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Consolation, Persuasion and Signifyin(g) Practices in Laclos's Les Liaisons dangereuses

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Introduction

In moulding his story of the 'war' of the sexes, of aristocratic libertinism against bourgeois puritanism in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, Choderlos de Laclos chose an epistolary pattern for different reasons. Not only did he aim at exploiting the already acknowledged advantage of the collection of letters i.e. foregrounding a realistic representation of the events as seen through the eyes of and told by several narrator-characters, but he also skilfully exploited the opposite connotations of the letter and of the novel to add to the impression of verisimilitude an educational dimension, as required by the aesthetic canons of the time. As Tzvetan Todorov has demonstrated, while letters are perceived as 'signs of intimacy' ensuring communication within the private sphere, the novel exposes them to the public judgement. (1967: 47-48) The exchange of letters functions as a double-edged weapon: it provides undeniable evidence of the libertines' art of manipulation as well as of their victims' painful and shameful fall; yet, while proclaiming the former's triumph, it also seals their doom once its content is made public. Neither the victims, nor the victimisers escape, thus, moral condemnation and the quest for happiness – of course, differently perceived – ends up in an uneasy manner for both characters and readers.

Symbolically, Laclos relates this quest for happiness throughout the novel to the idea of *consolation*, which I will further consider making special reference to the relationship between the Viscount of Valmont and Madame de Tourvel. The analysis will first dwell on the art of libertine argumentation, hypocrite and subversive, similar in many ways to what modern critics call Signifying, which turns out successful in persuading the chosen victim to let her guard off, to then discuss the traumatising effect of the victim's fall that the victimiser himself cannot help being affected by.

1. On Signifyin(g) Practices

Henry Louis Gates Jr. is the first to elaborate the concept of *Signifyin(g)* [1]. Drawing on an old African myth, Gates aims thus at pinpointing the complexity of meanings and functions attached to different rhetorical strategies, African in origin, but also functioning in the African American cultural context. He uses the epithet *Signifyin(g)* for the characterisation of the tricking Monkey which plays with figurative and formulaic language to convince the Lion that the Elephant has attacked his reputation and he discusses the 'trap' that such a rhetorical strategy sets to the uninitiated: the Lion takes the Monkey's words literally, goes to fight with the Elephant but ends up severely beaten, since he would not listen to the

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Elephant's explanations according to which he is mistaken. Eventually, the Lion returns to confront the Monkey only to be duped by the latter who, speaking in a similarly elusive manner, cleverly manages to escape punishment, as one variant of the legend seems to suggest [2]. (Potter 1995: 83)

Gates exploits the moral of this mythological tale to underline the features of Signifyin(g), which, in the African-American culture, covers a wide range of linguistic practices, often far more pervasive than mere verbal games. (Gates 1988: 80) For all the humorous effects it may produce, Signifyin(g), generally described as an essentially performative activity, carries a serious intentionality implicitly touching on larger questions of power relations. Opposing to the English *signification*– equally derived from the verb *to signify* – defined as simply "meaning", the black culture *Signifyin(g)* refers to "ways of meaning" (whether verbal, musical, theatrical), thus "open[ing] the door to a kind of intentional multiplicity … [which] upsets the authority and the univocality of the dominant interpretation." (Maguire 2002: par. 35)

As a polemically-targeted discursive mode arriving at "direction through indirection" (Gates 1988: 74), Signifyin(g) displays a number of similarities with other discursive practices that belong to different cultural spaces. For instance, Emily Maguire draws an extensive parallel between the African Signifyin(g) and the Cuban form of word-play called *choteo*. Comparing Gates' theory on Signifyin(g) with Jorge Mañach's analysis of *choteo*, she reaches the conclusion that both practices are performative in nature, undermine the denotive to produce a multiplicity of meanings, function as "method[s] of subverting power relations" and play with the reader's/ listener's expectations, who, if ignorant of such tricky means of expression, might easily mis-take the figural for the literal. (2002: par. 23)

Emily Maguire's exercise of comparative study focused on two types of discourse that, though similar in function, have developed in different cultural spaces may be regarded as somehow paving the way for further attempts at discovering in other cultural contexts linguistic practices akin to them. Or, as I will try to demonstrate in the subsequent section, libertine discourse displays the very allusive, *mis*taking, destabilising nature that would allow it to range, next to Signifyin(g), among linguistic means committed to exploring social and cultural contradictions.

2. Consolation and Libertine Signifyin(g) Practices

In her last letter to her friend Madame de Rosemonde, Madame de Volanges, Cécile's mother, writes:

> (1) Adieu, ma chère et digne amie; j'éprouve en ce moment que notre raison, déjà si insuffisante pour prévenir nos malheurs, l'est encore davantage pour nous en *consoler*. (Laclos 1964: 379)

This last letter of the novel, attributed surprisingly to one of the characters assuming, most of the time, the function of a mere observer from the outside, ends on the verb *consoler*, which, given its recurrent use [3], acquires the status of a leitmotif and key word for the interpretation of the text, weaving, as A. K. Mortimer suggests, "a thread among the various intrigues: all characters except the marquise seek it; none in the end obtains it." (2000: 19) To better understand the reason why *consolation* eventually turns unattainable, a first step would be to consider the multiplicity of meaning of the word *consolation* itself.

In Laclos' novel, "signification exceeds the word" (Spenser 1995: 459) as, more often than not, what is written in the letters does not correspond to what the characters actually experience. The two libertines, the Marquise of Merteuil and the Viscount of Valmont, often use the word *consolation* convinced that the dupes (Cécile and her mother, Madame de Tourvel and even Madame de Rosemonde [4]) will take

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it automatically in its denotative meaning of a moral act of support or sympathy towards the suffering and the distressed. Yet, the letters they address each other reveal their real intentions and their using the term in its connotative meaning, namely alleviating sexual 'sufferings.' This is actually only one of the many examples of subtle play upon the meanings of the words, this kind of "linguistic slippage" that drives "the verbal engines" of the libertine discourse. (Potter 1995: 81) Based on connecting in a surprising way the underlying connotations of language, the double entendre functions undeniably as one of the important rhetorical strategies of the libertine discursive play, which may be easily expanded upon in the terms in which John Wideman discusses Gates' Signifyin(g), i.e. as a "serious play that serves as instruction, entertainment, mental exercise, preparation for interaction with friend and foe in the social arena […] a sign that words cannot be trusted, that even the most literal utterance allows room for interpretation, that language is both carnival and minefield." (2003: par. 2) In the letters the libertines address to the others, the merely denotative is constantly undermined and the connotative is largely played upon. Dissimulation and the Signifyin(g) that "accounts for and sets into play the *mis*taking of meaning" (Potter 1995: 83) are aimed at blurring transparency and hence they are at the core of libertine aesthetics: "La transparence est ici pervertie, puisqu'elle vise à assujettir l'autre…" (Bayard 1993: 35)

In Madame de Merteuil's and Valmont's hands, the epistolary pattern subsuming libertine Signifyin(g) becomes an instrument by means of which the two could attain their goal, that is the triumph of libertine philosophy at the expense of the Other. They have indeed different projects: Valmont intends to seduce and humiliate Madame de Tourvel, who is looked upon as a paragon of beauty and virtue, while the marquise will have her revenge against the man who dared reject her, the Count of Gercourt, by plotting to corrupt his future bride, the innocent Cécile de Volanges. Yet, what unites them and drives them both on is the desire to disrupt the acceptable social and moral patterns and to possess and control the others.

In order to show that Madame de Merteuil and Valmont's way of being, strategies and goals are representative for the counterculture they belong to, I will proceed to briefly introducing the libertine principles as they were cultivated during the eighteenth century. Product of an aristocratic conception of life, rejecting the traditional codes of morality in social and religious terms, libertinism can be described as the art of subtly seducing and, by putting down the Other's resistance, determining her/him to acknowledge the law of pleasure. In this context, education is of utmost importance. Madame de Merteuil, for instance, shows in her autobiographical letter (Letter LXXXI) how she has trained herself by carefully observing, under different circumstances, the others' as well as her own gestures and discourse, in order to improve her dissimulation and manipulation skills and, hence, hidden behind the mask of respectability, to be able to live by libertine principles. Both the marquise and Valmont are thus the perfect embodiment of what critics call mondaine libertinism, which, while apparently adopting the mask of morality and good manners, plays by its own rules a hypocritical and highly strategic game, aimed not only at physical possession of the Other, but, above all, at the triumph over all ideological, social, religious and moral authority. As Raymond Trousson puts it, "le libertinage, sous quelque forme qu'il se présente, conserve quelque chose de transgressif, le libertin ne s'accomplissant qu'en infraction avec les principes censés assurer le bon fonctionnement de la société. […] Dédaigneuse de tout prolongement métaphysique comme de tout ordre supérieur, la créature s'assume et se prend elle-même pour fin, au nom d'une philosophie, explicite ou non, du bonheur immédiat des sens et de l'esprit…" (1993: XX) The libertines use the knowledge they acquire of the cultural code and "their understanding of how private and public accounts can shape individual acts" to "entrap their victims in a web of vicious fictions which ultimately destroy their lives." (Ray 1990: 323) Valmont destroys Madame de Tourvel and helps

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Madame de Merteuil destroy Cécile de Volanges and the Chevalier Danceny for the sake of maintaining a highly respected and feared position in the libertine society and of proving skills in subjugating the Other by constructing fictional identities [5]. The letters, marked by the conjunction of two subjectivities (the self and the Other) and two semiotic operations (self-expression and interpretation of the Other), serve the libertines' compulsion to overcome subordination to society and the rules that govern it. (Ray 1990: 322) All in all, on a micro level, the Signifyin(g) practices they may be said to display appear as indicators of "difference, incursion against stability, uniformity and homogeneity," but, on a macro level, as I have tried to point out, they serve to "frame and mobilize larger questions of power relations," especially those concerning class and gender. (Potter 1995: 82)

In order to be more specific and demonstrate how libertine Signifyin(g) functions as a hallmark of difference and an attempt at undermining power relations in society, I will further consider for a closer reading the letter full of double entendres that Valmont writes to Madame de Tourvel using the body of a courtesan, Émilie, as a desk. Valmont's interest in Madame de Tourvel, this beautiful bourgeois well-known for her austere morals, is motivated, in the first place, by his desire of enhancing his reputation of mastery. He is already so famous for his successfully seducing many women that his very name is enough to cause such violent reactions as presented in Madame de Volanges' letter to Madame de Tourvel (Letter IX)[6], which is but one of the many expressions of a culture which promoted the image of the moral, respectable, newly-rising bourgeois family. According to Simon Watney, "all apparent threats to this key object of individual identification will be subject to the kinds of treatment which Cohen and his followers describe as moral panics." (in Potter 1995: 90) Or Valmont represents such a threat. That explains both Madame de Volanges' outraged presentation of his character and deeds and Madame de Tourvel's early cautious behaviour towards him. In order to put down the latter's resistance, Valmont will set up "a highly self-conscious ploy" (Potter 1995: 85) in which he heavily relies on the letters to gain his victory.

At a first reading, if taken out of its immediate co-text [7], Letter XLVIII appears to be written in rather conventional terms by a lover overwhelmed with violent passion while alone at night. At least, this is what Madame de Tourvel *mis*takes it for.

> (2) C'est après une nuit orageuse, et pendant laquelle je n'ai pas fermé l'oeil; c'est après avoir été sans cesse ou dans l'agitation d'une ardeur dévorante, ou dans l'entier anéantissement de toutes les facultés de mon âme, que je viens chercher auprès de vous, Madame, un calme dont j'ai besoin, et dont pourtant je n'espère pas jouir encore. En effet, la situation où je suis en vous écrivant me fait connaître plus que jamais la puissance irrésistible de l'Amour; j'ai peine à conserver assez d'empire sur moi pour mettre quelque ordre dans mes idées; et déjà je prévois que je ne finirai pas cette Lettre sans être obligé de l'interrompre. Quoi! ne puis-je donc espérer que vous partagerez quelque jour le trouble que j'éprouve en ce moment? J'ose croire cependant que, si vous le connaissiez bien, vous n'y seriez pas entièrement insensible. Croyez-moi, Madame, la froide tranquillité, le sommeil de l'âme, image de la mort, ne mènent point au bonheur; les passions actives peuvent seules y conduire; et malgré les tourments que vous me faites éprouver, je crois pouvoir assurer sans crainte, que, dans ce moment, je suis plus heureux que vous. (Laclos 1964: 103)

As a matter of fact, the text is highly ambiguous. What Valmont seemingly intends as argumentative evidence meant to convince his addressee of a love that she strongly doubts is actually used in the connotative meaning to describe the stages of an erotic act. Such phrases as "une nuit orageuse [a stormy night]," "une ardeur dévorante [a devouring flame]," "l'entier anéantissement de toutes les facultés de mon âme [all my emotional resources completely shattered]" etc. denotatively hinting at the torment of a romantic lover reveal, in fact, the growing pleasure of a man making love and that justifies his stating that, at that moment, he

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was much happier than her. He even dares ironically invite her to share his pleasure, hoping that afterwards she would no longer be so insensitive towards him.

(3) En vain m'accablez-vous de vos rigueurs désolantes, elles ne m'empêchent point de m'abandonner entièrement à l'Amour et d'oublier, dans le délire qu'il me cause, le désespoir auquel vous me livrez. C'est ainsi que je veux me venger de l'exil auquel vous me condamnez. Jamais je n'eus tant de plaisir en vous écrivant; jamais je ne ressentis, dans cette occupation, une émotion si douce et cependant si vive. (Laclos 1964: 103)

This is an expression of the libertine's utter contempt for the bourgeois puritanical behaviour, on the one hand, and women's penchant for courtly love declarations in general, on the other. And he goes on:

(4) Tout semble augmenter mes transports: l'air que je respire est plein de volupté; la table même sur laquelle je vous écris, consacrée pour la première fois à cet usage, devient pour moi l'autel sacré de l'Amour; combien elle va s'embellir à mes yeux! J'aurai tracé sur elle le serment de vous aimer toujours! Pardonnez, je vous en supplie, au désordre de mes sens. Je devrais peut-être m'abandonner moins à des transports que vous ne partagez pas: il faut vous quitter un moment pour dissiper une ivresse qui s'augmente à chaque instant, et qui devient plus forte que moi. (Laclos 1964: 104)

As the voluptuous air he is breathing is that of a bedroom and the table metaphorically referred to as the sacred love altar is a prostitute's body, the attack against and irony towards the too moral and prude attitude of the Présidente are more than obvious. As Pierre Bayard remarks, "la destinataire se trouve encore plus ironiquement impliquée lorsque la scène amoureuse est presque directement exécutée devant elle, ou plutôt évoquée par un blanc textuel signifiant." (1993: 71) The blank space Bayard refers to separates the two major parts of the letter and the psychoanalyst interprets it as corresponding to the moment when Valmont starts making love with Émilie again.

The second part of the letter is dominated by the same ironical, even cynical tone:

(5) Je reviens à vous, Madame, et sans doute j'y reviens toujours avec le même empressement. Cependant le sentiment du bonheur a fui loin de moi; il a fait place à celui des privations cruelles. A quoi me sert-il de vous parler de mes sentiments, si je cherche en vain les moyens de vous convaincre? après tant d'efforts réitérés, la confiance et la force m'abandonnent à la fois. Si je me retrace encore les plaisirs de l'Amour, c'est pour sentir plus vivement le regret d'en être privé. Je ne me vois de ressource que dans votre indulgence, et je sens trop, dans ce moment, combien j'en ai besoin pour espérer de l'obtenir. Cependant, jamais mon amour ne fut plus respectueux, jamais il ne dut moins vous offenser; il est tel, j'ose le dire, que la vertu la plus sévère ne devrait pas le craindre: mais je crains moi-même de vous entretenir plus longtemps de la peine que j'éprouve. Assuré que l'objet qui la cause ne la partage pas, il ne faut pas au moins abuser de ses bontés; et ce serait le faire, que d'employer plus de temps à vous retracer cette douloureuse image. Je ne prends plus que celui de vous supplier de me répondre, et de ne jamais douter de la vérité de mes sentiments. (Laclos 1964: 104)

Having skilfully adapted, at least on the surface level, his argumentation to the expectations of his addressee and lent it a degree of opacity that forces her to remain confined to the literality of the utterance itself, without being able to perceive the referential reality it actually represents (Todorov 1967: 14-15), Valmont therefore concludes that his love has never been so respectful and that, consequently, she should not fear it or doubt the sincerity of his feelings.

The effect of Valmont's "parole inadequate […] qui ne désigne pas correctement son référent" (Todorov 1967: 14) built on a game of double entendres is even greater as the real circumstances in which the letter is written are known by two other persons, besides Valmont: Émilie, the prostitute on whose back the letter is actually written, and Madame de Merteuil who receives a copy of this letter, but does not consider it enough proof that Valmont will eventually have the strength to sacrifice Madame de Tourvel to the libertine principles and thus reaffirm his power of physical, linguistic and social mastery. Thus, the classical scheme of the libertine game is completed, incorporating, as Pierre Bayard shows, a third place, that of the

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outside observer and real addressee of the letter. (1993: 70) On the one hand, Madame de Tourvel, the dupe, complains in her reply that she should not listen and yet, she hears the love message that Valmont, the deceiver, supposedly sends her, which proves that, as far as she is concerned, the libertine's argumentation has successfully attained its goal and that her rejection is rather formal. On the other hand, the non-dupes, Émilie and particularly Madame de Merteuil, hear well and take the message in its intended connotative meaning. The former is really convinced that this linguistically slippery letter is the perfect embodiment of Valmont's semiotic mastery, but the latter is not. The marquise does not question the efficiency of the double entendre as a Signifyin(g) device resulting into the libertine's transcendence of social and cultural determination, but she wonders whether the viscount is really able to play that part of the 'superior being,' whether he is still in control of himself and of the fictions he sets in motion. If he is not, as she suspects and clearly states it in her reply, then he will lose control of the Other as well. Therefore, another question rises: these libertines, who dare challenge the power relations in their society in the name of an aristocratic life philosophy of freedom of all constraints, are they aware of the transformations they might themselves undergo in the process? Obviously, they are not and their obsessive wish to possess the Other and triumph over all rules will eventually cause their destruction. Valmont's case is particularly interesting in this respect and I will enlarge upon the reasons of his final fall, despite his excellent skills in using Signifyin(g) strategies to attain his mastery goal. Language itself will provide access to the characters' psyche and will turn out to be a permanent obstacle to both the understanding of the Other and introspection. (Bayard 1993: 37)

3. Affect, Connotation, Contradiction

The efficiency of the epistolary pattern as a verisimilitude-creating device largely depends on the fact that its polyphonic structure allows for the study of the effects of the fictional accounts included in the letters both on the addressees and on the addressers. The rhetorical devices the letter-writers use and that carry within a plurality of meanings also function as indicators of certain psychological mechanisms. Thus, the double entendre, so far commented upon as an inherent tool of libertine Signifyin(g), can equally be considered from the point of view of its direct connection with the subjective split within the characters, in particular in the cases of Valmont and Madame de Tourvel. In spite of numerous differences, they both could be looked upon as interesting cases allowing for the study of the manifestations of affect and its relations with representation. I would even say that, up to a certain point, the two characters evolve along similar lines; for them both, eventually "affect flows from the unconscious chain, like a river which leaves its bed and disorganizes communications, destroying the sense-making structures." (Green 1986: 206)

Thus, Valmont seems to conceive himself as a subject belonging to the libertine counterculture in terms of 'having,' 'power' and 'worth.' (Armstrong 2000: 134) Although he wants to prove himself completely independent from the contemporary society (just like Madame de Merteuil), he needs its confirmation of his 'uniqueness:' to use Ricoeur's terms, possession will paradoxically guarantee his otherness, his thirst for power will release his creative possibilities (as it could be seen in the above quoted letter, for instance) and everything he does is, above all, aimed at earning him the recognition of his 'worth,' or otherwise esteem. (Armstrong 2000: 134) By skilfully manipulating the script of his own culture, Valmont hopes to attain his goals (as matter of fact, he is convinced he will) by adapting his letters to the codes of his addressees and constantly maintaining a safe distance from their milieu. Like

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the Marquise de Merteuil, he thinks himself immune to exposure and his exaggerated self-confidence makes him forget about the danger of losing the distance and becoming personally involved. (Ray 1990:325) But he obviously lies to himself, just as Madame de Tourvel lies when she tries to convince herself and the others that she does not love Valmont. As Pierre Bayard emphasises, they both construct 'false realities' and become victims of negative illusion/ hallucination. Enlarging upon the definition of this psychic phenomenon, I. Armstrong states that: "negative hallucination is a phenomenon of the murderous Superego and a consequence of its merciless drive to idealization. […] The Superego's repression of pleasure reaches an ascetism which asks for total deliverance from the object of pleasure. […] The result is a psychic void produced by a succession of self-suppressions." (2000: 122)

For Valmont, the forces and conditions that impose restrictions while simultaneously constituting his specificity belong to the libertine counterculture with its principles of sexual emancipation, cold-blooded possession and mastery of the Other. For Madame de Tourvel, on the contrary, they pertain to religion and bourgeois morality. Yet, despite these differences, both Valmont and Madame de Tourvel are both subject to repression. They listen to each other, but do not hear themselves. Language as a means of representation is not characterized by transparency and "in proportion to the loss of representation, so the terrors of affect increase with all the power of the repetition compulsion." (Armstrong 2000: 122) Hence, the two characters' letters repeatedly make way for negation as expressed by contradictory statements or cases of double entendre that convey a double message without the sender being even aware of that.

On the one hand, Valmont is 'deaf' and 'blind' and refuses to realize that, while trying to win control over Madame de Tourvel, he gradually loses control of himself. The letter already commented upon shows to what extent language fails to ensure his mastery of the Other. For, as Madame de Merteuil rightfully remarks in one of her replies to Valmont [8], while thinking the Présidente to be the dupe, he is actually the dupe. To quote Pierre Bayard, Valmont can effectively set his pragmatic demonstration of 'superiority' only at the expense of "ne pas voir lui-même que *cette scène d'écriture est une scène érotique*, mais avec un tout autre sens qui lui échappe, faute d'être à même de se poser la question de sa propre jouissance…" (1993: 73) Of course, Valmont defends his position and he does it in many letters (e.g. CXXIX, CXXXIII, CXXXVIII, etc.), constantly claiming that he is not in love: pressured by this authority figure of the reversed Law of the libertines that is Madame de Merteuil, Valmont has negation as his only defence 'weapon.'

On the other hand, Madame de Tourvel feels herself the pressure of her social environment, basically embodied by Madame de Volanges. She appears to consciously yield to it, yet her rather enthusiastic references to her encounters with Valmont and her deep confidence that he is actually a better man than he appears to be point to what she is trying to repress, namely her growing love for him. Her accepting to write back to Valmont is perhaps the best evidence of her interest in him. Her reply letters reflect how, in trying to free herself from the object of pleasure, she becomes afflicted with "a mounting intensity of anguish." (Armstrong 2000: 122) All the arguments that she uses in her letters to persuade Valmont not to pursue her any more could be reduced to only two that enclose the very essence of negation: 'I must not' and 'I will not'. (Bayard 1993: 113) By saying 'I will not', Madame de Tourvel does not exactly deny she is in love, but by adding she 'must not', she emphasises that she cannot allow herself to get carried away with such emotions because of the consequences that might entail her breaking the social and moral laws.

All in all, the conclusion to be drawn is that both Valmont and Madame de Tourvel live in the "psychic void" of denial. However, while the former tries to find a way back from the "horrors of negative hallucination" (Armstrong 2000: 123) to regain his

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mastery of affect by eventually submitting to the rules of the libertine counterculture [9], the latter evolves differently. Signal anxiety functions for a while ensuring Madame de Tourvel's safety by adapting her reactions to the circumstances of the danger and sparing her, by denial, a much more painful experience. (Green 1986: 195) But eventually, her repressed desires break the barriers of her ego and she loses control of her affects. She admits she is in love and accepts Valmont as her lover. Under the circumstances, her ego having lost its adaptive solutions of defensive nature, the unexpected letter announcing their separation has a traumatizing effect on her. The loss of Valmont's love and of her own identity (for in the process she has come to identify with her aggressor) arouses traumatic anxiety. (Green 1986: 188-9) She retires to a convent and she refuses to accept that "a life after traumatizing is only possible with the help of another being." (Lam 2002: 165) Therefore, she rejects all friendly help and will not receive any letters. She will not deny what happened, but she condemns herself to suffering in isolation until death. Hers might be interpreted as a case of "agitated dramatization of affective experience which blocks all insight, turning the analytic situation back into a cathartic experience and preventing any *durch-arbeiten* ('working through')." (Green 1986: 195)

Valmont's repeated attempts to talk to her redouble her fear of being wounded again and cause her disintegration to maintain, even to worsen, finally bringing her on the verge of going mad. Valmont's traumatizing attack results in the dissociation between "the emotional personality (EP) who remains stuck in the terrifying threat and the apparently normal personality (ANP) who tries to go on living. Because of this dissociation, the threatening experience cannot become integrated." (Lam 2002: 175)

The last letter she writes (she actually dictates it to her chambermaid) reflects the disorder of her mind, which I would describe in terms of secondary structural dissociation (Lam 2002: 176); she addresses rather chaotically the most important people in her life. She starts by voicing her pain and anger against her aggressor Valmont, while simultaneously reiterating her not being worthy of redemption.

(6) Être cruel et malfaisant, ne te lasseras-tu point de me persécuter? Ne te suffit- il pas de m'avoir tourmentée, dégradée, avilie, veux-tu me ravir jusqu'à la paix du tombeau? Quoi! dans ce séjour de ténèbres où l'ignominie m'a forcée de m'ensevelir, les peines sont-elles sans relâche, l'espérance est-elle méconnue? Je n'implore point une grâce que je ne mérite point: pour souffrir sans me plaindre, il me suffira que mes souffrances n'excèdent pas mes forces. Mais ne rends pas mes tourments insupportables. En me laissant mes douleurs, ôte-moi le cruel souvenir des biens que j'ai perdus. Quand tu me les as ravis, n'en retrace plus à mes yeux la désolante image. J'étais innocente et tranquille: c'est pour t'avoir vu que j'ai perdu le repos; c'est en t'écoutant que je suis devenue criminelle. Auteur de mes fautes, quel droit as-tu de les punir? (Laclos 1964: 358)

Her discourse is marked by contradictory statements: on the one hand, she blames herself for being a sinner, but on the other hand, she blames Valmont for having tormented her and she refers to him as "the moral author of her mistakes." Was she then a subject taking an active part in her undoing or just a victim of Valmont's devious plans? Or was she both at the same time? Caught between responsibility and victimhood, she seems to have an ambiguous actantial position. (van Alphen 1999: 28)

In the next paragraph, she addresses her friends:

(7) Où sont les amis qui me chérissaient, où sont-ils? mon infortune les épouvante. Aucun n'ose m'approcher. Je suis opprimée, et ils me laissent sans secours! Je meurs, et personne ne pleure sur moi. Toute consolation m'est refusée. La pitié s'arrête sur les bords de l'abîme où le criminel se plonge. Les remords le déchirent, et ses cris ne sont pas entendus! (Laclos 1964: 358)

Since there is no concrete reference to some of her friends (not yet at least), her words could be perceived as a general address to the community. In one of her few moments of lucidity, she seems to realise that, in order to work through, she needs a holding environment to be able to fight against her traumatization. As Rosanne Kennedy and

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Tikka Jan Wilson point out, "in sofar as a new self is being constructed, this cannot be done by the self in isolation or with just one another (…). Rather it is an inherently social process, requiring a community that shares and participates in the discourse – both retrospectively and prospectively." (2002: 132) She needs the community's support and especially her close friends' empathy and not their compassion. Only their empathic attitude will allow her to regain her subjectivity, trust and the capacity to relate, in other words, to re-create a potential space. She literally begs for affective support when she appeals more specifically, in the last paragraphs of her letter, to Madame de Volanges, who advised her to flee Valmont, and respectively Madame de Rosemonde, who promised her '*consolation*:'

(8) Mes amies, ne m'abandonnez pas. Vous qui m'invitiez à le fuir, aidez-moi à le combattre; et vous qui, plus indulgente, me promettiez de diminuer mes peines, venez donc auprès de moi. Où êtes-vous toutes deux? S'il ne m'est plus permis de vous revoir, répondez au moins à cette Lettre; que je sache que vous m'aimez encore. (Laclos 1964: 358)

Unfortunately, it seems that neither of her friends will assume the imminent risks of empathic communication to help her confront the outer world again. The community remains blind to the "abyss of unhappiness" (Felman 2002: 93) that her marriage and Valmont's exercise of libertine mastery have plunged her into, while her friends remain merely sympathetic, which, unfortunately, is not enough.

Further on, Madame de Tourvel addresses her husband and God as agents of the Law now called upon to punish her for her sins:

(9) Et toi, que j'ai outragé; toi, dont l'estime ajoute à mon supplice; toi, qui seul enfin aurais le droit de te venger, que fais-tu loin de moi? Viens punir une femme infidèle. Que je souffre enfin des tourments mérités. Déjà je me serais soumise à ta vengeance: mais le courage m'a manqué pour t'apprendre ta honte. Ce n'était point dissimulation, c'était respect. Que cette Lettre au moins t'apprenne mon repentir. Le Ciel a pris ta cause: il te venge d'une injure que tu as ignorée. C'est lui qui a lié ma langue et retenu mes paroles; il a craint que tu ne me remisses une faute qu'il voulait punir. Il m'a soustraite à ton indulgence qui aurait blessé sa justice. (Laclos 1964: 358)

The pressure on moral and religious grounds of the Superego is painfully felt and makes her believe, as she clearly put it in a previous letter to Madame de Volanges, that there is no tomorrow for her: "the most elementary narrative framework, which consists of the continuum of past, present and future, had disintegrated." (van Alphen 1999: 35)

Nevertheless, the image of marital and religious authority further mixes with Valmont's.

(10) Impitoyable dans sa vengeance, il m'a livrée à celui-là même qui m'a perdue. C'est à la fois pour lui et par lui que je souffre. Je veux le fuir, en vain, il me suit; il est là; il m'obsède sans cesse. Mais qu'il est différent de lui-même! Ses yeux n'expriment plus que la haine et le mépris. Sa bouche ne profère que l'insulte et le reproche. Ses bras ne m'entourent que pour me déchirer. Qui me sauvera de sa barbare fureur?

Mais quoi! C'est lui... Je ne me trompe pas; c'est lui que je revois. Oh! mon aimable ami! reçois-moi dans tes bras; cache-moi dans ton sein: oui, c'est toi, c'est bien toi! Quelle illusion funeste m'avait fait te méconnaître? combien j'ai souffert dans ton absence! Ne nous séparons plus, ne nous séparons jamais! Laisse-moi respirer. Sens mon cœur, comme il palpite! Oh! ce n'est plus de crainte, c'est la douce émotion de l'amour. Pourquoi te refuser à mes tendres caresses? Tourne vers moi tes doux regards! Quels sont ces liens que tu cherches à rompre? pour qui prépares-tu cet appareil de mort? qui peut altérer ainsi tes traits? que fais-tu? Laisse-moi: je frémis! Dieu! C'est ce monstre encore! […]

Laisse-moi donc, cruel! quelle nouvelle fureur t'anime? Crains-tu qu'un sentiment doux ne pénètre jusqu'à mon âme? Tu redoubles mes tourments; tu me forces de te haïr. Oh! que la haine est douloureuse! comme elle corrode le cœur qui la distille! Pourquoi me persécutez-vous? que pouvez-vous encore avoir à me dire? ne m'avez-vous pas mise dans l'impossibilité

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de vous écouter, comme de vous répondre? N'attendez plus rien de moi. Adieu, Monsieur. (Laclos 1964: 358)

The disorder of her emotional personality, that defies integration, is reflected by hallucinatory visual images and different sensations: on the one hand, Valmont appears as a monster and all the body parts that might function as "metaphors of emotional feelings" (eyes, mouth, arms) (Lam 2002: 180) suggest hatred and rejection in contrast with the tender embrace implied in the positive image of her lover, obliquely pointing to her need for a holding, caring environment. In the description of her hallucinatory reliving of a traumatic experience, the readers can easily remark the focus on Valmont's facial features as indicators of either connecting and sharing feelings or hatred and repulsion.

After Madame de Tourvel's death, this letter is handed to Madame de Volanges and copied for Madame de Rosemonde, but it is never properly mailed or publicly read. I would rather argue that it is not the lack of a specific addressee that causes the letter not to be delivered; a more plausible explanation might be that Madame de Tourvel's words, as 'containers of affect,' have become 'unwanted objects' that remind of the violation of cultural taboos and, therefore, must be silenced. (Scott 2002: 76) The lack of linguistic communication entails lack of psychic communication and Madame de Tourvel dies alone.

Conclusion

After having sacrificed Madame de Tourvel to the libertine Law, Valmont loses control of his relationship with Madame de Merteuil too and his entrapment in the role of ultimate seducer that he plays for the marquise will cause his death. Madame de Merteuil also fails in controlling her readership up to the end and truth is finally revealed when Danceny exposes her by publicly reading her letters to Valmont. She loses all her fortune in a trial, she is disfigured by smallpox and she has to flee the creditors, supposedly to the Netherlands. Danceny leaves for Malta and Cécile de Volanges retires in a convent to become a nun. In the end, there is no consolation, either moral or physical for Laclos' characters. Scholars have raised the question whether at least the readers might find some consolation in this novel. William Ray seems to believe that the answer to this question is negative: according to him, the proliferation of narrative viewpoints and the lack of a single narrative ground make it impossible for the reader to know for sure what the characters' 'real' feelings are. (1990: 341) Pierre Bayard appears to share his opinion and he maintains in the conclusion of his study that the "impossibilité de lecture" is one of the major characteristics of the novel. (1993: 181-84) I would, however, emphasise other significant achievements in Laclos' novel as well: on the one hand, the reader is free to create her/his own "semiotic (dis)order" (Mortimer 2000: 76) and to follow the plot threads that (s)he takes more interest in. On the other hand, Laclos' novel may be looked upon not only as a moment in the development of libertinism as a counterculture, but also as a study *avant-la-lettre* of the paradoxes of the human mind and their linguistic representations. I think that if readers come to acknowledge these assets, then they might find some consolation after all, but the question obviously remains open to further discussion.

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Notes

[1] "The *g* enclosed in parentheses represents the choice between pronouncing the hard *g* or dropping it, as in vernacular speech. This denotes a conscious and active approach to using language." (*Voices Against Indifference Initiative. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.: W. E. B. DuBois and the Encyclopaedia Africana*. November 10-11, 2003. Biography. http://www.echofoundation.org/Past%20Projects%20II/Gates/Biography.htm accessed on April 7, 2007)

[2] Potter also makes reference to another variant of the same legend of the Signifyin(g) Monkey which ends with the Monkey being beaten by the Lion for having misled and insulted him. (1995: 83) However, that does not alter the conclusion to be drawn from the success of the Monkey's first use of Signifyin(g) speech to destabilise the hierarchical power relation as established between the Lion and the Elephant.

[3] The verb *consoler* as well as the noun and adjective forms derived from it (*consolation; consolant*) appear 75 times in Laclos' text.

[4] Madame de Rosemonde's status is somewhat ambivalent. Although she enjoys the reputation of a respectable woman, Valmont's aunt is susceptible to have lived quite an adventurous life. She knows what desire is and what its manifestations are, therefore her use of the word *consolation* could be looked upon as ambiguous, even duplicitous, at least when she addresses Madame de Tourvel. She can easily guess what Madame de Tourvel feels for her nephew and offers her '*consolation*' (see Letter CIII), but she does practically nothing to warn her or set her apart from Valmont so as to prevent the disaster. However, in the end of the novel, there is no doubt about her using the term in its moral denotative meaning: she does not reveal the whole truth to Madame de Volanges to spare her the pain of discovering that, at least apparently, judging by the letters, Cécile was not that innocent; therefore she advises her friend to let the girl take the veil. (Letter CLXXII)

[5] One of the best examples of actions taken merely for the sake of proving the superiority in manipulating the public discourse by constructing different fictional identities is Madame de Merteuil's tricking another famous libertine, Prévan, into going to bed with her only to claim then that he attempted to rape her. The events are presented in two contradictory narratives (see Bayard 1993: 56). The reader can find the truth about what happened from the marquise's letter to Valmont in which she boasts about her triumph over Prévan to precisely underline her superiority that Valmont dared doubt and to obliquely warn him that in case he betrayed her, he would have to pay dearly. Although certain aspects are purposely omitted, roughly the same factual reality is presented to Madame de Volanges too and publicly read as a proof of the attempted rape for which Prévan will be imprisoned.

[6] "Vous ne connaissez pas cet homme; où auriez-vous pris l'idée de l'âme d'un libertin? […]Encore plus faux et dangereux qu'il n'est aimable et séduisant, jamais depuis sa plus grande jeunesse, il n'a fait un pas ou dit une parole sans avoir un projet, et jamais il n'eut un projet qui ne fût malhonnête ou criminel. […] Aussi, si Valmont était entraîné par des passions fougueuses; si, comme mille autres, il était séduit par les erreurs de son âge, blâmant sa conduite je plaindrais sa personne, et j'attendrais, en silence, le temps où un retour heureux lui rendrait l'estime des gens honnêtes. Mais Valmont n'est pas cela: sa conduite est le résultat de ses principes. Il sait calculer tout ce qu'un homme peut se permettre d'horreurs, sans se compromettre; et pour être cruel et méchant sans danger, il a choisi les femmes pour victimes. Je ne m'arrête pas à compter celles qu'il a séduites: mais combien n'en a-t-il pas perdues?" (Laclos 1964: 44)

[7] Valmont's letter to Madame de Tourvel is introduced after the letter explaining the circumstances of the writing process that the viscount addresses to the Marquise de Merteuil. By copying and sending it to the marquise as well, Valmont wants to demonstrate that he is not in love as she claims him to be. Which of the letters tells the truth about Valmont's feelings is an issue further discussed in my case study.

[8] "Or, est-il vrai, Vicomte, que vous vous faites illusion sur le sentiment que vous attache à Madame de Tourvel ? C'est de l'amour, ou il n'en exista jamais: vous le niez bien de cent façons; mais vous le prouvez de mille." (Laclos 1964: 312)

[9] Valmont sends Madame de Tourvel a letter announcing his intention of breaking up, but the letter is actually written by Madame de Merteuil; the viscount only takes it for granted and copies it. This letter is suppressed from the collection by the editor as mentioned in one of the footnotes in the novel.

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