

H-France Forum

Volume 13 (2018), Issue 6 #4

Anne. C. Vila, *Suffering Scholars: Pathologies of the Intellectual in Enlightenment France*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. vii + 267 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 978-0-8122-4992-7.

Review essay by Caroline Warman, University of Oxford

The Marquis de Sade, interned during the 1780s at the château de Vincennes and later at the Bastille, developed a fierce reading regime which divided the day – and his books – into two categories: first and second. His “premières lectures” were undertaken in daylight only, as they required the most effort and the clearest mind. They consisted of philosophy, “morale” and history. His “secondes lectures” were largely literary, comprising the works of the dramatists and novelists, ancient as well as modern, and were for relaxation. In a letter to his wife, Sade complained of being deprived of books and unable to work without them: “que veux-tu qu’on fasse sans livres? Il faut en être entouré pour travailler, sinon on ne peut faire que des contes de fées, et je n’ai pas cet esprit-là.”[1] The only work he never needed any books for was “une petite dissertation [...] sur les dangers de la solitude et les funestes effets des prisons où elle s’exige,” writing that “c’est peut-être le seul ouvrage pour la composition duquel je n’avais pas besoin d’aucun livre; ma seule expérience m’aura suffi.”[2] It was reading, though, that helped him resist “les funestes effets des prisons”: he wrote to his wife for “quelques livres un peu libres et un peu... vous m’entendez bien. Ça, pour me faire venir de jolies pensées dans ma solitude, dans le goût du *Portier des Chartreux* ou de *Thérèse philosophe*. Le tout parce que la prison agit et que je sens que je me corrige à vue d’œil.”[3] As his abundant pornographic production attests, he successfully managed to resist the way prison was correctively acting on him. Yet he never did write exactly that book on the dangers of solitude and the terrible effects of imprisonment, unless of course we count all of his writings as precisely that. After all, as Simone de Beauvoir wrote, “En prison entre un homme, il en sort un écrivain.”[4]

Sade doesn’t appear in Anne C. Vila’s wonderful and deeply-researched book.[5] Nor is this the moment at which I launch some sort of critique of her work for not including an author whom I happen myself to have extensively studied. On the contrary, it’s more that her analysis has brought a whole area into visibility so successfully that I now wonder in a way I never have done before about the relationship between Sade and his reading, thinking, and writing, and about its relationship to his health, and how we might situate him in relation to the material Vila examines. The emerging (and as yet unpublished) writer who is the Sade of the 1780s clearly used study to sustain him in body and mind, and to help him resist the pressures of prison. He therefore offers a curious counter-example to the tide of writers who considered that their studies made them ill, attentively recording their symptoms. But it seems a bit weird to bring him into the purview of this study and call him a scholar or an intellectual, doesn’t it? Even if he manifestly did study, did think, did write, and even if doing all this did have a relationship to his health or conversely, his pathologies. So are we even justified in bringing him into the picture?

This sort of question has arisen out of my slightly anxious pondering about how to delimit or describe the twin categories in Vila's title, that is to say, those of the scholar and the intellectual. I was feeling that the more obvious category for the writers she predominantly focuses on - Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, Mme de Staël - would be that of the *philosophe*, and this would apply also to the *médecin-philosophe* Tissot, whose *De la santé des gens de lettres* (1st ed. 1768) was so deeply influential, and whose views and analysis are at the heart of this study. Partly, of course, the issue is a translation problem for the title of a book published in English, *philosophe* and *gens de lettres* being two culturally-specific terms which resist easy translation (and may also be resisted by publishers thinking about revenue). Vila uses a host of terms - both English and French - in her study. *Thinker*, *cerebralist*, *genius*, *writer* as well as *scholar* or *intellectual* are all key terms, as are the aforementioned *gens de lettres* and *philosophe*; then there's the *savant*, including the (generally negatively-tinged) *femme savante*. All of these terms are current in the texts she cites, apart from "intellectual" of course, which only exists as an adjective at that time; its use as a noun post-dates this period, passing into general circulation via its (pejorative) use in connection with the Dreyfus affair, and does not find its way into the admittedly very conservative *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* until the eighth edition of 1932.[6]

Does it matter that one of the terms in the title was not in use during the long eighteenth-century or by the writers Vila examines? Perhaps it doesn't; perhaps the anxious Foucauldian historicist can accept that we all know what we mean when we talk about "intellectuals," that the term can quite easily be retrospectively applied to the *philosophes*, that using it makes a bridge between "us" and "them," and indeed that the multiplicity of terms used opens up different avenues of study - makes us see, for example, how Sade might be looked at from this point of view - which the exclusive adherence to endogenous terms might preclude. And yet I do worry that the reliance on a term such as "intellectual," which is such a familiar concept for us, banalizes those whom it purports to describe, covering them with a false sameness, such that we lose our sense of the specificity of this period which in fact had no concept of the public intellectual. It "normalizes" - to use another term which did not exist in the Eighteenth Century - the figures under discussion.[7] And yet, how bizarre they are! Voltaire, naming his soul *Lisette*![8]

Part of what seems so curious to me about Tissot's analysis of the health of men of letters, or to be more precise, the ill effects of excessive study, is the view that it is the long hours in the *cabinet*, that is, solitude itself, that is the real problem. Thus arises a whole gamut of symptoms from inactive digestion and overactive nerves (Voltaire) to overwhelming melancholy (Rousseau and Mme de Staël), and it almost doesn't matter whether the "scholars" and "intellectuals" actively seek solitude or whether their ill health arises from the enforced solitude of their studies (see in particular pp. 55-57; 59-64; 123). Of course, Tissot is not the only writer or doctor identifying and discussing the problems arising from excessive amounts of solitude, but he is the person who also wrote the equally influential *De l'onanisme* (1760). Vila does draw out some continuity between the two works; in her view, however, Tissot's guiding principle is "the ancient doctrine of the nonnaturals" (p. 36) which avoids excessive depletion of any "vital resource" in any one area but does consider - according to a quantitative sort of logic - that loss in one can be compensated in another (p. 37). It is manifestly true that Tissot does adhere to this view, and Vila shows it incontrovertibly to be the case. But the damaging effects of solitude seem to be a further common thread linking his analyses of both masturbation and study, both of

which lead to a sort of melancholy exhaustion, the effects of which can be irreversible. Both activities are seen to be introverted, and those who engage in them are seen to be (and fear being) self-consuming. Thus we end up with the almost explicit overlap between the two areas in works such as Chateaubriand's anti-Enlightenment *Du génie du christianisme* (1802), where he describes the closed-in emotional and sexual world of those who read too much:

Il reste à parler d'un état de l'âme, qui, ce nous semble, n'a pas encore été bien observé; c'est celui qui précède le développement des passions, lorsque nos facultés, jeunes, actives, entières mais renfermées, ne se sont exercées que sur elles-mêmes, sans but et sans objet. Plus les peuples avancent en civilisation, plus cet état du *vague* des passions augmente; car il arrive alors une chose fort triste: le grand nombre d'exemples qu'on a sous les yeux, la multitude de livres qui traitent de l'homme et de ses sentiments, rendent habile sans expérience. On est détrompé sans avoir joui; il reste encore des désirs, et l'on n'a plus d'illusions.[9]

If we accept that Chateaubriand is following in Tissot's footsteps here (as well as in Rousseau's, of course, but as Vila shows, Tissot and Rousseau mutually influenced each other, see pp. 21; 35-36; 43-44), then the particular view they develop, and which Vila examines, of "scholars" as "suffering" and of "intellectuals" as having "pathologies" begins to be polemically and politically locatable, that is to say, as being *anti-philosophe* and anti-Enlightenment. Might there be a religious origin or resonance to this view of the anti-social lone scholar? I would be extremely interested to hear Vila's view on these questions, and the extent to which she thinks they might offer productive avenues for further exploration. She would certainly be right to draw our attention to her analysis of Voltaire's own (extensive) writing about his health and digestion; Voltaire is not *anti-philosophe*! And nor is Tissot, in any obvious way. Yet he does seem to think that locking yourself away for the purpose of study or indeed anything else, is bad for you and bad for society, and he's not alone. And then up looms Sade again, disruptively as ever. I mean, look what happened when he was locked away by himself with books! Would he be a symptom of this cultural view of the ill-effects of isolation, or even an extreme expression of it? In his case, where's the pathology exactly? In the writings themselves? And do these writings help us discern that the perceived pathologies of the scholar and writer are part of wider pro/anti-Enlightenment polemics, whether that be from the incarcerated Sade's own perspective, from that of the diagnosing doctor, the self-contemplating writer, the commentator, the *anti-philosophe*? Lots of new questions, ones which Anne C. Vila's fascinating and illuminating book has brought to light.

NOTES.

[1] Letter to Mme de Sade, March/April 1779, in Sade, *Lettres écrites de Vincennes et de la Bastille, Œuvres complètes*, (Paris: J.-J. Pauvert, 1966), 2 vols; 1:123. I draw these examples and analysis of Sade's "lectures" from my study: C. Warman, *Sade: from materialism to pornography* SVEC 2002:01 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2002), 87-89.

[2] Letter to Mme de Sade, 30 April 1781, in Sade, *Lettres écrites de Vincennes et de la Bastille*, 2:51.

[3] Letter to Mme de Sade, 15 June 1783, in Sade, *Lettres et mélanges littéraires écrits à Vincennes et à la Bastille avec les lettres de Madame de Sade, de Marie-Dorothée Rousset et diverses personnes*, ed. Georges Daumas and Gilbert Lély (Paris: Borderie, 1980), iii.147.

[4] Quoted without footnote reference in Maurice Lever, *Donatien Alphonse François, marquis de Sade* (Paris: Fayard, 1991), 375.

[5] And while we're on how good her book is, can I publicly acknowledge that I agree with her very interesting questioning (pp. 118-19) of a translation that Kate E. Tunstall and I proposed of a snippet from Diderot's *Lettre sur les sourds et muets*, see Marian Hobson, *Diderot and Rousseau: Networks of Enlightenment*, ed. and trans. Kate E. Tunstall and Caroline Warman, SVEC 2011:04 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2011), 235.

[6] ARTFL *Dictionnaires d'autrefois*: "Intellectuel" <https://artflsrv03.uchicago.edu/philologic4/publicdicos/query?report=bibliography&head=intellectuel>; ARTFL *Encyclopédie*: "Intellectuel" (article by Diderot) <https://artflsrv03.uchicago.edu/philologic4/encyclopedie1117/navigate/8/3340/>; OED "Intellectual": <http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2355/view/Entry/97387?redirectedFrom=intellectual#eid>. ARTFL and OED resources accessed 16.10.2018. The OED definition records the connection with the Dreyfus affair, and it is also mentioned by Wolf Lepenies, *Qu'est-ce qu'un intellectuel européen? Les intellectuels et la politique de l'esprit dans l'histoire européenne. Chair européenne du Collège de France, 1991-1992*, ed. Dominique Séglerd (Paris: Seuil, 2017), 31.

[7] See Peter Cryle and Elizabeth Stephens' brilliant study, *Normality, A Critical Genealogy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

[8] Voltaire to Cideville, 10 May 1764 (OCV, vol.111, p. 368), quoted by Vila, *Suffering Scholars*, 103.

[9] François-René de Chateaubriand, *Du génie du christianisme* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966), vol.1, 309 (ch.IX: "Du vague des passions").

Caroline Warman
University of Oxford
Caroline.warman@mod-langs.ox.ac.uk

Copyright © 2018 by H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. H-France reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/re-publication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Forum* nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission.

Volume 13 (2018), Issue 6 #4