of similar accomplishment an opportunity for libertinage. In Donis she swiftly acquires a wealthy accomplice. If she also teaches Donis for a short interval, it is only so as to acquire a better partner in crime, and perhaps hone her own philosophy too, as she holds forth before a willing listener. But Donis is soon sacrificed having betrayed herself as still imperfectly libertine. Juliette has little patience for teaching.

As she explains to her student and unwitting victim, any residual virtue “fairly turns my stomach” (ibid. p. 646.). Another student, Duchess Grillo, is tolerated for longer since she is at first a great source of pleasure. But as soon as she proves unresponsive to her teachings Juliette loses patience: “that was the moment I took the resolve to destroy her” (ibid. p. 722.). Princess Borghese is also finally despatched, after many libertine adventures by Juliette’s side. She is cast into a volcano because, in the end, she “lacked depth and rigor in her principles; timorous, still in prejudice’s grip, apt at any moment to give way before a reverse, and who, owing to nothing more than this one weakness, was unsuitable company” for a woman as corrupt as Juliette (ibid. p. 1019.).

xviii This is unusual in the prolix context of Sade’s writing.

xix Sade. *Juliette*. p. 485.

xx Ibid. p. 159.

xxi Gallop, Jane. *The Immoral Teachers*. *Yale French Studies* 1982; 63. p. 118.

xxii Ibid. p. 126.

xxiii Kings are ridiculed accordingly: “In our day there is nothing more superfluous than a king.” Having become weak, their authority rests on “nothing solidier than opinion”, which is fickle and will most assuredly betray them. These kings, seated at one remove and in luxury neglect, moreover, the “first virtue demanded of anyone who wishes to be a ruler of men” which is “knowledge of them”. Tucked away, “perpetually stunned and fuddled by their flatteries”, monarchs are not able to “sift nor scan” those they rule (Sade. *Juliette*. p. 568.). To master one’s subjects one must live among them and examine them most intimately.

xxiv Gallop. *The Immoral Teachers*. p. 122.

xxv Hence “the most enjoyable crimes are the motiveless ones. The victim must be perfectly innocent: if we have sustained some harm from him it legitimates the harm we do him” (Sade. *Juliette*. p. 702.).

xxvi It suits the purposes of explanation to treat Man, God, and finally Nature in that sequence. But it must be remembered that Sade works away at each problem (the problems posed by Man, God and Nature) throughout his texts and in no particular order. This is, in other words, and as Jane Gallop argues, no simple dialectical arrangement (see: Gallop, Jane. *Intersections: A reading of Sade with Bataille, Blanchot, and Klossowski*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981. ). Sade’s attacks are too frenzied for that.

xxvii Blanchot. *Lautréamont and Sade*. p. 7.

xxviii With regard to reason, Sade confronts the idea that a better use of reason, and better knowledge of and more thoroughgoing attempt to master our material existence ‘will make possible a better individual and social morality’ (Klossowski, Pierre. *Sade My Neighbour*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1991

[1967/1947]. p. 81.). As Pierre Klossowski argued, Sade foresees instead from reason ‘not the arrival of a happier era for humanity, but only the beginning of tragedy’, which he not only consciously and deliberately accepts, but also realises in his writing, making use of reason to monstrous effect (ibid. ).

xxix Blanchot. *Lautréamont and Sade*. p. 20.

xxx Sade. *Juliette*. p. 415.

xxxi Ibid. p. 14.

xxxii Blanchot. *Lautréamont and Sade*. p. 20.

xxxiii As the libertine Princess Borghese declares: “The stocks, the pillory, the scaffold itself would for me be a privilege, the throne of delight, upon it I’d cry death defiance, and discharge in the pleasure of perishing the victim of my crimes and over the idea that in future my name would a byword for evil, at whose mere mention generations of men would tremble... I see the abyss yawning at my feet, and jubilantly I hurl myself over the brink” (Sade. *Juliette*. p. 663-4.). Elsewhere Juliette says something similar: “There is nothing I fear less in the world than the noose... If ever a judge sends me to the scaffold, you will see me go forward with light and impudent step” (ibid. p. 1014.).

xxxiv Blanchot. *Lautréamont and Sade*. p. 21.

xxxv Ibid. p. 24.

xxxvi See: Sade, Marquis de. *The 120 Days of Sodom and other writings*. New York: Grove Press, 1966 [1785]. p. 362. And not only comparison is suspect, pleasure itself is problematic. The libertine should, in principle, be able perpetrate the worst crimes with the coolest temperament, without being fired up and into action by the atrocities occasioned: “Crime is the torch that should fire the passions.” Whereas the opposite (“passion firing her to crime”) is infinitely suspect. We are told that “the difference is enormous”, where the latter signifies, for the libertine concerned, that she is still plagued by a “ruinous sensibility” (Sade. *Juliette*. p. 475.).

xxxvii Klossowski. *Sade My Neighbour*. p. 79.

xxxviii Blanchot. *Lautréamont and Sade*. pp. 18-9.

xxxix Ibid. p. 25.

xl Cavarero, Adriana. *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*. Cambridge: Polity, 1995. p. 55.

xli Blanchot. *Lautréamont and Sade*. p. 25.

xlid Ibid. p. 26.

xlid Though Simone de Beauvoir’s account is divergent in so many other respects, here there is agreement: Beauvoir, Simone de. Must We Burn Sade? In: Wainhouse and Seaver, editors. *The 120 Days of Sodom and other writings - Marquis de Sade*. New York: Grove Press, 1966 [1951]. p. 21.

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- xliv Ibid. p. 29. This elision between the philosopher and the libertine is not exaggerated here. In Sade's writing accomplished philosophy and perfect libertinage are virtually synonymous, where the most horrific crimes are only achieved through the most perfect philosophy.
- xl Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*. *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*. London: Penguin, 2003 [1889]. p. 46.
- xli Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*. New York: Vintage, 1974 [1882]. §125.
- xlvi Blanchot. *Lautréamont and Sade*. p. 28.
- xlvii Sade. *Juliette*. p. 20.
- xlvi Blanchot. *Lautréamont and Sade*. p. 28.
- l Sade. *Juliette*. p. 967.
- li Blanchot. *Lautréamont and Sade*. p. 29.
- lii Ibid. p. 31.
- liii Ibid. p. 29.
- liv Ibid. p. 31.
- lv Ibid. p. 32.
- lvi Sade. *Juliette*. p. 782.
- lvii Blanchot. *Lautréamont and Sade*. p. 32.
- lviii The study of Nature helps destroy one's preconceptions concerning Man, God, Justice and so on; it is part of the process of their negation. The libertine must engage in "incessant, unwearying study of her; only by probing into her furthestmost recesses may one finally destroy the last of one's misconceptions" (Sade. *Juliette*. p. 611.). But the study of Nature also allows for the possibility of her own negation, or so the most accomplished libertine comes to believe.
- lix Blanchot. *Lautréamont and Sade*. p. 35.
- lx Ibid.
- lxi Klossowski. *Sade My Neighbour*. p. 92.
- lxii Ibid. p. 97.
- lxiii Ibid.
- lxiv Horkheimer, Max and Adorno, Theodor. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002 [1947]. p. 69.
- lxv Klossowski. *Sade My Neighbour*. p. 96.
- lxvi Horkheimer and Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. p. 69.
- lxvii Ibid. p. 65.
- lxviii Sade. *Juliette*. p. 730.
- lxix Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Will to Power*. New York: Vintage, 1968.
- lxx See: Straehler-Pohl, Hauke and Pais, Alexandre. Learning to fail and learning from failure - ideology at work in a mathematics classroom. *Pedagogy*,

*Culture & Society* 2014; 22(1). Some would argue that we should ‘make failure an option’, making it permissible for those who do not ‘fit’ to opt out of the normative order of an educational system they cannot bear. Such non-normative others are to be encouraged to follow other pathways to success (see Steigler, Sam and Sullivan, Rachael E. How to ‘fail’ in school without really trying: queering pathways to success. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 2015; 23(1). ). The problem with this kind of critique, I suspect, is that it would seem to perpetuate a belief in educational mastery by seeking to bleed out the effects of failure and diversify what it means to succeed. This admittedly generous, and typically progressive response to the presence of failure in education is problematic, in that it defers the problem of failure, and hence, despite itself, leaves education essentially intact.

<sup>lxxi</sup> Straehler-Pohl and Pais. *Learning to fail and learning from failure*. p. 81.

<sup>lxxii</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and Nobody*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005 [1883]. p. 36.

<sup>lxxiii</sup> We work towards the ‘accomplishment of nihilism’, a phrase I borrow from: Vattimo, Gianni. *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture*. Cambridge: Polity, 2002 [1988]. p. 20.

<sup>lxxiv</sup> Our ‘European’ education, that is, in the non-geographical sense.

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