SADE’S DELECTATIO MOROSA AND THE EROTIC SOVEREIGNTY*

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Abstract: Sade’s writings are a good example of the crisis of some corollaries of the XVIII century mechanicist interpretative model of human nature, for instance the thesis of the identity of the pursue of happiness and the self-conservation of its own individual nature, both responding to inclinations of the universal movement in nature.

With this presentation I would like to depict the complex interplay of individuality and eroticism in the epoch of the crisis of the modern mechanicist thinking. I’ll take for scrutiny the case of Sade’s writings.

In a variety of forms going from Literature to Art, Medicine and Philosophy modern society reveals worries about the coordination between choices of sources of pleasure, the self-observation of the subject, the social acceptability of some kinds of intimacy and interaction, the notion of moral personality and the “universal movement” as eternal cause of actions, including human actions, emotions and passions.

In French XVIII century literary culture a major part of these themes was articulated with the notions of movement, inner movement, sensation, conservation of the self, the parallelism between l’homme physique et l’homme moral through the passions or the notion of interest for example by de La Mettrie, Helvetius or D’Holbach, granting continuity to aspects of the XVII century mechanicist perspectives, and asserting a monistic, reductionist, image of the universal movement ruled by the laws of attraction, repulsion or inertia.

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The prestige of the scientific mentality brought the conditions for a generalized use of nature and movement as condensed formulas to abridge the complexity of the contingent connections linking bodily desire, self-perception and moral communication. The concepts of movement and nature were mobilized to recognize the contingent linkage of these areas. Saving aspects of the XVII century discussion of the value of “l’ amour propre” (ex: La Rochefoucauld and Pascal) such themes as pursuit of happiness, self-conservation or the protection of interests in civil society were the psychological and social main themes to make known the consequences of the universal movement in human life and in society.

The French expression “Le Système de la Nature” was a symbolic label of the belief in the conformity of all the realms submitted to the same universal movement. Sade was an heir of this general conception, but a disastrous inheritor for its survival.

By Sade one finds one of the most acute revelations of the difficulties in the conception of such universal conformity. A critical moment in the history of the harmonist, mechanical, image of human nature comes up, even if Sade continues the basic heritage of the ideology of “Le Système de la Nature”.

Additionally, I’m going to emphasize, very briefly, how Sade accomplishes a relative separation between “le physique” and “le morale” showing how “nature” and “movement” are cruel and can be turned against pleasure and the self-conservation of the self. Such separation entails complexity and not reductionism. Accordingly, Sade is an author responsible for the imagination of a new sort of individuation of the human subject which is multilinear and not expressive and unilinear. Henceforth, the connections between the realms, “le physique” and “le moral”, should be observed in individual events as self-referent results of the divergent domains, in contingency or, to use a heavy, serious term, in flesh.

Un fou! Le Marquis de Sade! Mais ce serait ôter à la folie ce quelque chose de sacré que lui ont accordé tous les peuples, ce serait faire de la plus grande maladie de l’homme, un crime.

Jules Janin (1834)

1. “Sade” in the History of “Perversion”

Since early, natural law doctrines, including Plato’s conception in the third book of the Laws (689 d e ss.), insisted on the opposition between the “natural” and the “unnatural” to make sense of what should be approved and what should be morally condemned in human actions.

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1 J. Janin, Le Marquis de Sade, Paris, 1834, p. 46.
Meaningful modern and contemporary ideas on “perversion” came from this prestigious historical background. Contradicting the unquestionable concept of nature the distinction “natural” vs. “unnatural” is a construction that demands descriptions of the “nature” on one side and the “unnatural” on the other side. The mutual exclusion of both sides also depends on descriptions and it is not “given”.

An aspect of the history of these descriptions is the modern history of the concept of perversion.

Some centuries after the platonic doctrine and its Christian adaptation the same opposition between “natural” and “unnatural” came back in the public declarations and documents of the Catholic Church concerning issues going from contraception and birth control, abortion, in vitro fertilization and Clinical Assisted Reproduction, cloning techniques and other controversial themes.

The “natural”/“unnatural” dichotomy became decisive in what regards sexual behavioural discipline and especially in the generation of semantic equivalents to the initial moral difference between the acceptable and the forbidden or the avoidable. A large domain of sexual behavioural orientations and practical tendencies enter the field of the “abnormal”.

If Sade’s system of nature in La Nouvelle Justine or in La Philosophie dans le Boudoir doesn’t work with the negative polarities (“natural” vs. “unnatural”) starting instead from a monistic theory of nature’s universal movement, the concept of nature is also established on a normative ground, even with contradictory consequences.

In 1958, by occasion of a presentation in the Collège de Philosophie G. Canguilhem established the triple genealogy of some physic-psycho-pathological theories on mental disease in the theoretical, clinical and organizational (asylums) fields (G. Canguilhem, 1958).

From some results of this complex genealogy we are able to appreciate how XVII century French philosophical doctrines on the “mind-body” problem, on the connection between bodily movements and mental representations and on “Physiology” were influential in the normative orientations towards insanity or “alienation” in the XVIII century and the correspondent measures concerning the creation of asylums during the late Ancien Régime and also in the revolutionary and Napoleonic periods.

Immediately after J. Colombier and Fr. Doublet’s «Instruction sur la manière de gouverner les Insensés» (1785) that divided the categories of mental disease and the asylum population in the groups of the frenetic, maniac, melancholic and imbecile, the notion of “mental alienation” didn’t include the special group of the “sexual perverted”.