

INTRODUCTION

“[...] afin que [...] les traces de ma tombe disparaissent de dessus la surface de la terre, comme je me flatte que ma mémoire s’effacera de l’esprit des hommes [...]”¹ thus ends the Marquis de Sade his last wishes, but his desire for oblivion was not to be satisfied.

Repeatedly on the headlines because of his excesses, twice sentenced to death, unpopular to all the regimes in power during his life, a writer discussed and censored for over two centuries, synonymous with pornography, depravity and cruelty, so much so to give origin to a neologism that immortalized his name, oblivion was definitely not a possible option.

Michaud, editorial curator of the *Biographie Universelle*, wishes to publish a biography of Sade already a few years after his death and the article, compiled by Audiffret, is published in 1825. For some time the Marquis's desire to be forgotten seems to be fulfilled, but less than a century later, Guillaume Apollinaire rediscovers the "Divine Marquis" and publishes a collection of selected works², thus reawakening an interest that did not decrease ever after.

Since then, rivers of ink have been poured on paper in the attempt to analyze, explain, describe this disquieting character, whose life has provided abundant material to scholars and writers: authors, criminologists, psychiatrists, biographers, novelists and playwrights have ventured and continue to try their hand in scientific, historical and fantasy works that have the Marquis de Sade as their protagonist. The difficulties encountered in the past in consulting Sadian works³ and the scarcity of original documents seem to have not deterred but encouraged the proliferation of interpretations and hypotheses of all kinds.

Why then another book about someone who seems to have already said everything, whose fiction and non-fiction writings have been analyzed and dissected in the light of literature and pathology by world-renowned experts? For the simplest and most unpredictable of reasons: an unexpected stroke of luck.

During some decennia of activity as autograph scholars we have become accustomed to surprising encounters with characters from the past and

¹ “[...]so that [...] the traces of my grave may disappear off the face of the earth, as I flatter myself that my memory will disappear from the minds of men [...]” Lever, 1991, pag. 653.

² “L’oeuvre du Marquis de Sade”, collection “Maîtres de l’Amour”, Bibliothèque des curieux, Paris, 1909

³ In this regard we recall a funny episode reported by Forsyth (pag. 49) “[...] in the 1930s a historian by the name of Geoffrey Gorer, who was researching the marquis, went to the British Museum to read some of de Sade’s works that were stored there. However, he was told by the British Museum that it was a rule that people were only allowed to read de Sade’s books ‘in the presence of the Archbishop of Canterbury and two others trustees’.”.

unforeseen discoveries, but the finding of an archive comprising over a hundred unpublished documents concerning the marquis de Sade was undoubtedly one of the more exciting events and one of the peaks of our already rich career.

The collection includes over a hundred unpublished documents and letters (autographs of the marquis, his wife Mme de Sade, his sister-in-law and lover Anne-Prospère, his mother-in-law Mme de Montreuil, his servants Carteron e Latour, and, above all, more than sixty letters addressed to Sade from a “*Sieur*” Devaux, whose name was all that was known about him until now) and it represents a precious instrument for the study of the period spanning from July 1772, immediately after the Marseilles events that led to Sade be sentenced to death, until the end of April 1773, time of his evasion from the Miolans prison.

The summer of 1772 in particular, when the marquis travels to Italy together with his sister-in-law, due to the scarcity of documents was up to now only imperfectly known and accordingly it had given origin to the wildest hypothesis. The months Sade spent in prison instead, December 1772 - April 1773, were well known, but only through the official correspondence: the letters of Devaux (this mysterious figure that seems to appear in the marquis' life shortly after the latter's arrival in Chambéry on October 1772, remaining faithfully at his side - almost an alter ego - throughout the period of detention in Miolans, to disappear just before the evasion) shed new light on this period and allow us to see it no longer filtered through the writings of diplomats and officials involved in the affair only because of the positions held, but seen by the marquis himself, through the mirror offered by this exceptional correspondence.

Other documents, all relating to the same period, include lists of expenses, travel notes, inventories of books, linen, silverware and various objects, contracts, letters written in response to others already known, correspondence with his wife, Mme de Sade. Apparently, Sade kept such documents during his imprisonment in Miolans and left them to a trusted person at the time of the evasion or immediately afterwards. And whoever he was, the chosen fellow proved to be really trustworthy and unsuspected if the present archive managed to survive safely the repeated attempts to destroy every paper concerning the marquis.

This extraordinary collection of letters and original manuscript, forgotten for more than two centuries, together with other relevant documents that has been our care to add whenever possible, constitutes the basis for a remarkably accurate reconstruction of the ten months that so deeply affected the life of the marquis de Sade and that, most probably, were decisive for the birth and evolution of the "writer Sade". Furthermore, since it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to describe the events that took place in such a short lapse of time without taking into account the

causes and consequences, we decided to extend our analysis, albeit succinctly, to the previous and following months, giving a brief account of the period spanning from 1771 to the fateful July 1772 and from the escape from Miolans to the end of 1774. For this purpose, documents already known in literature have been discussed, with particular attention for those whose uncertain or controversial dating gave us reason for deeper reflection.

In addition, during our research we discovered another hidden "treasure": part of the archive of Jean-Antoine Fage, Sade's notary and administrator, preserved in the ADV. To our knowledge, although known to Debauve⁴, these records have remained unpublished to date (with the sole exception of a single, document, only partially published). Accurately compiled and mostly related to the period of our interest, they allowed us to confirm some hypotheses and to formulate new ones.

Last but not least, in addition to filling some gaps in the biography of Sade, this archive is also of considerable interest with regard to the daily and, above all, cultural life of the time:

Indeed, it offers first-hand data, for example, on the duration of the journeys by diligence (French stagecoach) and the relative cost, the price of various objects of everyday use, the books read by the marquis and his correspondent and the theatrical performances attended by the latter. Literary, scientific, theatrical works, people famous at the time and events then in everybody's knowledge, needed just a hint to be promptly recognised and understood, while today some research is necessary to identify them. A study of this kind was not the purpose of our work and was not foreseen, but it seemed to us exceptionally interesting to revive this world now fallen into oblivion and that, after all, was the world experienced by Sade.

In order not to burden the reader with more information than strictly necessary to tell a story already rich enough of events, and to allow who has little interest in this aspect to ignore it without difficulty, we have decided to insert in the form of footnotes most of the material not strictly relevant to our history. Those who have the patience to read these small additions too, will discover a different world and, surely, they will be fascinated.

Finally, during our long career we have learned that history, studied through the first-hand testimony offered by manuscript documents, is not an ever-exact science, but it is a dynamic set of information, subject to be completed and supplemented by new discoveries. If it is often necessary to develop hypotheses in an attempt to understand undocumented times

⁴ Debauve, pag. 35 note n. 6

and events, it is compulsory to be ready to abandon conjectures apparently solid when the discovery of further documents brings new elements. We therefore found ourselves in the need to update, in the light of our findings, hypotheses and datings previously suggested by other authors. Obviously, we look forward to the discover of still further material, that will put other scholars in the position to improve our interpretations and fill the remaining gaps.

A final warning: those looking for the sensational, the scandalous, the morbid and sadistic sadism will remain deeply disappointed, as disappointed will be those who seek an analysis of Sade's literary works and its possible autobiographical implications. We are neither competent nor interested in the discussion of the sexual psychopathologies of the marquis, nor in the study of the writer as such and for these aspects we refer to the numerous specialized works. Our aim was to reconstruct, through the first-hand accounts in our possession, the ten months documented by this archive, reliving for a short while not only our protagonist, but also the people around him, recreating places and ambiances of the time, contributing to let out of the oblivion (Sade will forgive such further infringement of his last wishes) a vanished world.

Les vieux papiers sont l'âme des vieilles demeures wrote Bourdin, and with this statement we wish to start our story. If we will succeed in awakening in our readers even a fraction of the interest and enthusiasm that we have experienced in our journey through time, we will have achieved our goal.