

The Sacrament of Penance in Sade's Writing: A Practice between Hell and Apathy

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In his *Histoire de la Sexualité*, Michel Foucault traces the emergence of “sexuality” as a scientific and medical discourse on human behaviour back to the practice of the sacrament of penance. According to Foucault, Western culture constructed its knowledge of sexuality by gathering data from sexual sins that needed to be confessed to the priests. In the nineteenth century, this knowledge became the ultimate truth about sexuality and was organized into an elaborate scientific discourse. Western sexual discourse, thus entangled in moral categories, ascribed to sexual pleasure the potential of becoming evil. Foucault's opposition between *ars erotica* and *scientia sexualis* summarizes this perspective: whereas, in the former, initiation to pleasure is the basis for sexual apprenticeship, in the latter, sexuality is defined by the avowal and the classification of so-called deviant sexual behaviours.

My approach stems from a theological reflection on Sade's literature;¹ therefore, a close literary reading of Sade's texts is beyond the scope and expertise of my analysis.² The following argument advances

1 This article has evolved from a broader project on the need for a theological response to Sade's critique of Christianity. See Muriel Schmid, *Le soufre au bord de la chaire: Sade et l'évangile* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2001). The analysis of confessional models is a new development in my work.

2 The literary criticism of Sade's writing can be divided into three main schools: a historical reading represented by, among others, Michel Delon and Béatrice Didier; a philosophical approach such as Maurice Blanchot's, and Pierre Klossowski's essays; and what might be

in three steps. "Reconstructing Sex" briefly presents Foucault's argument. "Instructions on the Sacrament of Penance" looks at the historical and theological elements of the sacrament of penance. Finally, "The Traditional Sacrament of Penance: A Gate to Hell" and "The *Ars Artium*" demonstrate that Sade's treatment of the sacrament of penance, through literary devices and theological references, challenges the linearity of Foucault's perspective and gives to confession another status in the construction of "sexuality." According to Sade, it is precisely by virtue of a scientific discourse that the libertine reaches the highest level of awareness and self-knowledge. Sade modifies the language of confession/avowal by a succession of three levels of discourses, in order to empower the one who speaks rather than the one who listens and judges.

Reconstructing Sex: From Confession to Scientific Discourse

In 1976, Foucault published the first volume of his *Histoire de la sexualité* under the title: "La volonté de savoir."³ This volume serves as a general introduction to his study, presenting its overarching argument. Here, Foucault describes how Western discourse on sexuality, informed by the practice of the sacrament of penance, has become a *scientia sexualis*. After the fourth Lateran Council in 1215, which prescribed confession for every Christian as an obligatory and regular duty, the penitent was to describe his/her sexual conduct in explicit detail to the priest. This obligation was intended to help the priest evaluate the gravity of the sin and impose the correct penance. To that end, the confessor was advised to use a set of questions that would lead the penitent to a complete avowal: "Quis, quid, ubi, per quos, quotiens, cur, quodmodo, quando."⁴ As Foucault observes, it was a matter of saying "ce qui a été fait—l'acte sexuel—et comment" (p. 85) and to say it as precisely as possible.

described as the apology, best illustrated by Annie Le Brun's work. See, for instance: Michel Delon, *Le savoir-vivre libertin* (Paris: Hachette, 2000), Béatrice Didier, *Sade, un écriture du désir* (Paris: Denoël/Gonthier, 1976), Maurice Blanchot, *Lavitréamont et Sade* (Paris: Minuit, 1949), Pierre Klossowski, *Sade mon prochain* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), and Annie Le Brun, *Soudain un bloc d'abîme, Sade* (Paris: J.-J. Pauvert, 1986). My theological interpretation presupposes that the religious allusions in Sade's texts deserve a special treatment as part of his literary style and an expression of his goals as a writer of fiction.

- 3 Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité. Volume 1: La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976). References are to this edition.
- 4 Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 117.

In the sixteenth century, the Council of Trent, organized by the Roman Catholic Church in response to the Protestant Reformation, reflecting on the sacrament of penance, introduced a significant modification in the confession of sexual sins. The instructions to the priests insisted on a more global perspective on sexuality; thus, in Foucault's words, it was a question of not only retelling the act but also "de restituer en lui et autour de lui, les pensées qui l'ont doublé, les obsessions qui l'accompagnent, les images, les désirs, les modulations et la qualité du plaisir qui l'habitent" (p. 85). Describing the physical act was no longer enough: it also became necessary to examine one's soul through all the ramifications that sexual desire had on the body and the mind. The Council of Trent insisted that priests, in order to fulfil their role as judges and to lay out the correct penance for the sin, needed to know all the circumstances of the act. Thomas Tentler notes:

To be complete, the examination of conscience must discover not only all mortal sins, but also their "aggravating circumstances," which must be confessed. This means that the penitent must tell the priest anything about the sin that makes it more blameworthy and offensive to God's law.⁵

Through the evolution of the sacrament of penance and the instructions that went with it, sexual behaviour became part of a language structure comprising two necessary components: avowal and sanction. In the nineteenth century, a medical and scientific discourse on sex emerged. This discourse stemmed from the practice of confession and its use of language to express and to judge sexual acts. At that point, confession, according to Foucault, "a perdu sa localisation rituelle et exclusive" (p. 84), and this discourse produced a general truth about sex.

According to Foucault's argument, one aspect of the history of sexuality, in particular, is fundamental to our current understanding of *scientia sexualis*: the principle of secrecy at the heart of confessional practice has been retained throughout the evolution of the discourse on sex. Sexual acts, because they were often seen as shameful, were difficult to discuss. The role of the priest, therefore, included encouraging the full revelation of sexual behaviour and ensuring that the penitent did not hide anything from him. In the nineteenth

5 Tentler, *Sin and Confession*, p. 116. See also Jean Delumeau, *L'aveu et le pardon* (Paris: Fayard, 1990), p. 103.

century, according to Foucault, the principle of secrecy took an even more invasive dimension, legitimating all kinds of investigations:

En l'intégrant à un projet de discours scientifique, le XIX^e siècle a déplacé l'aveu; il tend à ne plus porter seulement sur ce que le sujet voudrait bien cacher; mais, sur ce qui lui est caché à lui-même, ne pouvant venir à la lumière que petit à petit et par le travail de l'aveu auquel, chacun de leur côté, participent l'interrogateur et l'interrogé. Le principe d'une latence essentielle à la sexualité permet d'articuler sur une pratique scientifique la contrainte d'un aveu difficile. (pp. 88–89)

With the *scientia sexualis*, avowal and sanction evolved into scientific knowledge and power. Sexuality, therefore, has become the prerogative of a complex network of discourses expressing truth on human nature and psychology. In Foucault's analysis of the sacrament of penance and its effects on contemporary treatment of sexuality, he clearly emphasizes the disciplinary function of penance. Although Foucault is correct to note that discipline is an important part of penance, he does not historicize the disciplinary function of the sacrament, using it as a given philosophical concept. Furthermore, Foucault does not take into serious account the consoling function of the sacrament: the Catholic Church also designed confession as a means of defusing, in the penitent's conscience, the anxiety provoked by the fear of God's judgment. It is necessary, therefore, to put the sacrament of penance into historical context in order to discuss Foucault's perspective.

Instructions on the Sacrament of Penance

As mentioned, in 1215 the fourth Lateran Council made confession obligatory, at least once a year, for every Christian. This obligation found fertile ground in the fear of God's judgment and the risk of eternal damnation, which Church teachings had always created. As Guy Bechtel puts it: "Nous pouvons sans cesse succomber, et presque sans le savoir: tel fut assurément le message constant du christianisme entre le XIII^e et le XVIII^e siècle. Une véritable phobie du mal, de la maladie, de la damnation traversa nos sociétés."⁶ The expertise and the power to save people from damnation was ascribed to priests; the sacrament represented the only effective means for them to dispense God's grace and to assure penitents that God would forgive them if they sincerely repented. Thus, the sacrament of penance played a

6 Guy Bechtel, *La chair, le Diable et le confesseur* (Paris: Plon, 1994), p. 49.

central role: it was conceived as the first step to salvation, renewing hope in God's forgiveness and, above all, giving the right to take communion as a sign of God's acceptance. To encourage people to obey the Church's commandment, priests would endlessly remind their parishioners of what was at stake in this sacrament, using the Sunday sermon to scare them.⁷

The sacrament itself, in order to work, had to be conducted in the proper way. To that end, after the fourth Lateran Council, theological reflections and practical instructions multiplied in the Catholic tradition.⁸ The following list summarizes the essential elements of this codification:

- a. The sacrament of penance consists of four elements:⁹ first, penitents need to express sorrow ("contrition" in theological terms) at having sinned; second, they must make a complete confession of their sins; third, they have to perform some penitential exercises; and fourth, the priest has to pronounce the absolution.
- b. Sins are classified from least to most severe. In this context, some sins—the reserved cases—ought to be confessed to the Pope (attacks on the clergy and its wealth, church burnings) and others only to the bishop (stealing or misuse of holy things, and sexual sins such as deflowering a virgin, having sex with a nun, sodomy, bestiality).¹⁰
- c. The priest must show compassion and patience, never anger or exasperation.¹¹ Trent explicitly affirms that the work of a confessor should not be that of a torturer.¹²
- d. The confessional box, which appeared in the sixteenth century, is seen as a necessary device to establish a distance between the priest and the penitent, especially when the penitent is a woman. The penitent must kneel in deference to the priest, which accentuates the humility of the penitent and the authority of God's tribunal.

7 On this topic, see in particular Bernard Dompnier, "Missions et confession au XVII^e siècle," Groupe de la Bussière, *Pratiques de la confession* (Paris: Cerf, 1983), pp. 201–22.

8 For a presentation of this literature, see Bechtel, pp. 82–93.

9 Tentler, *Sin and Confession*, p. 3.

10 On the classification of sins see Hervé Martin, "Confession et contrôle social à la fin du Moyen Age," Groupe de la Bussière, *Pratiques de la confession*, p. 124. On reserved cases, see Tentler, *Sin and Confession*, p. 304f.

11 See Delumeau, pp. 30–31 or Anne T. Thayer, "Judge and Doctor: Images of the Confessor in Printed Model Sermon Collections, 1450–1520," *Penitence in the Age of Reformations*, ed. Katharine Jackson Lualdi and Anne T. Thayer (Aldershot, Burlington, Singapore, and Sydney: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 10–29.

12 Delumeau, p. 47.

- e. The penance should never exceed the capacity of the penitent and, thus, should not discourage him/her from practising the sacrament on a regular basis. Penance has to be proportionate to the crime and to the sinner's capability.

All these elements are part of a slow evolution in Church teachings. In this context, an important break occurs after the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century. Before Trent, the image of the confessor was clearly two-sided: the confessor is both a judge and a physician; as of the sixteenth century, however, the accent is put on the judging role of the confessor, and the confessional box becomes the symbol of that shift. At that point, the consoling dimension of penance became secondary. As Anne Thayer explains: "In articulating the Catholic Church's understanding of the sacrament of penance, the Council of Trent responds to Luther by strongly reaffirming the traditional role of the confessor as a judge while the image of the confessor as a doctor receded to the background." In conjunction with this distinction, theological explanations of the priest's power in granting the penitent God's forgiveness express three tendencies. Thayer categorizes them as follows:

Those collections I designate as "rigorist" stress the importance of contrition and satisfaction, holding the penitents themselves largely responsible for the successful forgiveness of sins. At the other end of the spectrum, "absolutionist" preachers accentuate the power of the sacrament to work forgiveness and highlight the priest as the mediator of this grace. Consequently, the expectations placed on the penitent are relatively less demanding. In between, those I call "moderate" preachers build their exhortations around the effective pairing of the contrition of the penitent with the absolution of the priest.¹³

The image of the confessor as a judge goes with the rigorist attitude.¹⁴ In this case, the expertise of the confessor, who knows all the rules and is able to make a decision in accordance with them, is stressed: only the priest can impose the penance that will allow penitents to enact their own forgiveness.

"How does salvation work?" is the question at the heart of the sacrament of penance. As the historical overview demonstrates, the debate about the power of the priest is central to our understanding of the sixteenth century as an age of reforms that modified the

13 Thayer, "Judge and Doctor," p. 27, 15.

14 Thayer, "Judge and Doctor," pp. 17.

definition of the sacrament of penance:¹⁵ whereas the Council of Trent insisted on the sacrament as a means of attaining salvation, Luther affirmed, through his famous *sola gratia* and *sola fide*, God as the sole judge and forgiver of humankind. All along, Catholic theologians were trying to find a way to dispense God's grace, with the help of a regulated practice. The authority of the priest, the truth of Christian doctrine, and the elements of Christian ritual, therefore, were constantly reaffirmed.

Keeping in mind these historical elements of the sacrament of penance, let us look at Sade's writing in order to evaluate the use of this sacrament in his fiction.

The Traditional Sacrament of Penance: A Gate to Hell

Discourses on and around sex are, of course, essential to Sade's writing. In addition, they are often set in a religious context: churches, monasteries, or convents; the libertines themselves are often priests, monks, or bishops. Religious and theological themes abound in his writing: sacraments, the mass ritual, biblical references, or discussions about the fundamentals of Christianity; however, literary critics have often overlooked the function and the structure of theological discourse in Sade's work. Béatrice Didier, in an original contribution entitled *Sade théologien*,¹⁶ demonstrates that Sade knows the Catholic tradition and uses its method of argument (the *refutatio*) to criticize it: "Sade réfute—ou fait réfuter par ses personnages—tous les dogmes essentiels de la théologie catholique avec une compétence, une subtilité qui supposent un esprit parfaitement à l'aise dans ces concepts et dans cette technique."¹⁷ Didier illustrates her point by enumerating several aspects of Sade's writing that are directly influenced by Catholic theology, first and foremost the sacrament of penance: "La confession est probablement le «sacrement» qui tient la plus grande place dans l'œuvre de Sade."¹⁸

15 See Tentler, "Postscript," *Penitence in the Age of Reformations*, p. 242.

16 Didier, "Sade théologien," *Colloque de Cerisy: Sade écrire la cirse* (Paris: Belfond, 1983), pp. 219–40. Jean Deprun in his short essay "Sade philosophe" does a similar reading, showing how Sade uses the French materialist philosophers. Cf. D.A.F. de Sade, *Œuvres*, intro. Michel Delon (Paris: Gallimard/Pléiade, 1991), pp. lix–lxxix.

17 Didier, p. 220.

18 Didier, p. 233.

In his writing, Sade introduces the sacrament of penance in two basic ways, which correspond to two explicit power positions in the text: the victim's and the libertine's. This analysis will demonstrate how Sade criticizes the traditional sacrament of penance within the Catholic practice. Making the link with Foucault's argument about *scientia sexualis*, I will then show how Sade uses scientific discourse to describe human sexuality. This discourse, formulated in Sade's writing from the narrator/reader's point of view, will demonstrate that his critique of the sacrament of penance is based not only on his understanding of human nature but also on the relationship between scientific language and sexuality.

In order to illustrate the sacrament of penance at the level of the victim, I will refer to two examples of a confession made to a priest and taken from *La Nouvelle Justine*, first published in 1799. These two stories present a detailed staging of the sacrament of penance. *La Nouvelle Justine* was written at the end of the eighteenth century, the final result of a long process of creation for Sade (which started in 1787 with the manuscript of *Les Infortunes de la Vertu*). In these examples, I wish to pay close attention to the structure of confession and the way in which Sade alters it.

The first scene occurs during the famous convent episode. Justine has already been raped and abused by various libertines; following the advice of a young female shepherd, she seeks refuge in a Benedictine convent hidden at the bottom of a valley. The church of the convent is known for its representation of the Virgin, which is supposed to perform miracles. Justine goes to the convent hoping to be saved by the six monks living there, whom the shepherd describes as religious people "dont rien n'égalé la piété, la continence et les mœurs;" the shepherd insists: "allez-y, mademoiselle, allez-y, vous n'en reviendrez pas sans vous sentir meilleure."¹⁹ The encouragement of the shepherd plays with the traditional expectation of the sacrament of penance, which promises believers liberation from their feelings of guilt and sinfulness and from their fear of God's condemnation; however, the informed reader can already foresee the fate awaiting Justine and the mistake she is making in hoping for help. As Alice Laborde notes in her analysis of this episode: "L'aveuglement des victimes provient de leur interprétation historique de signes qui se révéleront strictement

19 Sade, *La Nouvelle Justine* in *Œuvres*, ed. Delon (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 2:591. References are to this edition.

«sadiques».²⁰ Justine is the victim of her education: what she thinks will save her will actually entrap her.

Trusting, Justine walks to the convent and asks to make her confession. Dom Sévérino, the head of the convent, accepts and leads her to the church “dont les portes se verouillent aussitôt sur elle” (2:593). Sade does not reveal what Justine says to the priest; since we have followed Justine’s previous steps, Sade assumes the reader knows what happened to Justine. Rather, he puts the emphasis on the priest’s reactions to the confession: hidden from Justine, while listening to her, Dom Sévérino is having sex with a young boy in order to bring satisfaction “à l’embrassement que les récits naïfs de Justine vont produire sur son genre nerveux” (2:594). Once again, Sade underlines Justine’s error: as he is supposed to, the priest indeed listens to Justine with “grande attention” and “un air de pitié et d’intérêt” (2:594), asking several questions at the end of her story, to elicit all the details of what was done to her. Again, Justine is misled by this pastoral attitude and cannot perceive arousal and sexual pleasure in the priest’s attitude. After the confession, the penance imposed on Justine by Dom Sévérino is to kneel down, naked, in front of the Virgin Mary. Justine confidently unveils her soul and body in order to be saved and to receive absolution. Her nakedness and resignation become, therefore, symbols of the priest’s power over the penitent: “ne vous ai-je pas dit que votre salut dépendait de votre résignation, et que ce qui paraissait souillure chez les autres hommes, n’était que pureté, chasteté, dévotion, chez nous!” (2:598). As Roland Barthes notes: “lorsque, dans une assemblée, le nu côtoie le vêtement (et par conséquent s’y oppose), c’est-à-dire hors des orgies, il sert à marquer les personnes spécialement humiliées.”²¹ In the staging of the sacrament of penance, Justine’s nakedness suggests that contrition is a form of humiliation and clearly situates the penitent among the victims.

Following the scene of penance, Dom Sévérino leads Justine to the heart of the convent, the secret and hidden place where the monks become libertines and where her body will be used for their pleasure. No absolution is pronounced, but a repetition of the “sins” that Justine confessed earlier follows her confession. This repetition

20 Alice M. Laborde, *Sade Romancier* (Neuchâtel: La Baconnière, 1974), p. 53. This collection of essays by Laborde offers an original approach to Sade’s writing. She pays close attention to the typology and the ritual that construct the libertine universe.

21 Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* in *Œuvres complètes*, intro. Eric Marty (Paris: Seuil, 1994), tome 2, p. 1054.

becomes an initiation ritual, initiation into the full understanding of human nature. Laborde finds that

Sade respecte la topographie relative au mythe de l'enfer. C'est la descente aux enfers qu'il répète inlassablement, mais cette descente a une double signification: elle n'est que le prélude à la punition de la faiblesse et de l'innocence de la victime, elle est aussi prélude à une initiation, à une reconnaissance des caractéristiques essentielles de l'humain, à savoir sa cruauté, son désir, sa puissance, etc.²²

The sacrament of penance, in this episode, opens a world where Christian values are mocked and entirely disqualified. The next example will confirm this reading.

The second scene is part of the life story of one of the monks, Jérôme. He has been appointed confessor and is called to the side of a dying woman. She confesses to him that two years ago one of her friends, who was about to die, entrusted to her care a young girl along with some money for her education. This friend asked her to hand both to a duke in Milan. Seduced by the money, she kept it and the girl, breaking the promise to her friend. Responding to her, Jérôme plays with her fear, implying that her crime cannot be redeemed. "Vous m'effrayez, mon père!—Je le dois, madame; en ma qualité de médiateur entre le Ciel et vous, je dois vous montrer les fléaux suspendus sur votre tête" (2:775). Again, nothing is unusual in this attitude: the priest is the mediator between God and believers, and he has the power to save or condemn their souls. The fear of eternal punishment is the main motivation for confessing one's sins. The experience of death is the extreme situation that renders confession absolutely necessary. Since the priest is called to reassure the dying person, absolution needs to be offered. In Sade's text, absolution is categorically refused:

"Oh! Mon père", dit alors la bénigne créature [...] "me donnerez-vous au moins l'absolution?—Dieu m'en garde", répondis-je d'un ton ferme et sévère: "je ne compromettrai point jusque-là la médiation que j'ai reçue du Ciel; je n'assimilerai point, par cette sainte bénédiction, le coupable à l'homme de bien: l'exiger... oser me le demander même est un nouveau crime, dont le ciel doit inévitablement vous punir. Adieu, madame; vos forces faiblissent, je le vois; rappelez toutes celles qui vous restent pour soutenir le moment cruel de votre apparition devant Dieu; moment bien terrible sans doute, quand on y arrive que pour écouter la sentence céleste qui doit vous plonger aux enfers!" (2:776)

22 Laborde, p. 55.

Two important misunderstandings arise in this passage. First, even though Jérôme claims to be a mediator between God and the believers, he refuses to fulfil his role; as a priest, he is, by definition, supposed to offer absolution or at least to help the penitent gain it. Second, the natural request to be absolved is turned into an additional crime. Whereas Justine seeks purification through the sacrament of penance, the dying woman expects consolation and comfort from the priest. This expectation shows her weakness and allows the priest to take advantage of her.

In these two scenes, confession appears to be the gate to hell. The penitent, thinking of liberating her consciousness, is, in fact, trapped in her own sins. In Justine's case, hell is a concrete entrapment; she falls down into a prison where her so-called sins are going to be repeated again and again. In the second case, hell is expressed as the impossibility of the priest's pronouncing God's pardon, making confession useless at its core. This technique in Sade's use of the sacrament of penance contributes to one of his main attacks on religion: faith is naïveté and leads the believer to his or her own downfall. Moreover, contrary to the traditional technique of the *exempla*²³ that preachers used in their sermons to provoke fear among listeners in order to encourage them to confess their sins, Sade's stories threaten the believer and contradict the Church's teachings on the ability of the sacrament of penance to relieve the penitent.

In these two cases, Sade seems to refer to the rules governing the administration of the sacrament and to mock them. In the case of Justine's confession, Sade evokes the classification of sins in the Catholic doctrine. According to the instructions cited or mentioned above (p. 765), the priest does not technically have the power to absolve her crimes: they must be confessed to a bishop. In the case of the dying woman, the refusal of absolution may refer to the delay of absolution authorized by the Church in cases where repentance seemed not sincere enough. Sade may also be referring to the sin of failure to make restitution, which was beyond the jurisdiction of the priest as well and needed to be confessed to the bishop.²⁴ In short, Sade depicts the image of a rigorist confessor who knows the rules

23 On the *exempla* genre, see Jacques Berlioz and Colette Ribaucourt, "Images de la confession dans la prédication au début du XIV^e siècle: L'exemple de l'*Alphabetum narrationum* d'Arnold de Liège," Groupe de la Bussière, *Pratiques de la confession*, pp. 95–110.

24 Tentler, *Sin and Confession*, p. 307.

and sticks to them—he does not possess the authority to absolve either Justine's or the dying woman's specific sins. This practice may well coincide with what Sade encountered in his personal experience of the Church.

When victims confess in Sade's texts, one striking aspect is the lack of details in the description of their sins: all the emphasis is put on the priest's role and attitude. This confessor is not only a judge but also becomes a torturer, and the confession is not a sacrament but a sadistic ritual. Interestingly, the Church's Council of Trent foresaw the risk of such a misuse of the rite.

Besides staging the sacrament of penance, Sade also refers to the language of confession in his heroes' narrations, the libertines, who, unlike the victims, describe their exploits with precise details. Didier notes: "Le libertin lui confesse glorieusement ses manquements à l'ordre moral, ce qui lui est l'occasion d'affirmer à la fois ses vices et ses convictions."²⁵ This is the second level where Sade refers, in his texts, to the practice of the sacrament of penance. One example of this technique appears in *La Nouvelle Justine*, when a series of questions is asked to fully uncover the libertines' sexual acts performed in a hidden place:

Avez-vous bandé?—Non.—Les titillations du plaisir ont-elles été vives?—Médiocres.—Votre imagination s'est-elle échauffée sur des choses plus fortes?—Oh! j'en désirais d'affreuses.—Pourquoi ne vous y êtes-vous pas livré?—Elles eussent ravi le sujet à la société; j'ai voulu l'en laisser jouir. (2:906–7)

When the libertine/penitent is about to tell his or her story, the listeners invite him or her to express all sensations, thoughts, and feelings that accompanied the crimes. In this context, Sade may well follow the Tridentine instructions on how to make a good confession. Sade characterizes this kind of narration as "l'un des récits les plus obscènes" (2:703), "le plus impur qui ait jamais été fait."²⁶ Libertine acts need to be shamelessly and fully told in order to have a full effect. Here, Sade opens up another type of confession that is much more detailed than the victims' speeches: the discourse of the experienced libertine. On the one hand, the libertine confesses his or her crimes

25 Didier, p. 234.

26 D.A.F. de Sade, *Les Cent Vingt Journées de Sodome* (Paris: Gallimard/La Pléiade, 1991), tome 1, p. 69.

and thus pretends to reveal true human nature. On the other hand, the listeners take over the role of the priest, judging the gravity, and therefore the validity of the crimes as true libertine acts. Once again, absolution *per se* is not granted; rather, absolution is replaced by the listeners' authorization to perform such acts in order to be accepted into the society of libertines.

Overall, Sade uses the sacrament of penance, with accurate ecclesiastical and historical details, in order to contradict two presuppositions intrinsic to it: first, he denies the power given to the priest to pronounce God's judgment (power that was acknowledged by common people); furthermore, he denies the very possibility of erasing so-called sins.²⁷ So, even if the Catholic priest is set up as a mediator between God and the believers, he cannot fight human nature and its terrible desires. These two critiques are illustrated by the appropriation of the practice of confession by the community of libertines. Sade refuses to grant the sacrament of penance the power to control human behaviour, to educate people, and to heal them of their guilt and fear. He denies the old understanding of penance that insists on the dual function of the sacrament: "discipline and consolation."²⁸ The only consolation for Sade is that the Christian God does not exist, and human beings should, therefore, feel free from the fear of God's judgment; the only discipline that matters to Sade is the careful staging of sexual desires, which is controlled by the speech of the libertines.

It is time now to come back to the status of scientific discourse on sexuality and its link to the sacrament of penance. A very specific use of the medical discourse on sexuality is rooted in Sade's critique of the sacrament of penance. The narrator comments on the libertines' experiences. When the narrator speaks about the libertines' exploits, he provides a third way to take sexual acts into consideration: in the voice of the narrator, these acts are depicted in a sober style similar to the one that appears in scientific treatises on sexual behaviours and

27 It would be interesting to explore the possible influence of Protestant Reformation doctrines on Sade: his life in the South of France may have put him in contact with Protestant communities. On the Protestant arguments against the Catholic sacrament of penance, see Tentler, "Postscript," p. 355 or Raymond A. Mentzer, "Notions of Sin and Penitence within the French Reformed Community," *Penitence in the Age of Reformations*, pp. 84–100.

28 Tentler is the scholar who has brought back these two elements into the study of the sacrament of penance; see *Sin and Confession*, p. 13.

perversions in the nineteenth century. Simone de Beauvoir reminds Sade's readers that "ce n'est pas sans raison qu'on a comparé son œuvre à la *Psychopathologia Sexualis* de Kraft-Ebbing ...; ainsi Sade a établi systématiquement, selon les recettes d'une espèce d'art combinatoire, un répertoire des possibilités sexuelles de l'homme."²⁹ This literary device is especially present at the end of *Les Cent Vingt Journées de Sodome*. In this type of language, Sade adopts a medical point of view that translates sexuality into cold dissection: the bodies are literally cut and dismembered. According to Michel Delon,³⁰ the nineteenth-century medical approach to Sade's descriptions of sexual conduct favoured a purely scientific interest in Sade's writing. This reading of Sade's texts introduced the neologism "sadisme" in 1834 as a medical term: thus, the text was understood as a listing of potential human perversions, and the intersection between the world of the author and the world of the text was solely based on neutral observation. This "médicalisation" of Sade's texts reveals the desire to validate Sade's literature by including it in the history of scientific disclosures about human sexuality. This "médicalisation," however, loses sight of the function of Sade's scientific language about sexuality in his description of human nature. Using Foucault's perspective on the evolution of Western sexual discourse helps in calculating the full effect of scientific language on sexuality in Sade's writing.

The shift in sexual discourse, from the language of confession to scientific treatises, described by Foucault, is present in Sade's work. In Sade's universe, indeed, the discourse on sexuality moves from the fear of judgment expressed by the victim, to the pleasure of the senses discovered by the libertines, to the apathy of pure observation put into words by the narrator. The staging of the sacrament of penance is the literary device that Sade chooses to illustrate the two first perspectives. At that point, Sade is not far from Foucault's interpretation: forced confession gives to the listener the dangerous power to judge and to sanction. Sade differs from Foucault's argument when he evaluates the status of scientific discourse. According to Sade, scientific discourse stems from the denial of the confession's power structure and ignorance of human nature; it represents the decisive

29 Simone de Beauvoir, *Faut-il brûler Sade?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), p. 30. Richard Kraft-Ebbing (1840–1902) was a specialist in mental illness; his treatise *Psychopathologia Sexualis* was published in 1886.

30 See D.A.F. de Sade, *Œuvres*, intro. Delon (Paris: Gallimard/Pléiade, 1991), pp. xliii–xliv.

step that allows libertines to distance themselves from their passions, leading them to the apathy of the observer. Laborde reminds us that the notion of apathy, “fondamentale à la compréhension de l’œuvre sadienne, est très particulière car elle implique, non pas une indifférence aux choses, mais, au contraire, une forme de détachement supérieur, condition nécessaire à un état de lucidité totale sans lequel l’expérience du héros sadique ne saurait être.”³¹ Sade shows that scientific discourse, far from controlling sexual behaviour, is the final step that frees the libertine from the power of morality over sex. The principle of secrecy in confession is transformed in Sade’s universe into the secrecy of libertine society, which protects itself against the hegemony of morality. Within this society exists a compulsion to speak up and give voice to desire against all kinds of taboos and authority. The libertine experience of sexuality, then, opens up to observation and description taken over by scientific discourse. At the end of this analysis, the perfect libertine is the reader who sides with the narrator, detached from all feelings of either fear or pleasure.

In comparison with Foucault’s argument, Sade insists on an existential evolution of the discourse on sexuality rather than a chronological or sociological one. Whereas Foucault implies that the sacrament of penance is the root of Western control, by means of scientific discourse, over sexuality, Sade claims that the same language allows the individual—the libertine—to release his or her sexuality by deepening and finally overcoming the need for pleasure. The portrayal of the confessor as a spiritual guide, found in the tradition of the *ars artium*, may explain the Sadian perspective on the role of confession as a way to reach objectivity and apathy.

The *Ars Artium*

Foucault views confession as a purely disciplinary means. Further, he sees a negative evolution from the classical model of confession to what he calls an *ars artium* at the beginning of the sixteenth century and finds in this shift the basis for *scientia sexualis*:

Ce rite, depuis le XVI^e siècle, s’est peu à peu détaché du sacrement de pénitence, et par l’intermédiaire de la conduction des âmes et de la direction de conscience—*ars artium*—il a émigré vers la pédagogie, vers les rapports des adultes et des enfants, vers les relations familiales, vers la médecine et la psychiatrie. (p. 91)

31 Laborde, p. 14.

According to Foucault, *ars artium* in Western culture has invaded education and medicine, becoming a disciplinary tool to control behaviour. Foucault does not situate the concept of *ars artium* in its original setting. In fact, his understanding of the *ars artium* loses sight of the therapeutic and initiatory aspect that defined it at inception.

The *ars artium* is an expression made popular by Gregory the Great (540–604) in his *Regula Pastoralis*.³² Critics agree that Gregory the Great was influenced by Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 330–390) in his use of this concept.³³ The text written in 362 by Gregory of Nazianzus is in Greek, translated into Latin by the monk Rufin (345–410) at the end of the fourth century. Gregory the Great wrote his *Regula Pastoralis* in Latin around 590.³⁴ The full Latin expression states: “ars est artium regimen animarum.” By this expression, Gregory the Great wants to define the highest task of the minister: guiding souls. He makes the comparison between the physician and the pastor, insisting that both need to be trained in order to heal efficiently the body or the soul, respectively. In so doing, Gregory the Great defines pastoral care—of which the sacrament of penance becomes a central element—more in terms of the physician’s task than the judge’s.³⁵ In parallel, confession, in the monastic practice³⁶ of the fourth and fifth centuries, has a clear therapeutic function in addition to the pedagogical one. Confession, then, was not yet dissociated from spiritual guidance, but conceived as the first step to self-knowledge. The function of this ritual is to help the monk reach a level of apathy: his calling consists in extracting himself from the world and its emotional troubles. The ideal life is an ascetic life.

Against Foucault’s argument, we find in Sade’s perspective the definition of confession as the first step to self-knowledge. Sade seems to return to the possibility of a therapeutic and initiatory function in the sacrament of penance. Indeed, Sade definitively refuses the figure of the confessor as a judge. Going back to the pre-Tridentine figure

32 Grégoire le Grand, *Règle Pastorale* (Paris: Cerf, Sources Chrétiennes no. 381, 1992), 1:1.

33 Grégoire de Nazianze, *Discours* (Paris: Cerf, Sources Chrétiennes no. 247, 1978), 2:16.

34 On this text see Bruno Judic, “Structure et fonction de la *Regula Pastoralis*” in *Colloques internationaux du CNRS, Grégoire le Grand* (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1986), pp. 409–17.

35 In this context, *ars artium* comes in later manuals to explain the role of the confessor as a healer; see Tentler, *Sin and Confession*, pp. 96–97 or Thayer, “Judge and Doctor,” p. 20.

36 On this topic see Jean-Claude Guy, “Aveu thérapeutique et aveu pédagogique dans l’ascèse des pères du désert (I^{ve}-Ve s.),” *Groupe de la Bussière, Pratiques de la confession*, pp. 25–40.

of the confessor that was lost by the eighteenth century, Sade prefers the image of the confessor as a physician, which he may draw from the early Christian principle of *ars artium*. The therapeutic function of the sacrament in Sade, however, should not be understood as the exact equivalent of the traditional healing or consoling function. In Sade's understanding, confession cannot pretend to change human nature or to reassure people, but may reveal and justify the real self. According to Sade, the true therapeutic function of confession can emerge only when the penitent is free from the power figure of the priest. Sade insists on that idea by staging the refusal of absolution. In Sade, if the ritual works efficiently, it is followed not by absolution, but by rites of initiation and philosophical dissertations—a sort of *ars artium* enhanced by an *ars erotica*. These rites allow the penitent to reach a new universe where he or she is set apart and protected from moral oppression (the secret society of the libertines). In this discovery of the self, then, the highest point of self-knowledge is apathy, which is translated into the ability to order the chaos of desires and fantasies and take pleasure from the most threatening impulses. The narrator gives voice to this perspective. Sade suggests that telling the whole truth about sex, even if forced, is a way of opening a world of passions: confession is an appropriate way to uncover the depth of human sexuality—its excess and its violence—and to unleash it.

In this context, the use of the sacrament of penance in Sade's writing illustrates a broader argument: in order to become fully human, people have to free themselves from the fear of death and God's judgment, which, ironically, the traditional sacrament of penance as consolation claims to achieve.³⁷ Sade tells his readers to deny the priest's power in order to liberate their souls from fear and anxieties. If the sacrament of penance is not seized as the opportunity to discover and to embrace fully one's own sexuality, it becomes an oppressive tool used against human nature and freedom. Sade, therefore, refuses absolution to the ones trapped in the power structure of the sacrament of penance.

Moreover, Sade seems to contest the idea that the discourse about sex, emerging from the structure of confession, leads to an economic and scientific power over individuals. Rather, almost two hundred

³⁷ In *Du confessionnel en littérature* (Paris: Saint-Paul, 1986), Bertrand de Margerie shows that Chateaubriand, unlike Sade, insists on the consolation offered by the sacrament of penance.

years before Foucault, he emphasizes that confession, by revealing the truth about human nature, sets the libertine—the Sadian hero—free from the bonds of social power and moral categories: he becomes an outlaw, master in his own universe. In this universe, the libertine's privilege is to stage sexuality, instead of penitential exercises, and to eventually enumerate all its faces through scientific experiments.

Critics have noted that the use of speech in Sade's writing is a libertine prerogative. Barthes reminds us that "hors le meurtre, il n'y a qu'un trait que les libertins possèdent en propre et ne partagent jamais, sous quelque forme que ce soit: c'est la parole. Le maître est celui qui parle, qui dispose du langage dans son entier; l'objet est celui qui se tait, reste séparé, par une mutilation plus absolue que tous les supplices érotiques, de tout accès au discours."³⁸ In this context, looking at Sade's use of the language of confession reveals something about the link between sexuality and language, and helps distinguish various forms in which the libertine employs language. In the staging of the sacrament of penance that involves victims, the libertine acquires the word and the power of the priest. Within the libertine society, the libertines use the language of confession to reveal their crimes; dissertation and explanation follow the avowal, giving to the libertine the word and the mind of the philosopher. Finally, in the narrator's voice, the language becomes observation and description, which is an indication of apathy. At this third level, the language is set outside of the libertine universe and given back to the reader who, up to this point, was kept silent. The narrator's apathy should ultimately inspire the reader to resist the structures that control sexual desire by claiming the power of sexual discourse. The legacy of sadism, the term itself, suggests that such an empowerment is possible.

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38 Barthes, p. 1061.