The Act and Evil in Literature

When speaking of Zeno's famous paradox (Achilles and the tortoise), Lacan remarks:

A number has a limit and it is to that extent that it is infinite. It is quite clear that Achilles can only pass the tortoise - he cannot catch up with it. He only catches up with it at infinity (infinitude).

This remark allows us to distinguish the "two faces of Achilles": his "Sadian" and his "Don Juanian" face. These "two faces of Achilles," as we will show, articulate very well what we developed above as the two aspects of Kant's theory of the act. On the one hand we have an infinite approach towards the holiness of the will which requires the (Sadian) fantasy of the immortality of the body and, on the other hand, the "suicidal" act that always goes "too far," leaving a hole in the Other, and thus becomes the paradigm for "diabolical evil." In other words, either it is always the case that one more step is required for the accomplishment of an (ethical) act or such an act has already been left behind; either we still have not attained the object (of desire) or we have already exceeded it.

The "Sadian movement" implies that we will approach the whole of the object of desire ad infinitum. With each step we come closer to it, yet we never really "cover the whole distance." Therefore, as Sade puts it in his famous statement, we (always) have...
before us one more effort to be made. This is the reason that the Sadian "paradigm" is apt to strike us as quite tedious: Sade’s narratives progress exceedingly slowly, "bit by bit" (as if Achilles were actually trying to catch up with the tortoise), they are overloaded with a myriad of “technical details” and lengthy digressions. It appears that the heroes of these stories have “all the time in the world” and that it is postponing the attainment of pleasure that gives them the greatest pleasure. This is the paradigm that also governs what we call the erotic.

On the other hand, we have the “Don Juanian movement,” perhaps best described as an overly hasty pursuit. Here, every time we set out for the object of desire, we move too quickly and immediately overtake it. So we find ourselves required to begin again and again. If the “Sadian paradigm” is monotonous (yet still attracts us with its suspense), the “Don Juanian” is repetitive (yet full of adventure). The difference between these two approaches can be also formulated in terms of the difference between a “part by part” and a “one by one” approach to the object of enjoyment. In the first case, we enjoy the body of the other part by part, but when we want to “put the pieces together,” they can never make a whole, a One. In the second case, we begin with the One, we enjoy a multiplicity “one by one,” yet we can never say that we enjoyed them all. “She,” each one of them, is essentially One-less-than.

That’s why, in any relationship of man with a woman - she who is in question (en cause) - it is from the perspective of the One-less (Une-en-moins) that she must be taken up. I already indicated that to you concerning Don Juan (…)

It is probably no coincidence that both of these attempts (trying to reform the Other “part by part” or “one by one”), when undertaken seriously, enter the territory of “diabolical evil.” In this chapter we will closely examine the logic of these two “ap-
The whole of the story told in _Les Liaisons Dangereuses_ is set against the background of an original myth - the mythical relationship of Merteuil and Valmont which was broken off in order for the current story to begin. This relationship is presented to us as a kind of "original Oneness" where love and enjoyment coincided, precisely insofar as they are fundamentally incompatible. Regarding this incompatibility, the tone of the novel agrees with Jacques Lacan’s statements from his Seminar _Encore_: love has to do with identification and thus functions accordingly to the formula “we are one.” On the other side is enjoyment, _jouissance_, which in principle is never “whole.” The _jouissance_ of the body of the other is always partial, it can never be One. At the beginning of the novel Merteuil warns Valmont against his planned seduction of Madame de Tourvel, saying that she could only offer him a half-enjoyment (_demi-jouissance_), stressing that in such a relationship 1 + 1 always makes 2 (and never 1, which would be the definition of “whole,” “non-half” enjoyment). Although “in the real word” _jouissance_, enjoyment, is always only a half-enjoyment, in the case of Merteuil and Valmont there was an “absolute self-abandon” and “ecstasy of the senses, when pleasure is purified in its own excess.” This is the Marquise’s description. Valmont on the other hand puts it like so: “when we took the bandage off the eyes of love and forced it to enlighten with its flame the pleasures it envied us.” In this mythical relation the antimony of love and enjoyment is, or rather was, thus abolished.
In the beginning was the (successful) sexual relation, the attainment of a One. Valmont and Merteuil broke this relationship off because “larger concerns demanded their attention,” because duty called. They separated for the benefit of the world and started “preaching the faith in their respective spheres” (p. 28). However, their original relationship remained present in all of their subsequent enterprises as the immeasurable measure compared with which all of their other partners turn out to be inadequate, whereby a series opens up from the original One. It is this disproportion or, more precisely, the threat of this disproportion, that is the cause of jealousy on Merteuil’s as well as on Valmont’s side. When Merteuil engages herself in the relationship with Belleroch, Valmont for instance says:

The fact is, my love, that as long as you distribute your favours in more than one quarter I am not in the least jealous: your lovers remind me of Alexander’s successors, unable to maintain between them that mighty empire where once I reigned alone. But that you should give yourself entirely to one of them! That there should exist in one other than a challenge to my power! I will not tolerate it; you need have no hope that I will. take me back, or at least take a second lover. (p. 48)

The logic at work here is: it is either me alone (Valmont) or a series of others. And the larger this series is, the more flattering it becomes for Valmont. Of course, the privileged partner can never be a part of the series. The Marquise confirms this when she says in response to Valmont’s asking her for the agreed upon reward after his successful seduction of Mme de Tourvel, “I may sometimes have had pretensions to bodily forth a whole se-ra-glio in my person; but I have never been persuaded to belong to one” (p. 306).
In other words, there is no relation, no ratio, between the Marquise de Merteuil on one side and all other women on the other side. The same goes for the Vicomte de Valmont. He is furious when the Marquise (seemingly) promotes someone else to the “post” of One (and only), Merteuil is furious when the Vicomte tries to place her in a series with other women.

When the One breaks apart (as it must), we are transposed into the logic of what mathematicians call the “continuum of real numbers”: since there is always a real number between any two given real numbers we can never nullify their difference by gradually diminishing it, just as Achilles can never catch up with the tortoise by successively covering half the distance between them. He may in fact overtake the tortoise, but he will only reach it at infinity. As the Chevalier de Dancey puts it in a letter to the Marquise, ce n’est pas nous deux qui ne sommes qu’un, c’est toi qui est nous deux. What is at stake here is not the conventional formula of love, we two are one, the point is that Merteuil is “both” (of them). Thus Merteuil’s attitude: to be one with the other is only possible if you are (already) both.

In the background of Valmont’s and Merteuil’s undertakings and conspiracies lies the assumption that love can be “mechanically” produced and regulated, that its “flame” can be risen or lowered according to one’s wishes. Valmont decides to make Madame de Tourvel fall in love with him, so he forms a strategy and systematically carries it out step by step, leaving nothing to chance. And Madame de Tourvel does in fact fall in love with him. This assumption is, as Mladen Dolar has pointed out, a central theme in 18th century European literature. Dolar, in his analysis of Mozart’s opera Cosi fan tutte, links it to the more general fascination with the machine, the model of l’homme-machine or “automaton” as a counterpart to the autonomous subjectivity of the
Enlightenment. According to this thematic “... the most sublime feelings can be mechanically produced by deterministic laws, they can be experimentally and synthetically provoked.” The person who knows this (in the opera Cosi fan tutte, the philosopher) can manipulate these machines as he/she pleases, generating whatever results are desired.

In Laclos' novel it is the Marquise de Merteuil that is in such a position. In letter 106, for example, she claims that women like Cécile are nothing but “machines à plaisir,” “machines for giving pleasure.” She adds:

Don’t forget that everyone is soon familiar with the springs and motors of these machines; and that, to make use of this one without danger it will be necessary to do so with all speed, to stop in good time, then to destroy it. (p. 254)

This knowledge, however, is effective only as long as it is privileged. When it becomes “common knowledge” it quickly loses its power and efficacy. Yet, in the universe of Les Liaisons Dangereuses it is not only knowledge that separates the autonomous subjects from the automatons and pleasure machines. Merteuil also uses another expression to refer to these non-subjects, namely “espèces.” Espèces are people-machines that can be manipulated, and treated like things that are equivalent, replaceable and exchangeable for one another. On the other side we could place what Merteuil calls the scélérat (“the evil people”). Only the scélérat is able to rise above the status of an object, a machine or a thing. In other words - and this could be regarded as an essential motif of the 18th century - the path to autonomy leads through Evil, evil as an “ethical attitude,” evil as a project (and not just as “occasional evil”). Knowledge itself is not enough. It is in fact the ground of superiority, yet in order for this superiority to be effective something more is required:

fasciniranosti, modul des homo-machine ili "automaton" kako spriječavanje na autonominu subjektivnost na Prosvjetljenog. Sprema ova tematika "...najviši čutića može da se proizvede neka "motorka" po determinističkim zakoni, može da bude predisponezijski eksperimentalno i sintetički. Ljepota koja je znana ovo (u operama Cosi fan tutte, filozof) može da rukuva sa ovne machines kao pojavi, pa to rukuva, predisponezijski i savršenih rezultata.

Vo Laclosovom romanu, Markizeta de Merteij je u vezi poljubke. Vo pisma 106, na primjer, taj tvari dekka ženi kako Cecile (Cécile) se samo "machines à plaisir", "mashini za pružanje zadovoljavača". Taa dodava:

Ne zaboravaj deka na sije im se poznavati mehanizmata i motora na ovne machines; i deka, da se upotrebi bezbedo, potrebno je da se odvrdi sa seta brizina, da se zapre napredno, potoc da se uništui. (str. 254)

Ova znanja e efikasno samo dodaka je pravilegiran. Koga stanova "opisno poznavo", brzo ja gubi moja i efikasnost. Sprema, vo uniwerzum na Les Liaisons Dangereuses, ne e značena autonominu moment koji go odvieda autonominu subjekt od rôbotite i machines za zadovoljavača. Merteij koristi i drug izraz kog sahradi za ne-subjektne, imeeno "espèces" (vidi, zab. na prerverdvojivost). Espèces se lupe-mashini koji može da se manipulisira i treperi kao predmet koji se ekvivalentni, zamjenuchi i nedostaci sa drugi. Na druga strana bi moglo da gi ravnimi one koji Merteij gi narabka scélérat ("stenog lupe"). Samo scélérat može da se izdigne nad status na objekt, machines ili predmet. Sa druga zavorba - a, ova može da se smeta kako sušinskih motiv na 18-tiîot vekt - itajekajka kon autonomnost videti prekko Zalojito, zloto kako "etihni stav", zloto kako projekt (a, ne samo kako "povreženo zlo"). Značajno samo po sebe ne e dolovno. Taa je veznost osnova...
the decision for evil and the strength to persist in it regardless of the consequences, even at the expense of one’s own well-being.

For the purposes of our discussion, a very interesting aspect of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* is the nature of Valmont’s seduction of Madame de Tourvel. Valmont’s aim is far from being simply a “victory” over Madame de Tourvel in the sense of “spending the night” with her. The latter is rather to be a by-product of another plan. The project Valmont undertakes with Madame de Tourvel is somehow unique, it is not exactly like his other projects. Tourvel is not only married, she is also “happily married,” her virtue and loyalty are “genuine,” they are not - as in the case of “most other women” - feigned and adopted because of given social norms and values. From the very beginning Tourvel is not approached by Valmont as just “one more,” she is not approached as just another tasty morsel for Valmont’s fickle appetite. We could go further and even say that it is only with the seduction of Madame de Tourvel that Valmont will actually become Valmont. Before this he is just another version of Don Juan, the tireless seducer who “conquers” one woman after another. With his seduction of Madame de Tourvel Valmont completely shifts the paradigm of seduction: the logic of “one by one” (or rather three by three) gives way to the logic of “piece by piece,” bit by bit, the logic of the infinite approach to the goal.

What makes Valmont’s enterprise so difficult is not only the sainly virtue of Madame de Tourvel, but also and especially the conditions set for this project by Valmont himself. Victory must be complete, he says, which means that it is not enough that Madame de Tourvel gives in to his seductive efforts in a moment of confused passion. Instead, her act of surrender must be a result of reflection and of sober decision. Valmont does not want Madame de Tourvel on the level of the espèces, on the level of all other women - machines for pleasure. When she is to make the
The decisive step this step has to be accompanied by the clear awareness of what she is doing and what the consequences of her act may be. In other words, he wants Madame de Tourvel as Subject.

This is why Valmont twice refuses to take advantage of opportunities offered to him. The first time is when he “softens” Madame de Tourvel with a “noble act.” We are referring to the episode where Valmont (knowing that Tourvel has ordered his “surveillance”) goes to the village near-by and “generously” saves a very poor family from the seizure of their property. He reports the event to Merteuil, saying:

How weak we must be, how strong the domination of circumstance, if even I, without a thought for my plans, could risk losing all the charm of a prolonged struggle, all the fascination of a labiously administered defeat, by concluding a premature victory; if, distracted by the most puerile of desires, I could be willing that the conqueror of Madame de Tourvel should take nothing for the fruit of his labours but the tasteless distinction of having added one more name to the roll. Ah, let her surrender, but let her fight! Let her be too weak to prevail, but strong enough to resist; let her savour the knowledge of her weakness at her leisure, but let her be unwilling to admit defeat. Leave the humble poacher to kill the stag where he has surprised it in its hiding-place; the true hunter will bring it to bay. (p. 63)

He adds to this report: Ce projet est sublime, n’est pas?, “Do you not think my scheme sublime?”

This paragraph deserves comment on several points. First of all, Valmont points out the difference between himself as a person, as a “pathological subject” (who almost gets carried away by lust)
and himself as a "professional." Valmont uses an impersonal expression saying that he almost put in danger "the conqueror of Madame de Tourvel," i.e., himself as a "professional." The second important thing here is his definition of this "danger": he is in danger, namely, of receiving nothing for his labours but the tasteless distinction of having added one more name to the roll of women he has seduced. Valmont's intentions with Mme de Tourvel are unique. The decisive question is not whether he will "have" her or not, it is whether he will "have" her in the right way. To put it differently, victory itself is not enough for victory. The victory of the "humble poacher" killing the stag where he has surprised it is one thing; quite another is the victory of the "true hunter" who brings the stag to bay, and does not take advantage of the effect that surprise produces.

Later in the story, Valmont is offered another opportunity which he once again does not take. This time he writes to Merteuil in explanation: "As you know, the victory must be complete. I shall owe nothing to circumstances" (p. 232).

He says similar things in other letters as well. In letter 6 he says for instance:

How enchanting to be in turn the cause and the cure of her remorse! Far be it from me to destroy the prejudices that possess her. They will add to my gratification and to my glory. Let her believe in virtue, but let her sacrifice it for my sake; let her be afraid of her sins, but let them not check her; (p. 33-34).

In letter 70, he puts it like so:

My plan, on the contrary, is to make her perfectly aware of the value and extent of each one of the sacrifices she makes me; not to proceed so fast with her that the remorse is unable to catch up; it is to show her virtue breathing its last in long-protracted
da ja stignu, da pokazam kako oстатоци на nejzinahta
doblest se raspršavaju vo odloženo-prodolženi agoni;
prizmata na svešnost postojano da ja držam pred nejzinate
ochi; (str. 150).

Сега можеме да видиме поконкретно кон што цели Валмон.
Ja vodi Madam de Tourvel kon prawene na nekoj chokor, potoа
zaстанува, se povlekuva i chea taа da stane целосно весна
za implikacija od toj chokor, целосно da go согледа
значењето на nejzinate pozicija. Ako вообличаената
postanka на Валмон е да заведе жена, da ja natera da se
„обесчести“, а потоа да ja напушти i (доколку може) да ja
уништи, so Madam de Tourvel se obiduva nepsto drugo, se
obiduva da ja „уништи“ пред nejzinate вистинска
destrukciija. Сo други зборови, Валмон систематски ja turka
Madam de Tourvel kon царството „намеѓу две смрти“.

Roseann Runte (Roseann Runte), во својата студија за
„трогачките“ хероини на tri 18 вековни романи – Новийа
Елоиза (New Heloise), Клариса (Clarissa) i Обаична врски
(les Liaisons Dangereuses) – истакнува дека сите три хероини
на ovne романи (чули, Клариса и Мадам de Tourvel) имаат
eдно заедничко нешто, сите, во еден момент стануваат
членови на живување мртвii. Без претерување можеме да
кажеме дека ова е еден од клучните мотиви, не само на les
Liaisons Dangereuses, туку воопшто на целот 18 век (и по
18 век затоа што овој мотив може да се најде и на други
места). Kога Валмон вели дека Турвел треба да јa држи
„призамата на весност постоjano пред неjzinate ochi“,
зборовите треба да не потсетат на друга слика, овоj пат od
кинематографијата. Посочуваме на филмот Peeping Tom
(Supkavoi). Во овоj филм, приказната се врти околу круг
женi кои се убиени и кои имаат едно заедничко нешто: сите
починале со израз на краен ужас во нивните ochi. Нивните
изрази не се едноставно изрази на преплашени жртви,
ужасот на нивните лица е незамислив и никоj od
истражувачите на убивствата не може да сфати зошто. Oвоj
agonies; to keep that somber spectacle ceaselessly before her eyes;
(p. 150).

We are now in a position to see more precisely what it is that
Valmont is after. He leads Madame de Tourvel to make a certain
step, then he stops, pulls himself back and waits for her to be
come fully aware of the implications of this step, to realise fully
the significance of her position. If Valmont’s usual procedure is
to seduce a woman, make her “dishonour” herself, and then to
abandon and (if possible) destroy her, with Madame de Tourvel
he tries something else: he tries to “destroy” her before her ac-
tual destruction. In other words, Valmont systematically pushes
Madame de Tourvel towards the realm “between two deaths.”

Roseann Runte, in her study of the “tragic” heroines of three
18th century novels - New Heloise, Clarissa and Les Liaisons
Dangereuses - points out that all three heroines of these novels
(Julie, Clarissa and Madame de Tourvel) have one thing in com-
mon, they all become, at a certain point, members of the living
dead. Without exaggeration we can say that this is one of the key
motifs not only of Les Liaisons Dangereuses but also of the 18th
century in general (and beyond the 18th century as well, as this
motif can be found elsewhere). When Valmont says that Tourvel
has “to keep that somber spectacle ceaselessly before her eyes”
these words should remind us of another, this time cinematog-
graphic, image. We have in mind the movie Peeping Tom. In
this movie the plot turns around a series of women who were
murdered and who have one feature in common: all of them died
with an expression of absolute horror in their eyes. Their ex-
pressions are not simply the expressions of terrified victims, the
horror on their faces is unimaginable and no one among those
investigating the murders can account for it. This enigmatic ex-
pression becomes the major clue in the investigation, which turns
on what it was that the victims saw before they died, what in-
spired them with such horror. We might expect that the answer
will be that the murderer is some kind of monster or that he wears a monstrous mask. But this is not the case. The solution to the mystery, it turns out, is that the victims saw their own images while they were being killed. The murder weapon consists of two long, scissor-like blades to the end of which a mirror is attached, so that the victim can see the blade penetrating her and see herself dying. But there is more. The murderer is a filmmaker by profession, whoTU are his victims to a suitable location under the pretences of having them do a "screen test" for a part in a movie. At a certain point during the "screen test" the murderer reveals the two blades at the end of the camera support, and moves in to kill the victim while she watches in a mirror surrounding the lens that approaches. As she watches herself die the Peeping Tom films it all - focusing especially on his victims expression of fear. His obsession is far from simply that of murdering women. Instead the latter is, as in the case of Valmont, merely an inevitable by-product of a "sublime plan." "All" that the Peeping Tom wants is to catch on film the expression on his victims' faces of the ultimate horror (and the opportunity of being able to study it afterwards "in peace"). His enjoyment consists of watching the other watching her own death. The gaze is here literally the object of his fantasy.

This scenario is paradigmatic for Valmont's enjoyment and of his plans with Madame de Tourvel. He wishes to make her fully consciousness of her own death, long before she is to die, he wishes to see death leave its mark on a living organism, to bring his victim to the point where she is forced, if we can put it thus, to live death. Valmont says just this when he declares: *la paura femme, elle se voit mourir*, "the poor woman, she is watching herself dying." This is precisely what fascinates him so much. Thus we cannot help but agree with Valmont when he says that his project is "sublime."
многу". Така, можемо само да се сложиме са Валмон кога вели дека неговиот проект е "позвишени".

Но, што вунност значи "да се живее сопствената смрт" и "да се гледа себе си како умираш"? Нијуарчената изјава за "la pauvre femme, elle se voit mourir" и "l'heureuse femme, elle se voit leurir", срецна жена, се гледа како умираш? Затоа, разгледување парадигмски случај на певерзнат позиција по захислати на Лакан: тоа што певерзнато го ризикува е да нема задоволство за него, туку тоа да остане за Другот, задоволувајќи го Другот со дополнителното задоволство кое й недостасува. Певерзнато сака Другот да стане "комплетен" субјект со помош на задоволството кое го предизвика када Другот. Намера на субјективирање на Другот, како што можеме да видиме, е доста очигледна во романот.

Веќе ја истакнаа дистинкцијата на Мертви помеѓу espèces и scélérats. Истина дека само scélérat, "добрите" можат да го достигнат нивото на автономен субјект додека сите други остануваат само машини или предмети. Сенак, тоа не е се. Жртвата на Валмон, Мадам де Турвел истотака ќе биде издигната, во еден момент, од нивото на мнозинството машини - espèces. А, ја водихнува нејзиниот мачител: низ неговите раце и низ измачувања на кои ја подложува, низ изборот кој жртвата е принудена да го направи, таа станува субјект. Во тој контекст, романот нуди извонредна слика на "првата смрт" на Турвел, на моментот кога конечност одбира Валмон и "се предаава". Лакло (Laclos), преку перото на Валмон ни го дава следниов опис на Мадам де Турвел:

Замислејте жена која седи во зарadena неподвижност со непроменлив израз на лицето, се чини како ниту да размишluva, ниту служа, ниту пак разбира; од чии очи кон зииваат, постоjанo и неkontrolirano пагаат solzi. (стр. 303)

But what exactly does it mean "to live one’s death" and "to watch oneself dying?" The unspoken exclamation behind "la pauvre femme, elle se voit mourir" is none other than "l’heureuse femme, elle se voit jour," the fortunate woman, she is watching herself enjoying? We are thus dealing here with the paradigm case of the perverse position as Lacan conceives it: what is at stake for the pervert is not finding enjoyment for himself, but making the Other enjoy, completing the Other by supplying the surplus-enjoyment she lacks. The pervert wants the Other to become a "complete" subject, with the help of the jouissance that he makes appear on the side of the Other. This intention to subjectivize the Other is, as we have seen, quite apparent in the novel.

We have already mentioned out the distinction made by Mertueil between the espèces and the scélérats. We pointed out that only the scélérat, the "evil" can reach the level of the autonomous subject, while all others remain mere machines or things. However, this is not all that there is to it. Valmont’s victim, Madame de Tourvel is also to be elevated, at a certain moment, from the level of the mass of mere machines, the espèces. And it is her tormentor who thus upgrades her: in his hands and through the tortures to which he subjects her, through the choice the victim is compelled to make, she becomes a subject. In this regard, the novel offers a remarkable image of Tourvel’s “first death,” of the moment when she finally chooses Valmont and “surrenders herself.” Laclos gives us, via Valmont’s pen, the following description of Madame de Tourvel:

Imagine a woman seated in stiff immobility with a fixed expression on her face, seeming neither to think nor to listen, nor to understand; from whose staring eyes the tears fall continuously and unchecked. (p. 303)
Is this not a perfect image of Condilliac's statue, a statue that is about to begin again, from nothing, as a figure of a new(born) subject?

The other aspect of the novel that particularly interests us here, in relation to ethics, is the question of Valmont's desire and guilt as they emerge from his relation with the Marquise de Merteuil. At a certain point Valmont betrays his relationship or pact with the Marquise and thus renounces his "ethics" and his "duty."

This side of the story is condensed in the famous letter 141 in which the Marquise de Merteuil writes a letter within a letter, which letter within Valmont will afterward simply transcribe and send to Madame de Tourvel. We are referring to the famous "rhetorical" letter in which every thought concludes with the phrase "ce n'est pas ma faute," "it is not my fault":

One is very soon bored with everything, my angel; it is a law of nature. It is not my fault.

'If therefore I am now bored with an adventure which has claimed my attention for four mortal months, it is not my fault.

'If, that is to say, my love was equal to your virtue - and that is certainly saying a great deal - it is not surprising that the one came to an end at the same time as the other. It is not my fault.

'It follows that for some time I have been deceiving you, but then your relentless tenderness forced me in some sort to do so! It is not my fault.

'A woman that I love madly now insists that I give you up for her sake. It is not my fault.

'I quite realize that this is the perfect opportunity to accuse me of perjury: but if, where nature has gifted men with no more than constancy, she has given women obstinacy, it is not my fault.

'Believe me, you should take another lover, as I take another mistress. This is good, very good advice: if you find it bad, it is not my fault.
Zbogum angelo moj. Te zemaw so zadovoljstvo; te ostavam bez kaše. Mogu biti kje se vratite. Takov je životot. Ne sum vinnov. (str. 335 - 336)

Valmont ne e vinnov, a to e zato za ova e priroden zakon, zato za Madam de Turgel go prijundla da postani kako go postupuva, zato za druga žena angelo angelo da bide tako, zato za priroda da garfuli majhite samo so postojnost in zato za žensko e škod. Rezultirata na argumentot e vo takva forma koja sosem budlost, kako e reda koga povremena, ja prijedziva kako bismislena soopstvenitna osnovna. Postojanoto povtoruvanje na 

This letter is a lethal letter, a poison-pen letter by which Valmont literally kills Madame de Turgel. Or, more accurately, this letter is the letter by which the Marquise de Merteuil kills Madame de Turgel using Valmont’s “sword.”

Valmont comes out of this episode as a complete “sucker.” Merteuil has made an absolute fool of him:

Yes, Vicomte, you were very much in love with Madame de Turgel, and you are still in love with her; you love her to distraction. But because it amused me to make you ashamed of it, you have bravely sacrificed her. You would have sacrificed her a thousand times rather than take a joke. To what lengths will vanity lead us! The sage was indeed right who called it the enemy of happiness. (p. 340-341)

On the other hand, this whole affair results in a rude awakening for the Marquise, because her long held assumption that Valmont
is attracted to her only because of his "vanity" proves to be entirely justified.

Where can we locate the decisive moment when Merteuil comes to know with certainty that Valmont is really in love with Madame de Tourvel? Precisely when Valmont sacrifices Madame de Tourvel, as he himself puts it. This sacrifice is, because it is a sacrifice, far from a testimony to his indifference to Mme de Tourvel, it is proof of his love for her. In the staged game leading up to Valmont's admission that the loss of Tourvel was a sacrifice, Merteuil chooses the perfect way to find out Valmont's real feelings for Madame de Tourvel. She sets a trap for him in the register of "desire and guilt." The question for her is not whether or not Valmont "objectively" broke the rules they both swore to follow. The decisive question is whether he broke them "subjectively," on the level of his desire. Hence the point of Merteuil's trap is not to find out whether Valmont is ready to sacrifice Mme de Tourvel, it is to find out whether he considers it a sacrifice to break with her. The question is not whether Valmont has "objectively" done wrong, the real question is whether he feels guilty - if he does feel guilty, then for the Marquise, he is guilty. Merteuil knows very well that if Valmont was guilty, then he would respond to her provocations exactly the way he does: with a sacrifice. If Valmont feels guilty than the logic of the superego will automatically lead him to take what is most precious to him and to sacrifice it.

This letter contains yet another "twist." The phrase ce n'est pas ma faute is not originally Merteuil's invention, thus what we have here is not just "a letter copied from a letter within a letter." At the origin of all this is another letter that Valmont wrote to Merteuil after his "success" with Madame de Tourvel. In this letter he says, among other things: "I am not in love, and it is not my fault if circumstances compel me to play the part" (p. 328). It is thus in a letter from Valmont to the Marquise that we first...
come across the expression “it is not my fault.” It is this phrase that makes Merteuil aware of the gravity of the situation, the line to which she responds by telling him the story about a friend who, like Valmont, went on doing stupid things and claiming afterwards that it was not his fault. This is the story that Valmont copies from her letter and sends to Madame de Tourvel, the letter we have already quoted.

Merteuil knows very well that it is precisely the phrase ce n’est pas ma faute, it is not my fault, that is the purest form of the admission of guilt. She knows very well that because of their underlying logic, claims like “the circumstances forced me to do it,” “I could not help it,” “it was beyond my control” are the best testimony of the subject’s guilt. They show, namely, that the subject has “given way as to his desire” (céder sur son désir). The definition of what we might call the “law of desire” is that desire does not pay any attention to the “laws of nature,” to how the “world goes,” or to the “force of circumstances.” This is precisely what links the “logic of desire” to the (original) project of the Marquise and Valmont. So when Valmont addresses her with such a flat excuse Merteuil takes it as an outrageous insult. The letter within a letter she sends to Valmont, and that he later copies and sends to Madame de Tourvel is not only a “knife in the heart” of the latter but also a sharp reminder to Valmont that this kind of rhetoric suits only automata and not autonomous subjects. In other words, it is a reminder that while mechanical, human creatures, espèces, can be fooled with this kind of “fatalistic crap,” it is unforgivable that a person who believes himself an autonomous subject would use such an excuse when addressing another autonomous subject. Merteuil’s irritation comes from Valmont daring to say to her that “it is not his fault,” from his showing that he underestimates her, as well as himself. He underestimates himself just by using such a lame excuse and her because he believes she will “buy” it.
This point about the law of desire is in keeping with the following remarks of Lacan in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*:

Something is played out in betrayal if one tolerates it. If driven by the idea of the good... one gives ground to the point of giving up one’s own claims and says to oneself, ‘Well, if that’s how things are, we should abandon our position; neither of us in worth that much, and especially me, so we should just return to the common path.’ You can be sure that what you find there is the structure of cédére sur son désir. Once one has crossed the boundary where I combined in a single term contempt for the other and for oneself, there is no way back.

This is exactly what happens to Valmont: he steps onto the path of no return. What is more, he does it precisely in the name of the good (in keeping with Lacan’s account). When Valmont realises the seriousness of the situation, he desperately falls back on his last reserves. He offers the Marquise a trade. He writes her a very commubial and jealous letter, putting her affair with Danceny on the same level as his affair with Tourvel and proposing, so to speak, mutual forgiveness. After the Marquise sharply refuses this trade, as well as its “blackmailing” subtext (“if you don’t want to lose me, you’d better do what I say”), he suggests in another letter that Merteuil too, should “give way as to her desire,” because otherwise they will both be destroyed. In letter 152 he tells her, more or less, the following: Each of us is in the possession of all that is necessary to ruin the other. But why do it, if instead we can re-establish our friendship and peace? The choice is yours but you should know that a negative answer will be taken as a declaration of war. Merteuil’s response is: fine, war it is. Thus it is fair to say that the Marquise is the only one who remains until the very end loyal to her duty, and refuses to tolerate Valmont’s offer of mutual betrayal – she refuses to give way as to her desire:

Токму ова му се случува на Валмун: зачекорува на патеката на неповрат. И, тоа го прави токму во име на доброто (следевки ја пресметката на Лакан). Кога Валмун се сфаќа сериозноста на ситуацијата, во очак се свртува кон своите последни резерви. И нуди нешто на Маркизата. И пишува многу „сопружничко” и љубоморно писмо, ставајки ја нејзината афера со Дансени на исто ниво со својата афера со Турвел, и предлага, така да речеме, взаимо простување. Откако Маркизата остро ја одбива понудата, како и „цензурачкото” подтекст („лозолку не сакаш да ме изгубиш, подобро да правиш како што ти велам”), во друго писмо предлага Мерттил „да ја се предаде на желбата”, зашто наку и двадцата ќе бидат уништени. Во писмото 152, тој ја го вели отприликата следново: секој од нас поседува што е потребно за уништување на другот. Но, зошто да го правиме тоа, ако имаме место тоа можеме повторно да го воспоставиме нашето пријателство и мир? Изборот е твој, но треба да зная дека негативното одговор ќе се сфати како објавување на војна. Одговорот на Мерттил е: в ред, нека е војна. Затоа, фер е да се каже дека Маркизата е единствената која останува докрај верна на својата должност и одбива да го толерира предлогот на Валмун за взаимно предавство – одбива да ја препушти на желбата:
What I call 'cédér sur son désir' is always accompanied in the destiny of the subject by some betrayal.... Either the subject betrays his own way ... or, more simply, he tolerates the fact that someone with whom he has more or less vowed to do something betrays his hope and doesn't do for him what their pact entailed - whatever the pact may be, fated or ill-fated, risky, shortsighted, or indeed a matter of rebellion or flight, it doesn't matter.

When Valmont writes, "it is not my fault if circumstances compel me to play the part" he enters a game quite different from the one he has previously been playing. We could define the shift he undergoes as a shift from the perspective of the "moral law" (i.e., the law linked to the position he adopts as his principle and which determines his subjectivity) to that of the law of the superego. This shift is visible, first of all, in the way he responds to the Marquise's letter. He is perfectly aware of his guilt, but he gets it all wrong: he understands giving up Madame de Tourvel as a price he has to pay in order to resume his old ways and to make peace with the Marquise. He does not see that whatever he does, things can only get worse. The Marquise has no doubt that he is capable of sacrificing what is most precious to him. The point is that this sacrifice is the ultimate proof of his guilt. Whether he gives up Tourvel or not is a "technical question." Whatever he does from this point on will have to be either too much or too little, and this is enough to establish that we are here dealing with the superego. He makes the sacrifice required of him, he rejects the object most dear to him, but by doing this he only gets further entangled in the snare of the superego. This much is clear when he writes to the Marquise that one thing alone can bring him greater glory: winning Madame de Tourvel back. Thus Valmont's act is an act that remains essentially unaccomplished. In order to accomplish it, he (perpetually) has to make "one more effort."
Identities

References


2. Ibid., p. 129.

3. "Како што се задоволството нагласува кантовецот Сад, може да се окува само дол гледна на Другото од едностранна причина што никой не видел тело целосно обвитано около телото на Другото до степен на негово нађакање и фагоциприе" Затоа мора да се ограничиме на нежни стисоки, како на пример прикаане на раката или нешто друго - ау, боли!" Ibid., стр. 26


8. "Ах, верувате ли Виконт, кога една жена се намерува на срцето на друга, ретко успева да најде раклива точка, а раката поратаму е неизлечиво. Додека целев на оваа, или насочувајки Ве Вас, заборави дека таа е конкуренција која не се одбрани наместо мене, и дека, васност, не ставите под неа." (стр. 341)


10. Ibid., стр. 321.

11. Ibid., стр. 321.