

# From Social Marginalization to Language Transgression: The Figure of the *Picaro* in Sade's *Aline et Valcour*

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Philosophers and writers of the Enlightenment sought through philosophic, scientific, literary, and epistemological enquiry to undermine the established social order. Indeed, as the *Encyclopédie* indubitably attests, the effort to enlighten humankind through study in diverse fields of knowledge was predicated upon the questioning of the foundations of social, religious, and political institutions, which necessarily infringed upon the liberty of man. Yet, in their attempts to promote this spirit of liberty and tolerance within their own countries, eighteenth-century writers curiously found fertile terrain in the examination of their respectively neighboring countries.

In contrast to England, which as amply demonstrated in Voltaire's *Les lettres philosophiques* had come to represent for French writers a political and social model worthy of imitation, Spain had been subjected to more critical scrutiny and condemned as *unenlightened*. Indeed, the vision that French writers had of eighteenth-century Spain was hardly complimentary. Firmly under the yoke of the Inquisition—an institution synonymous with religious intolerance<sup>1</sup>—Spain in their eyes languished in a state of economic ruin, political instability, and social degradation<sup>2</sup>.

The Marquis de Sade depicts this state of devastation in his epistolary novel, *Aline et Valcour*, in which he provides an account of the heroine Léonore's journey through the Iberian peninsula. Yet, despite his criticism of Spain and his rejection of its social and polit-

ical institutions, Sade curiously chose to compose letter XXXVI of *Aline et Valcour* in the form of a picaresque novel, a literary genre clearly borrowed from Spain and which shares certain characteristics with the libertine novel.

The tension that exists in the narration of the picaresque novel between the life of the *pícaro* and a world filled with avatars whom the *pícaro* must face or evade, finds its parallel in the narration of Sade's libertine novels and most particularly in the continual conflict between virtue and vice in *Aline et Valcour*. In letter XXXVI of this novel, the dissension manifests itself in the protagonist Léonore, who finds herself obliged to travel and traverse dangerous countries, including Spain, and constrained to avoid, albeit with rather limited success, all sorts of perils. Indeed, just as the *pícaro* must attempt to survive in a depraved world, so too must Sade's heroine, Léonore, tread a sinuous path in a vicious world in order to subsist.

The existence of these similarities raises important questions. Indeed, why was it that in *Aline et Valcour* Sade found it necessary or expedient to turn to the picaresque novel in his representation of an unenlightened Spain? Furthermore, what function does this portrait of Spain as seen through the eyes of the *pícaro* Léonore serve? It will be the purpose of this study to answer these questions and raise others by enquiring as to how Sade's vision of Spain informed his incorporation of the picaresque within his libertine novel.

As previously noted, in the eyes of eighteenth-century French writers, Spain constituted a country enveloped in shadow, imperious and hostile to the intellectual ferment of the Enlightenment. The literary representation of Spain also attests to a widespread recognition that it had lost its place of political, commercial, and literary prominence among European countries. Indeed, in the eighteenth century Spain was no longer the center of a glorious colonial empire as it once was. Most authors, philosophers, and travelers, who sought to record or create their visions and experiences of Spain in novels, political tracts, or travel accounts, never ceased to emphasize the loss of Spanish hegemony, and one need not look far to find examples of texts during this period describing the decrepitude and degeneracy of the Iberian peninsula. For instance, in *De l'Esprit des lois* (1748), Montesquieu chauvinistically contends that the Spanish, being lazy, have little control over their own political

institutions, and as a consequence, the latter are of course dominated by foreign powers. He writes: "toutes les nations qui commercent à Cadix confient leur fortune aux Espagnols ; elles ne s'en sont jamais repenties. Mais cette qualité admirable, jointe à leur paresse, forme un mélange dont il résulte des effets qui leur sont pernicieux : les peuples de l'Europe font, sous leurs yeux, tout le commerce de leur monarchie" (Montesquieu 573).

Towards the end of the eighteenth-century, the vision of Spain appears to have remained unchanged. For example, in his *Voyage de Figaro en Espagne* (1784)<sup>3</sup> the Marquis Fleuriot de Langle criticizes the pernicious effects of the Inquisition on literature and the arts. He notes:

Le catalogue des livres permis est si mince, les peines si graves, les MM. de l'Inquisition sont si alertes, qu'on ne trouve chez les libraires, de Saragosse que de cantiques, des almanachs, des noëls, des rudiments, des dictionnaires, des heures et la vie originale de quelques saints du canton.

Depuis que la foudre a consumé la salle des spectacles, il n'y a plus de comédie : on a tenté de construire un nouveau théâtre ; mais le ciel s'est couvert, le tonnerre a grondé, Notre-Dame du Pilier a jeté des cris ; les ossements, les reliques ont changé de place, les corps saints sont sortis de leur tombe : aussitôt, à coups de pierres, le peuple consterné, les prêtres et les moines furieux ont dispersé les maçons. (17)

In this passage the Marquis de Langle casts Spain as a country ravaged by the Inquisition, whose fanaticism and vigilance had resulted in the suppression of the secularization of literature and the arts that had taken place in other European countries more than a century prior.

Like these writers, Sade too denigrates Spain as an unenlightened country in *Aline et Valcour*, particularly in the philosophical digressions that punctuate the dialogic narration of Léonore's traversal of the Iberian peninsula. These digressions shed further light on Sade's vision of Spain, the capital of which he locates not in Madrid, but in the colonies of its empire. For instance, Sade writes: "ce n'est pas à Madrid qu'est la capitale de l'Espagne, c'est à Lima, c'est à Mexico" (Sade 529). He continues by adding: "mais vous

peuple misérablement affaibli, que deviendriez-vous si vos colons vous abandonnaient ? Accoutumés à ne vivre que d'or, n'en recueillant plus dans votre sein, où seriez-vous sans l'Amérique ?” Sade follows his criticism of Spain’s economic parasitism, with a vituperative account of Spain’s religious institutions, which he vehemently condemns. He declares: “plus écrasés que jamais par votre inquisition et vos prêtres, on ne trouve en Espagne que des alguazils, des chevaliers de la Cruciata et de la Sainte-Hemandad [. . .]” (530). Sade continues by writing: “L’Europe ? Elle serait ravie de vous voir écrasée [. . .] vos processions, votre fourberie, votre mollesse vous en feront toujours détester [. . .]” (530). Indeed, in this manner Sade’s *Aline et Valcour* recalls the work of several other *philosophes*, for in his novel Spain represented the antithesis of the Enlightenment as a politically and economically ruined country constrained by the rigidity of religious dogma preserved by the Inquisition.

Certainly, a thorough account of the perception of Spain in the age of Enlightenment would exceed the bounds of this study; however, a cursory examination of the literary representation of Spain by eighteenth-century authors demonstrates a remarkable homogeneity. Yet, although Sade’s representation of Spain in *Aline et Valcour* recalls those provided by other French authors of the period, he nevertheless differs significantly from the latter with regard to the narrative function of this representation.

In his epistolary novel *Aline et Valcour*, Sade chose to narrate two parallel stories, that of Aline and Valcour and that of Sainville and Léonore, which although seemingly unrelated at the beginning of the novel, converge as the constantly interrupted narration evolves. For instance, after having described the schemes of the peripatetic libertine protagonists, the narrator reveals that Léonore, whose own father has not only disinherited her, but also offered her as a sexual object to his partner in crime, the Président de Blamont, is none other than the sister of Aline. Seeking to escape her miserable fate, Léonore was forced to endure a seemingly endless voyage through various countries all the while seeking to avoid the numerous criminal situations she encounters along the way. Indeed, lamenting all that she has endured over the course of her travels, Léonore writes:

J'ai échappé aux pièges d'un noble vénitien ; un corsaire barbare n'a osé attenter à ma pudeur ; elle n'a point cédé aux poursuites d'un consul français ; à la veille d'être empalée à Sennar, ne sauvant ma vie qu'au prix de mon honneur, j'ai trouvé le secret de garder l'un et l'autre ; j'ai vu un empereur cannibale à mes genoux ; je suis sortie intacte des mains d'un jeune portugais, d'un vieil alcade de Lisbonne, des quatre plus grands débauchés de cette ville ; don Flascos et de Benda-Molla n'a pu triompher de mes rigueurs ; une bohémienne, deux moines et un chef de brigands ont soupiré sans fruit. Et tout cela serait-il grand Dieu pour devenir la proie d'un inquisiteur (583).

Confronted with a turbulent series of events that she is unable to master and encountering fraudulent characters over whom she exercises no control, Léonore necessarily recalls the familiar picaresque hero. Subject to the vagaries of chance the latter has been described by Stuart Miller in his study *A Genre Definition of The Picaresque Novel* in the following terms:

The picaresque hero is continually assaulted by events, but unlike other fictional heroes, he can ultimately do little to control these events. His fortune goes up or down as it pleases. His fate is in lap of the gods, but the gods are continually dropping it. Haphazard revolutions of good and bad fortune are his lot [. . .] (28).

Cast in the guise of the pícaro, Léonore recalls the protagonist in *Lazarillo de Tormes*, the anonymous work that marks the début of the picaresque genre in sixteenth-century Spain. In his introduction to this work, Carlos Vaillo Torres maintains that over the course of his travels the hero Lazarillo must confront a hostile society and secure his place within it by casting aside its religious principles (36). Vaillo declares: “[. . .] Lázaro debe enfrentarse desde el principio con una sociedad hostil para la cual nada valen los principios religiosos que pretende defender [. . .]” (36). In like manner, seeking to survive in a hostile world and subject to the will of three masters, our dear Léonore is similarly constrained to live by her wits in a world of debauchery and crime.

In her study “Narrative techniques and Utopian Structures in Sade's *Aline et Valcour*,” Béatrice Fink contends that Léonore repre-

sents “the key unity” of the novel, for she is the sole protagonist who evolves as the novel unfolds, yet while remaining undebauched (76). Indeed, over the course of her travels, Léonore never succumbs completely to vice; she recognizes it, brushes against it, fears it, but at no point does she deliver herself unto it. Faithful to the role of the *pícaro*, Léonore knows how to manipulate the vices of her libertine adversaries, as exemplified in her evasion of the sexual advances of the monk Don Crispe, in whose drink she does not hesitate to drop a somniferous substance. Indeed, it was precisely through the elaboration of such ruses that Eléonore proved able to escape the predations of the monk and those of his ilk, and thus continued her voyage. Yet, such behavior once again demonstrates Léonore’s affinity with picaresque hero, for as Stuart Miller writes: “the chaotic nature of this world is amplified by the picaro’s own mode of living, by the numerable tricks he plays on others” (23).

With this in mind, let us turn to a passage from the aforementioned *Lazarillo de Tormes* in which the protagonist Lázaro must utilize his cunning in order to vanquish his master. Horribly mistreated, Lázaro continually succeeds in obtaining that which he desires by duping his blind master, as in the episode in which Lázaro after several schemes finally drinks the wine that his master guards between his legs.<sup>4</sup> Such familiar *topoi* of the picaresque novel figure prominently in Sade’s *Aline et Valcour*.

Sade could not bring himself to deny the importance of Spain’s literary heritage, which had spread throughout Europe through the prominence of works such as Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. Indeed, with regard to Cervantes, Sade writes in his *Idées sur les romans* that:

son immortel ouvrage, connu de toute la terre, traduit dans toutes les langues, et qui doit se considérer comme le premier de tous les romans, possède, sans doute, plus qu’aucun d’entre eux, l’art de narrer, d’entremêler agréablement les aventures, et particulièrement s’instruire en amusant (16).

Yet, Sade’s *Aline et Valcour* provides an even more forceful testament of his esteem for Cervantes’ work, for indeed, the adventures of Léonore demonstrate Sade’s debt to his predecessor and to Spain’s literary heritage more generally.

Yet, although Sade's *Aline et Valcour* borrows from the picaresque novel, other literary traditions inform his work as well. For instance, in her study *Sade: une écriture du désir*, Béatrice Didier states that in the novel *Justine*, Sade vacillates between the *conte philosophique* and the *roman noir* thus producing an episodic progression in which the reader enters a world of the unreal. Indeed, as Didier states: "le conte est irréel parce qu'abstrait, schématique ; le roman noir, parce qu'il est au contraire redondant, parce qu'il accumule les épisodes sinistres au-delà du vraisemblable" (102). Indeed, by incorporating the *conte philosophique* and the *roman noir* in addition to the picaresque novel as I contend, Sade produces a rich amalgamation of narrative styles that provides for the reader's entrance into a liberated paradigm in which the narrative codifications of the novel are pushed beyond their limits.

Indeed, the intertwining of episodes and the utilization of different literary genres bestow upon the writer a liberty that provides for an aesthetic renewal in which strict narrative codifications must be reevaluated. In this regard, Ansart explains in *Réflexion utopique et pratique romanesque au siècle des Lumières*, that Sade makes reference to his works by contemporary novelists including Rousseau's *Nouvelle-Héloïse*<sup>5</sup> and the abbé Prévost's *Cleveland*.<sup>6</sup> These novelistic processes provoke within the reader such confusion that the novel appears to be composed of a group of events that are fabulous as well as fortuitous; yet, this narrative complexity anchors *Aline et Valcour* firmly within the picaresque tradition.

Nevertheless, it would be futile to seek to find within *Aline et Valcour* a novelistic logic or meaningful chronological progression. Indeed, regarding this work it is impossible to speak of narrative rules or constrictions, for this disorder nourishes this *roman philosophique* and renders it free. As Sade indicates within his *Idées sur les romans*, the novel permits the creation of "un tableau des mœurs séculaires" (26) and that the role of the writer is not to create rules, but rather to propose *élans*. He writes :

Une fois ton esquisse jetée, travaille ardemment à l'étendre mais sans te resserrer dans les bornes qu'elle paraît d'abord te prescrire : tu deviendrais maigre et froid avec cette méthode ; ce sont des élans que nous voulons de toi, et non pas des règles ; dépasse tes plans, varie-

les, augmente-les ; ce n'est qu'en travaillant que les idées viennent.  
(Sade 29)

For Sade, it is not a question of formulating rules for the novel, but rather of experimenting, and it is as such that in *Aline et Valcour* Sade returns to the picaresque novel. As Carlos Vaillo has clearly stated: “en la novela picaresca no tiene sentido hablar de constricciones, de reglas, porque el género picaresco [. . .] se va formando por adición de las obras en un proceso dinámico y libre” (14). In this sense, Sade’s libertine novel *Aline et Valcour* necessarily recalls picaresque novels such as *Lazarillo de Tormes*, for in both works narrative and literary forms are pushed beyond their previously established limits.

This extension, present at the level of narration, finds its parallel in virulent critiques of all social, religious, and political institutions. Indeed, with regard to the narration of Lázaro, Vaillo writes: “[su] mundo se ha secularizado y desconoce la caridad” (36). Henry Van Gorp has also noted in his article that “le protagoniste-narrateur est une figure solitaire qui vit en marge de la société [. . .]” and that “le picaro et ses antagonistes incorporent ensemble le thème central du *desengaño* à travers la relation trompeuse ; par là apparaît également une critique de la société” (210). Cast in the image of the picaresque hero, Léonore too lives in the margins of a cruel, violent, and vicious society that is also subject to criticism.

In *Aline et Valcour*, the representation of the social order consists of corrupt kings and monks whom Léonore must continually face; yet, her encounters with the latter provide the occasion for the denunciation of the moral, religious and political values that are prevalent in society, whose order has in a sense come to be inverted. Indeed, traditionally corrupt elements of society such as the brigands with whom Léonore meets and travels before reaching France, are far more virtuous than the figures of authority present throughout the text. Yet, Léonore, who resists the brigands’ overtures to join them in their thievery, nevertheless finds sanctuary from the corrupt authorities of the external world while in their company. She writes:



Ces malheureux viennent de se permettre des propos affreux, sans doute, mais ils ne m'ont fait aucun mal, et ils annoncent clairement l'envie de ne point m'en faire. Ils ne m'ont point livré par raison d'État aux mains d'un roi barbare qui pouvait me dévorer ; il n'ont point eu dessein comme l'alcade de Lisbonne, d'abuser de ma misère pour se procurer des jouissances, ils ne m'ont pas volée pour me contraindre à me jeter dans leurs bras, ils ne m'ont point brûlée, tenaillée, pour obtenir de moi l'aveu de crimes imaginaires, ils ne m'ont point placée entre le déshonneur et la mort pour triompher de ma faiblesse, ils ne me tuent point pour empêcher que je ne révèle leurs crimes....ce ne sera donc jamais que dans les états proscrits par la société, que je trouverai de la pitié et de la bienfaisance, et ceux qui doivent y faire régner la piété et la religion, tour à tour séduits par le despotisme, ou frémissant sous le joug de l'imposture, ne m'offriront que des horreurs du crime. (Sade 618)

Significantly, it is the vulnerable Léonore's exposure to the brigands that permits her philosophical reflection on the nature of virtue and vice. Indeed it is this social commentary that clearly reflects Sade's criticism of the religious and political institutions of his own period, for Léonore's comparison of the virtuous brigands with the vicious devout necessarily implies an inversion of the social order and a resultant chaos that finds its parallel in the world of the *pícaro* (Miller 10).

In this manner, an unenlightened Spain and its picaresque literary tradition find themselves transposed in Sade's *Aline et Valcour* into the libertine novel, whose transgression of novelistic limits and language are imbricated with a powerful denunciation of the existent social order. Indeed, for our picaresque heroine Léonore, is it not disorder and chaos, violence and crime, that provide the foundations for her philosophy through a dialectic of virtue and vice that alone permits the differentiation of good from evil? Similarly, the borrowing of the narrative structure of the picaresque genre and its seemingly anarchic application permits Sade to reflect upon the renewal of the novel as a guarantor of social, religious, and political liberty.

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## Notes

1. Under the article "Inquisition," the Chevalier de Jaucourt explains that the Spanish inquisition was synonymous with barbarism. He claims: "il faut que le génie Espagnol eût alors quelque chose de plus impitoyable que celui des autres nations. On le voit par les cruautés réfléchies qu'ils commirent dans le nouveau monde: on le voit sur-tout ici par l'excès d'atrocité qu'ils portèrent dans l'exercice d'une juridiction où les Italiens inventeurs mettoient beaucoup de douceur. Les papes avoient érigé ces tribunaux par politique, & les inquisiteurs espagnols y ajoutèrent la barbarie la plus atroce." (774).

Highly critical of religious intolerance, the *philosophes* of the eighteenth century clearly cast themselves as champions of liberty through their denunciation of the cruel practices of the Inquisition in Spain. Indeed, in the same article, the chevalier de Jaucourt concludes that "sans prétendre réformuler ce problème, il est permis d'avancer, avec l'auteur de l'esprit des lois, que si quelqu'un dans la postérité ose dire qu'au dix-huitième siècle tous les peuples de l'Europe étoient policés, on citera l'*inquisition* pour prouver qu'ils étoient en grande partie des barbares; & l'idée que l'on en prendra sera telle qu'elle flétrira ce siècle, & portera la haine sur les nations qui adoptoient encore cet établissement odieux" (776).

2. Indeed, as indicated by the contents of the Chevalier de Jaucourt's article "Espagne" in the *Encyclopédie*, in the eighteenth century Spain no longer represented an Empire worthy of emulation, for "[...] l'inquisition, les moines, la fierté oisive des habitants, ont fait passer en d'autres mains les richesses du Nouveau-Monde. Ainsi, ce beau royaume, qui imprima jadis tant de terreur à l'Europe, est par gradation tombé dans une décadence dont il aura de la peine à se relever" (953).

3. In response to widespread criticism de Langle modified his text substantially over the course of subsequent editions; however, these changes have cast doubt on the authenticity of de Lange's travel in Spain. Robert Favre explains in the preface of *Voyages de Figaro en Espagne* that "s'il est impossible d'établir si oui ou non l'auteur s'est bien rendu dans le pays qu'il prétend décrire, on peut en revanche rester perplexe sur le traitement qu'il fait subir à son propre texte, qu'il remanie selon les éditions et même selon les livres, transposant nonchalamment de l'un à l'autre ses descriptions d'Espagne en Suisse" (81). Yet, whether fictitious or not, de Langle's text shares much with works of his contemporaries with regard to his derisive characterization of Spain.

4. Just as he is about to drink the wine that his master keeps for himself, Lazarillo explains in a comical manner: "yo, como estaba hecho al vino, moría por él; y viendo que aquel remedio de la paja no me aprovechaba

ni valía, acordé en el suelo del jarro hacerle una fuentecilla y agujero sutil, y delicadamente con muy delgada tortilla de cera tapanlo, y al tiempo de comer, fingiendo haber frío, entrábame entre las piernas del triste ciego a calentarme en la pobrecilla lumbre que teníamos, y al calor della luego derretida la cera (por ser muy poca), comenzaba la fuentecilla a destilarme en la boca, la cual yo de tal manera ponía, que maldita la gota se perdía. Cuando el pobreto iba a beber, no hallaba nada. Espantábase, maldecíase, daba al diablo el jarro y el vino, no sabiendo qué podía ser” (49).

5. According to Ansart, Sade borrowed the epistolary form and the psychological analysis of *Aline et Valcour* from Rousseau’s *Nouvelle Héloïse* (Ansart 135).

6. Ansart has suggested that the episode between Léonore and Sainville that interrupts the main plot—the impossible love relation between Aline and Valcour—bears some resemblance to Prévost’s *Cleveland* (Ansart 135).