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The Libertine's Progress

Seduction in the Eighteenth-Century French Novel

Pierre Saint-Amand

Translated by Jennifer Curtiss Gage

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FOREWORD

Among the distinctive achievements of modern French culture, none is greater, I believe, than a certain type of essay. . . . No, I am not thinking of Montaigne. His exuberance and capriciousness are marvellous, but the works I have in mind are different.

The French often refer to them as *essais classiques*, with the stress on the second word, to emphasize these traits, precisely, for which the founder of the genre is not especially notedself-discipline, simplicity, and, above all, singleness of purpose.

The classical label is not intended to suggest that the *essai classique* is historically rooted in the so-called classical age. It really comes later. Its great period begins with the nineteenth century and is not over yet. This golden age coincides with the reign of nihilism. The authors of these essays are no nihilists, however. In a world where thinking is disdained unless it can be turned into money or political propaganda, they celebrate and cultivate apparently "useless" ideas, although in a highly selective fashion. Ideas should never be celebrated en masse, as if all of them were necessarily equal. This attitude is the benevolent side of nihilism, and it is just as bad as an open contempt for all ideas.

Many people try to escape nihilism by retreating into the past through the sheer force of nostalgia, but it cannot be done and they become bitter. The authors of classical essays successfully escape nihilism. They are not particularly nostalgic or even hostile to the world in which they live. They understand its historical raison d'être too well.

Unlike most people around them, they see nihilism as a particular creed that they cannot espouse. In a certain sense, therefore, they are more nihilistic than everybody else, but in another sense they are not. They believe in the power not of ideas in general but of some very specific ideas. It is not a mater of faith with them but of experience. They think that they have personally experienced the power of these ideas.

These ideas, they have discovered, generate too much coherence and significance, in too many areas, to be treated as ordinary. Exciting and even exhilarating as this discovery may be, it is not mystical in the slightest. It is an intellectual and therefore eminently communicable experience.

All real ideas, however, are somewhat complex and delicate. In order to be fully appreciated and evaluated, they demand a quality of attention that, sadly enough, books no longer command in our world, even in academic circles. There are too many of them, perhaps. Paradoxically, the devaluation of language leads to a monstrous proliferation of books.

Even if a book is lucky enough to attract some attention, it is unlikely that it will receive the serious examination that all authors inevitably crave and that very few genuinely deserve. If the ideas in a book are not shrugged off as the by-product of some banal family trauma or of sordid class interest, they will be made a part of some historical sequence, they will be regarded as mere rearrangements of earlier ideas.

Thinking is highly encouraged in universities, and it gets everything it needs except what it needs most, the generous and unprejudiced attention of people genuinely interested in it. Far from occurring in an age of disbelief, our nihilism is a great condensation of belief, although entirely focused only on those ideas that seek the destruction of all other ideas.

Is our tired world still willing to give disinterested intelligence a chance? This question cannot fail to weigh heavily on the mind of would-be authors. They are at the mercy of readers whose attention span is very brief and whose good will is quickly exhausted. Their chances of being heard are few and they do not want to squander them.

If would-be authors are courageous enough to assess the

intellectual situation correctly, and if, above all, they have something significant to say, they will conclude that their only viable course is the most direct and simple approach, the strategy of the job well done and of the most effective prose. Our courageous would-be authors will be too committed to their ideas not to shun the sensationalism to which many desperate people resort nowadays, and they will try to write an *essai classique*. This is what Pierre Saint-Amand has done, and he has succeeded.

He has chosen the strategy of no strategy at all. Not a word in his book is superfluous; not a turn of phrase is selected for rhetorical effect. That is why he writes so elegantly. Good writing always is the product of harsh circumstances. It is somewhat consoling to think that the skeptical lassitude of the present and its indifference to intellectual values must have made a contribution, if only an indirect one, to the luminous display of intelligence and sensibility that this little book represents.

However, I should not dramatize the writing of this essay too much; I might convey the impression that Pierre Saint-Amand is a tense and beleaguered author, and he is nothing of the sort. He is perfectly at ease with his theme, seduction in the eighteenth-century novel; he writes about it with all the deftness and lightness appropriate to the subject.

His major approach, true enough, is controversial. I am in a good position to realize that *mimetic desire* is not universally popular in our humanistic fields. For some reason, Pierre Saint-Amand easily eludes the dogmaticism to which an interest in mimetic desire is supposed to make us vulnerable. He often resorts to psychoanalytical ideas, for instance, and with remarkable results. Where some people see rigid oppositions, he discovers avenues of contact, and he pursues them efficiently and rapidly, never belaboring his points, yet never so hasty either as to betray the spirit of the various perspectives that he manages to reconcile.

The novels that Saint-Amand studies reproduce in fainter, yet perfectly recognizable, outline the mimetic patterns characteristic of myth and tragedy. These patterns are not lifeless

vestiges or even static themes but the very form of the human relations that unfold in the novels, the most visible signs of mimetic processes that also make themselves manifest in other ways, in the dramatic details of these works, of course, as well as in their overall plots.

The vicissitudes of seduction and sexual affairs are governed by the laws of the model/obstacle (*skandalon*), the mimetic doubles, pseudonarcissism, the sacrificial crisis, and the transferential runaway against a single victim, or "scapegoat mechanism." In novel after novel, new aspects of these schemes are uncovered, and, as the crisis of which they are a part intensifies, they undergo various transformations that tend to reproduce diachronically the logic of the mimetic process.

The approach provides an umbrella under which the proximity, even unity, of certain phenomena that traditional perspectives found difficult to reconcile, become self-evident. This is the case, for instance, at the end of the century in question, with the growing fascination with the occult, often judged "paradoxical" in the context of Enlightenment rationalism. From a mimetic standpoint, hypnosis, magnetism, mesmerism, and so on are by-products of the same crisis that is also signified by the increasingly violent, promiscuous, and demonic turn that seduction takes at the very end of the century, notably in Laclos and Sade.

As it substitutes the continuous logic of its crisis for the discontinuities of literary history, the mimetic perspective dissolves certain traditional problems, automatically reinterpreting them as misunderstandings rooted in standard philosophical attitudes.

Pierre Saint-Amand restores to their rightful place the various catastrophes that occur in the conclusions of many novels. When modernist ideology minimizes the punishment of villains, in these novels, it resists the ancient pull of mythical scapegoat transference, and this attitude would be praiseworthy, to be sure, if it were not motivated primarily by an inverted moralism even less able to question its own sacrificial nature than the standard moralism that it replaces.

The modernism that would censor Madame de Merteuil's

smallpox out of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* and hell itself out of *Don Giovanni* truly reduces the drama of eighteenth-century seduction to the pornographic consumerism that, judging from our contemporary disintegration, must have been its manifest destiny all along. The suppression of the tragic dimension flatters the temper of our time, and that is why the "reductionism" implicit in it is never condemned, never even perceived. Ironically, critics obsessed with reductionism tend to focus their accusations primarily on the perspective that restores the structural wholeness of the works they study, the mimetic perspective.

This essay spectacularly refuses the bizarre belief, reinforced by deconstruction and postmodernism, according to which respect for diversity must be bought at the price of unity. Far from hindering the deployment of difference, the mimetic scheme enables the critic to articulate singularities by revealing in them variations on the same mimetic patterns at different stages in their isolation. Critical insights form a rich network of correspondences around an organizing principle that is truly the vital center of the essay.

This last statement should raise an outcry. A universally valid principle of unity is what our contemporary world has learned to regard as an impossibility. This is the number-one rule of our "postmetaphysical" world. I believe in it myself, but I never forget that the rule applies only to *metaphysically* grounded principles.

Is mimetic desire a metaphysically grounded principle of unity? Those who distrust it swear that it is, of course, but their acquaintance with it is invariably limited to its most superficial and banal applications. When handled as powerfully as in the present essay, mimetic desire becomes a deconstructive tool not only of the human relations directly analyzed but also of the conceptual apparatus that goes with them.

Far from being a metaphysical center, the mimetic scheme is the decentering operation par excellence. It reaches all aspects of the work, because it radiates from the former metaphysical center. What unseats this former center is the discovery of the nonmetaphysical origin in which all metaphysical sys-

tems of representation are grounded, the transference of the unanimous victim system, the "scapegoat mechanism."

When we really get hold of this decentering centrality, we can write coherently once again about the presumed incoherence of desire and language. The idea that our culture is irreducibly chaotic and cannot be criticized effectively unless the critics and their texts manage to impersonate chaos is a remarkably naive reassumption of the mimetic stance by those who wish they could wish it away, a residue of the old avant-garde. As long as we try to get rid of mimetic desire merely by pretending that it is not there, we will turn ourselves into the living proof of its continued dominance.

The reason why the mimetic scheme causes anxiety and resentment in some circles is that it pushes demythification beyond the reaches of our purely humanistic culture, into the religious area that is the key to our current cultural impasse. It thus violates the most powerful taboo of modernism, which is the exclusion of the religious. There is no worse *reductionism* than the reduction of the religious to the extreme superficiality of *superstition*.

Saint-Amand defines the ultimate goal of mimetic desire as self-divinization, divine self-sufficiency. The traditional name of the structures generated by this rivalry with God is Satan. The return of the satanic in the late eighteenth-century novel should not scare the living daylights out of our humanists. When humanism was still alive, there were humanistic interpretations of Satan, and it is this essay's *coup de genie* that it concludes with the greatest one, which is also the most fitting one from a historical and cultural standpoint.

It concludes with Goethe's great explication with Satan, *Faust*, and this conclusion is immediately preceded by an analysis of *Elective Affinities*, Goethe's great explication with mimetic desire.

Taken all together in chronological order, the novels studied in this essay seem to constitute a single novel that has the same form as each of these components. Between the Regency and the Revolution, this ideal novel reenacts the whole mimetic process with the Terror in the role of the victim-making

mechanism and with Goethe, later, embodying an ambiguous rebirth of the cultural order.

It may be objected, of course, that the small group of novels selected for this study represent chiefly the choice of posterity, the so-called literary *canon*. Why not? Insofar as it is trueand up to a point it must be truethis idea can only suggest that mimetic and sacrificial considerations must play a role, perhaps the principal role, in the canonization of certain works in preference to others.

This preference in turn must reflect an obscure realization that history itself in that period should reenact the mimetic process. Our view of eighteenth-century French history is inseparable from a crisis and catharsis pattern that culminates in the Revolution and its Napoleonic aftermath.

With his Goethean conclusion, Pierre Saint-Amand makes this form esthetically and intellectually perfect. His last chapter is a discreet, yet powerful, homage to German classicism and the unity of European culture. No other writer but Goethe could provide a nonreligious, a still humanistic summation of what Pierre Saint-Amand's *essai classique* is about.

RENÉ GIRARD

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INTRODUCTION
THE MIRRORED BEDROOM

The eighteenth century, Baudrillard tells us, witnessed the twilight of seduction. Its flights of passion, elaborate arabesques of gallantry, and unabashed libertinage are still evoked with nostalgia. As Baudrillard writes, "The eighteenth century still spoke of seduction. It was, with valour and honour, a central preoccupation of the aristocratic spheres." 1 But seduction, I would argue, must be apprehended somewhat closer to its origin. It is above all fascination, mesmerism, sorcery. My interest, then, lies in the magic of magnetic gestures, in the intimidation of the gaze that transfixes.

Enlightenment novels are peopled with hordes of seducers. It is not enough to trace in their gestures the stamp of the libertine code; we must also probe the diabolical intent of their gaze. Beneath the flaunted gallantry, the libertine flourish of these novels, a profoundly archaic core can be found lurking in the shadows of metaphor. Modernity chafes at this archaic residue, which it cannot efface. Yet, this archaism is itself an allegorical form of desire, the mask desire dons when it seems to relegate to the distant past the relations of those who succumb, in our day, to its law. Archaism is the hypocritical form of an abiding pulse of desire: it is desire's archetype. The eighteenth centurydevoted, as we know, to libertine superficialityneeded this ancient decor in order to surprise us by showing that it, too, was haunted by the dark side of Desire.

I propose to read the eighteenth-century novel as the locus

in which the so-called Enlightenment reveals its underside, foundering on the blind reefs of desire. Atheistic philosophers (except perhaps Diderot) have no place in this world of obscure desires and ancient fears. Their place is taken by creatures of the night under the spell of Evil. My aim is to restore all their satanic excess to these beings from another centuryas if the libertine parade, the rhetoric of love, and the apparent game of seduction concealed in broad daylight these bewigged monsters, these sirens and bacchantes. Such words are not mere metaphors; they reveal the terror of seduction in the novels, and they tell the truth about a century that still believed in its superstitions.

For the eighteenth-century novelthis bears repeatingis superstitious. It can be read as the unconscious, as a palimpsest of all the atheistic philosophies of the Age of Reason. Seduction reigns, indeed, but as an avatar of archaic fears. Sade locates the origin of the novel in imaginary seduction and in superstition: "Everything was a novel, because the gods spoke only through the medium of men who, more or less interested in this ridiculous artifice, did not fail to make up the language of phantoms, from whatever they imagined would be most likely to seduce or terrify." 2

Love in the novel occupies the place of the cult of divinity and ancient religious practices. In this sense the novel is always idolatrous: "Man," writes Sade, "is prey to two weaknesses. . . . Wheresoever on earth he dwells, man feels the need *to prey*, and *to love*: and herein lies the basis for all novels" (99). The seductive relation that binds novelistic characters is more than a game: it is a spell-binding, a supernatural bond(age). These characters must not be denied their mythological status: Medusa, Delilah, the Gorgon, and the Devil are a few of their forgotten metamorphoses.

Within this population we must distinguish between coquettes and seducers. As rivals in desire, they share a place in this gallant inferno. The coquette appears in these novels as one of the modern figures of sorcery. Despite the widely held belief that witches had been expelled from the Age of Enlightenment and packed off far from the shores of Reason,

along with their craft, 3 the eighteenth-century novel brings the sorceress back into our phantasms, back within the horizon of our desires. Her secrets, her ability to hypnotize the other through her enticing attire, her rites of initiation are all terrifying: once again, the witch is back with her charms, potions, and poisons.

In the imaginary of the social collective, we must understand the coquette as the modern construction of the sorceress. In Sade, the coquette reigns like a high priestess amidst her bottles and vials, her aphrodisiacs. Prévost imbues the coquette with an enchanting scent; her presence alone electrifies. Marivaux, timid and chaste, nevertheless delivers Marianne fully coiffed and thus endows his orphan with singular virtues. She, too, bewitches her targets, seeing into the deepest secrets of their souls. The coquette is above all a soothsayer, endowed with superhuman talents. Her beauty isolates her from the community; she can multiply herself at will, take on various faces, and refuse to give herself to anyone. The persecuting voice of public rumor loses no time in condemning her to trial by calumny. As a foreigner to the community that takes her inshe is orphaned, abducted from home, torn from her obscure past (Marianne, Manon, Suzanne Simonin)she wields redoubled powers of fascination.

As for the seducerwhat is he but the Devil with a modern face and wordly tastes? His modern development must be traced through the flurry of imposture that characterized the eighteenth century, played out against the backdrop of occult practices in vogue at the time. As Jean-Didier Vincent admirably sums it up, "the eighteenth century is the century of imposture."4 Mesmer, Cagliostro, Saint-Germain, and Casanova were the great heroes of seduction during this period.5 Each in his way possessed the same secrets of the soul and the same hypnotic powers. The public bowed down before them as they did before their God. Mesmer, wielding his phallic wand, played at Orpheus for society ladies.

The rakes that people eighteenth-century novels keep company with soothsayers and fortune-tellers. The libertines received their magical powers from the community and fre-

quented the bedrooms of palm-readers. The Sadean seducer is modeled after these charlatans; the political fate of Sade's libertines is based on such fantastical characters.

All we need do to get a clear view of the eighteenth century is to lift up the veil of Reason. Distinctions already begin to blur between Sade's boudoirs of torture and Mesmer's "*crisis rooms,*" where women succumbed to delirium by contagion. 6 It is hardly surprising that Sade and Goethe were Freemasons, that Casanova kept company with the Marquise d'Urfé, both a libertine and a witch, that Diderot abandoned his *Encyclopédie* to write a diabolical novel, or that Valmont's seduction in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* is so magnetically charged with the technics of seduction that were all the rage at the time. Nerval's *Illuminés* reminded us of the murky depths that lay beneath the Age of Reason. Yet, his book was eclipsed by his romanticism, by the allegorical diabolism of the nineteenth century. "Books on the Cabbalah and occult sciences flooded collections," he reminded us.7 A whole literature on the Cabbalah flourished within easy reach of the salons. The *Illuminés* could be read as a refashioning of this library of superstitions. Enlightenment/Illuminism: the antisuperstitious psychosis of the eighteenth century must be read in the kinship between these two terms, in the reversibility of this complementary coupling.

Closer to us, Michel Foucault was well aware of these archaic aspects of the eighteenth-century novel. He also realized that these archaisms cover up a general metaphorization of desire: "Most eighteenth-century novels . . . are full of insidious poisonous preparations: camphor, snakeskins, powdered turtledove bones, and above all, the terrible Javanese ant-eggs. Finally, there is the inoculation against inadmissible desires that trouble the hearts of the most faithful: illusory delights, true pleasures. All those nonmagical philters."8

We must appreciate the true potency of all these philters. Yet I intend to go even further. Not only will I insist on rousing the ghosts that haunt the eighteenth century, on stirring up their ashes to infuse them with a breath of truth; what I wish to show through the novels of the eighteenth centuryby describing the mechanisms of desire and the interrelations

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to which beings are subjected by this desireis that century's superstitious core.

Narcissus-Lucifer

Par le regard, je touche, j'atteins, je saisis, je suis saisi.
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I would like to examine these intricacies of desire against the backdrop of a genealogy of seduction in order to avoid a typology that would catalog and classify the seducers according to their successes and failures, freezing their appearance and their qualities. Typology might be said to strip the seducer of his desire, turning his seduction into a banal mechanism. Leporello counts, while Don Giovanni sings his desire at the top of his lungs. . . .

The vital link in this genealogy is the desire for seduction itself; that is, the genealogy takes desire as a structural, evolutionary figure and, in a somewhat Kierkegaardian maneuver, follows the trajectory from its obscure birth (desire wrapped up in itself, so to speak) all the way to its theoretical (intellectual) explosion. At this point of arrival, desire recognizes its object not in its victim but in its reflexive *jouissance*. This moment of theoretical solitude, which Kierkegaard sees as the *erotic* (or *intensive*) moment proper to seduction, is perhaps also the moment of the most absolute attraction. Yet this ecstasy of desire is precarious; the seducer can end up a victim of Desire.[10] As John Forrester succinctly puts it: "The seducer may turn him- or herself into the seduced, by introducing into the other a passion which then overwhelms him."[11] The present genealogy follows more closely the path marked out by René Girard when he speaks of a progressive, reflexive aggravation of desire: "Desire is always using for its own ends the knowledge it has acquired of itself. . . . Desire bears light, but puts that light in the service of its own darkness; it places the truth in the service of its own untruth."[12]

We will observe the entangled progression of this desire from Marivaux to Goethe, appreciating in each seduction the quality of desire that informs it. The names of the characters who play out these episodes are of little importance; they are but stages in the progression of desire. I will attempt to show how an episode of seduction contains in embryonic form the elements of a more elaborate seduction. By thus unraveling seductive desire, we will be better able to grasp the complexity and wealth of its component parts, its progressive theorization, and the delirious pretension of its aims.

In this study, seduction operates around a principle figure: that of *mediation*, with reference to René Girard's notion of mimetic desire. Paisley Livingston offers a simple and elegant definition of the phenomenon in *Models of Desire: René Girard and the Psychology of Mimesis*:

> René Girard refers to mimetic desire as *le désir selon l'Autre*, "desire according to the other." He contrasts mimetic desire to desire *selon soi*, desire that is a spontaneous and autonomous manifestation of an individual's inherent wants or preferences. Instead of having an "immediate" relation to his or her objects of desire, the person who desires mimetically has a "mediated" relation to them, ne that takes a detour through a model. Desire, then, is said to be "triangular," for its most basic structure involves at least three terms: the agent who desires, the object of this agent's desire, and the agent who serves as the "model" or "mediator" of the desire. 13

Seductive mediation offers a particular structure: it is always internal. By that I mean, in Girard's terms, that the model of desire installs himself in the closest proximity to the desiring subject. The relation between model and agent is not dependent on sociological hierarchy; it is primarily spiritual. The content of seduction always involves some degree of emulation. The seducee's selection of the seducer implies what Paisley Livingston calls "tutelary beliefs," beliefs that involve "the mimetic agent's view that the model's desire corresponds to an intrinsically superior choice"; "tutelary beliefs are be-

liefs that inform the believer that someone's desires are worth copying." 14 This means that the mediating seducer, feigning external mediation, can imitate a transcendental quality (autonomy, self-sufficiency, in a word *Being*). Hence the veneration, the idolatry that he provokes in the other. The seducer wants to be Desire for the other; he wants to stand in the place of the other's desire, *fascinans* and *fascinum*, obstacle and rival at the same time.

The seducer is the model of the other's desire, but he also becomes the object of the other's desire. He usurps the place of the object, assimilating it to his being. Internal mediation performs this reduction (with respect to the triangular model), bringing the subject of desire closer to the mediator; that is, internal mediation is a step toward the true destination of desire. Becoming a rival for the other's passion, the seducer dazzles the other with a blinding light. Seduction is a strategic military *occupation*. In the female form of the tantalizing coquette, or in the male form of the seducer who initiates, we find the same tendency of desire. The seducer points us toward the royal road of desire, but he places himself jealously on the horizon, like a beacon, both shimmering mirage and obstacle.

On the part of the seduced there is a tendency to absolutize the seducer as model. The model becomes for the seduced the sole executor of the privilege of desire. Seduction arouses in the self the desire for the other. Lurking in the silent pact of seduction is the deceitful "promise of metaphysical autonomy," the ontological delusion of which Girard speaks.15 The person who is seduced seeks his lost divinity in the other, desperately believing that he will be able to recover this "divine heritage." Inside seduction slumbers a sort of *religiosity* of desire: the term comes from Daniel Sibony, who sees seduction as a "playful, sometimes exasperated quest for an object-god to consume."16 Michèle Bertrand perfectly sums up the dilemma of seduction when she writes that "To seduce is to become master of the other's desire, to forbid him to be desiring. . . . To be seduced is to allow oneself to be enslaved by the other's desire, in order to have nothing left to desire."17

Seductive mediation choreographs this potent lure to which