?Ce n?est pas ma faute:?

The Strange Fortunes of Piety and Consciousness

in Choderlos de Laclos?s *Les Liaisons dangereuses*

Whenever a French and a German tale
follow the same pattern, the German veers
off in the direction of the mysterious, the
supernatural, and the violent, while the
French steers straight for the village
where the hero can give full play to his talent for intrigue

--Robert Darnton1 [1]

If man?s life is only a shadow and true reality lies elsewhere, in the inaccessible, in the inhuman or the suprahuman, then we suddenly enter the drama of theology. Indeed, Kafka?s first commentators explained his novels as religious parables. . . . Such an

1 [1] Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1984), 55.

interpretation seems to me wrong (because it sees allegory when Kafka grasped concrete situations of human life) but also revealing: wherever power deifies itself, it automatically produces its own theology; wherever it behaves like God, it awakens religious feelings toward self; such a world can be described in theological terms.

--Milan Kundera2 [2]

Choderlos Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782) is an epistolary novel of wicked reason and deformed consciousness, the latter a philosophical problem that appears throughout the work of Eric Voegelin. In volume V of *Order and History* Voegelin addressed the problem of philosophy deprived of "the erotic tension of the Divine beyond" as a specific property of 18th-19th-century deformation.3 [3] The libertines of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* banish the beyond and founder on deformative attempts nevertheless to preserve an erotic tension with the objects of their desires.4

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2 [2] Milan Kundera, "Somewhere Behind," in *The Art of the Novel,* transl. Linda Asher (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), 102.

3 [3] Eric Voegelin, *In Search of Order*(Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 54.

4 [4] See Voegelin's discussion of "the contracted self" in "The Eclipse of Reality," in *What is History and Other Late Unpublished Writings,* edited by Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 111-114.

[4] All the characters are seekers after knowledge; most of them use it to direct the lives of others. Consciously abolishing love from the love of knowledge they assure themselves the ennui they seek to avoid, they abolish love from their lives, and, in some cases, they perish. In this novel, philosophy is absent from the stage; even so, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* is a philosophical novel.

Robert Darnton's remark above to the effect that the French will choose busy town over bewitched and bewitching tarn illuminates indirectly much of the scholarly discussion of Laclos's splendid novel. Whether author Laclos is understood as disciple or debunker of Rousseau or Descartes, an ironic proponent of the libertine code of ethics, or simply as the neutral observer disingenuously set forth by the novel's borrowed epigraph''J'ai vu les moeurs de mon temps, et j'ai publi' ces Lettres''the focus of criticism is directed at analysis of the society in which the novel was set. It is, as Ronald Rosbottom has put it, 'a novel about connections, not about individuals.'5 [5] Mondanit'worldliness'is the touchstone even for critics whose discussions center on the eighteenth-century self.6 [6]

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5 [5] This is 'even more striking,' continues Rosbottom, 'when we realize that modern autobiography, evolving from its Lockean origins, was born and developed in the eighteenth century.' Ronald C. Rosbottom, *Choderlos de Laclos* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), 58.

6 [6] The classic study of this phenomenon as explored in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* is Peter Brooks, *The Novel of Worldliness: Cr'billon, Marivaux, Laclos, Stendhal* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969). Brooks defines worldliness as 'an ethos and personal manner which indicate that one attaches primary or even exclusive importance to ordered social existence, to life within a public system of values and

The *Liaisons* is such a complex and intricate work that studies frequently allude to the novel's resistance to interpretation.7 [7] One critic has suggested that "whatever his intentions may have been," author Laclos "systematically and loyally served" "the law that is superior to all others, because of the reversals it provokes, the law of the novel." 8 [8] The openness of the epistolary form powerfully influences audience as well as author. Elizabeth MacArthur has suggested that epistolarity provokes a particular response from the scholarly reader:

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gestures to the social techniques that further this life and one's position in it, and hence to knowledge about society and its forms of comportment" (Brooks, 4). Novels of worldliness are generally novels of stasis: "It is typical of all novels of mondanit²," writes Susan Winnett, "that society emerges unchanged from the plots for which it has served as a medium" Susan Winnett, *Terrible Sociability: The Text of Manners in Laclos, Goethe, and James* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 17.

7 [7] It is usual to find the language of defiance and resistance to interpretation. Christine Roulston has (persuasively) complicated the model by suggesting that even as the novel resists reading, "the model of reading proposed by Laclos" advocates "a process of resistance rather than of identification," i.e., Laclos instructs the reader to resist the novel. Christine Roulston, *Virtue, Gender, and the Authentic Self in Eighteenth-Century Fiction: Richardson, Rousseau, and Laclos* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 146.

8 [8] Anne Deneys, "The Political Economy of the Body in the *Liaisons dangereuses* of Choderlos Laclos," in *Eroticism and the Body Politic*, edited by Lynn Hunt (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 60.

> Critics tend to respond to such metonymic texts by metaphorizing them. To impose metaphor on a metonymic text is to give it a message to make it didactic, in other words to force it to say what it ought to say. Editors and critics of epistolary narratives have almost universally adopted this moralizing stance. . . . If epistolary narratives refuse the stabilizing certitudes of more closural forms, challenging received values with their disruptive metonymic questioning, it is not surprising that critics confronted with them attempt to reassert stable, meaningful order.9 [9]

Among those caught up in the problem of tracking the pressure exerted by form on meaning10 [10] some have declared that *Les Liaisons* can be metaphorically penetrated as a *boulet creux* (an artillery device invented by the versatile Laclos), which draws its force from a hollow center.11 [11] Other metaphorizing interpretations have included *Liaisons* as stage (with Laclos cast as puppeteer or

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9 [9] Elizabeth J. MacArthur, *Extravagant Narratives: Closure and Dynamics in the Epistolary Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 274.

10 [10] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity, Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1982), 189.

11 [11] Joan DeJean presents an extended development of the strategic analogy, which has also been treated by Irving Wohlfarth and Georges Daniel. Joan DeJean, *Literary Fortification: Rousseau, Laclos, Sade* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 252-3.

ventriloquist), as a *jeu de miroirs,* and even as ﷺa harem looking inward upon itself.ﷺ12 [12] These interpretations are all solidly rooted in the figurative language of the novel itself. Critics who have not focused on the nature of the epistolary form and its structure, or on some aspect of worldliness, have emphasized the Merteuil-Valmont correspondence and relationship, individual psyches of Merteuil or Valmont, the novelﷺs intertextuality, or the novelﷺs fictional and actual readers.

The foregoing discussion should offer some indication of the extent to which a storytellerﷺs consciousness stands to be swallowed up more by scholarly debate than by vivid characterizations and plot. Nevertheless, all these critical roads lead to the intentions, and mind, of the novelﷺs author. Given that the epistolary novel is ﷺthe perfect medium to camouflage the existence and presence of the novelist,ﷺ Laclos will not be easy to find.13 [13] Searching for the author, many critics fault Laclos for ending the novel weakly. Merteuilﷺs disfiguration by smallpox, Valmontﷺs death after a duel with one of his dupes, Tourvelﷺs death in the convent of her youth (the latter deemed implausible by the fictive publisher in the novelﷺs first preface) have struck readers as lame and lacking in subtlety. Vivienne Mylne, while applauding Merteuilﷺs silence at the end of the novel, takes issue with the smallpox that disfigures her because it invokes ﷺa punitive Providence which upsets the purely

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12 [12] Suellen Diaconoff, *Eros and Power in Les Liaisons dangereuses: A Study in Evil* (Gﷺnﷺve: Librairie Droz, 1979), 56.

13 [13] Lloyd R. Free, ed., *Critical Approaches to Les Liaisons dangereuses* (Madrid: Studia Humanitatis, 1978), 22.

human motivation of the rest of the book.14 [14] A few have offered evidence that the novel is a model of libertine salvation. The focus here is on the character of Valmont and his gradual entrapment in the language of seduction.15 [15] His undoing—and thereby his salvation—is his own doing. Although it is not unusual to find parallels drawn in the critical literature between Valmont and Laclos, the novel's second preface (this one by a fictive "editor") problematizes a reader's inclination to impute to letters "the laboured manner of an author who appears in person behind the characters through whom he speaks"/ "La manière peinée d'un Auteur qui se montre derrière le personnage qu'il fait parler."16 [16] Does the editor's preface foreground even as it minimizes the issue of an authorial

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14 [14] Vivienne Mylne, *The Eighteenth-Century French Novel: Techniques of Illusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 242. But see also Susan Winnett, *Terrible Sociability,* 44

15 [15] Antoinette Sol employs the theme of libertine redemption to argue that "Valmont takes part in two versions of the male plot, which cancel each other out: the reformed rake...and the successful libertine. . . . His indeterminacy functions as an allegory of the novel as a whole." Antoinette Marie Sol, *Textual Promiscuities: Eighteenth-Century Critical Rewriting* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2002), 194.

16 [16] Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses,* transl. P. W. K. Stone (Penguin: 1961; reprint 1972), letter 22; Laclos, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (Éditions Gallimards, 1972), 31. English translations are those of P. W. K. Stone. Subsequent references will be identified in the text by letter number or, in the case of prefatory material, by LLd and the page number denoting the Penguin edition.

presence, via ?une mani?re pein?e,? that stands more decidedly behind one character than another?17 [17]

Eric Voegelin writes about the relationship between the storyteller?s consciousness and a work of fiction in the ?Postscript? to a letter to colleague Robert Heilman. The original letter was a 1947 response to Heilman?s analysis of the Henry James novella *The Turn of the Screw*. The ?Postscript,? written years later, focused on an effort to assess and amplify the validity of a principle that had driven Voegelin?s responsive analysis.18 [18] This principle was, ?to follow the pattern of symbols, and see what emerges by way of meaning? (Voegelin on James, 134). The work of fiction was to be the primary tool of analysis. As Voegelin argued, under this rubric even an author?s non-fiction commentary ?by which he himself has indicated a line of interpretation? was secondary to ?the meaning offered by the

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17 [17] Such critical pairings are not confined to main characters. One critic, for very good reasons, has identified Laclos?s presence in the novel with a brief cameo by a shoemaker who appears in the first letter and never again. See Susan K. Jackson, ?In Search of a Female Voice: *Les Liaisons dangereuses*,? in *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature*, edited by Elizabeth C. Goldsmith (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989), 161.

18 [18] As the initial analysis was part of a letter from one scholar to another, this later assessment took the form of an extended ?postscript? and both were published in *Southern Review*, 1971. They subsequently were included in Volume 12 of the *Complete Works*. Eric Voegelin, ?On Henry James?s *Turn of the Screw*, ? in *Published Essays 1966-1985*, edited by Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990). Cited hereafter in the text as ?Voegelin on James.?

text" (Voegelin on James, 135). Voegelin's original interpretation of James's novella as a story of a "soul's closure to God," and, in counterpoint, of its roots in a "cosmic drama of good and evil as an incestuous affair in the divinity," was complicated by the fact that, but for the frame of a vague "garden," specific religious symbols quite evident to Voegelin were more or less missing from the language of the novella itself. Voegelin's "Postscript" qualified the premise (following the symbols to meaning on the assumption that the author " "knew" what he was doing") and worked through the difficulties arising from symbolic vagueness.19 [19] As I perceive *Les Liaisons Dangereuses,* it has remarkable resonance with Voegelin's understanding of *The Turn of the Screw.* Laclos's novel is undoubtedly a story of the soul's closure to God, and I will suggest parenthetically that the theme of incest is present as well. I will begin by following symbols, as Voegelin has done in the analysis of James, and then proceed to Voegelin's "Postscript" as preface to discussion of the consciousness of the storyteller.

Les Liaisons Dangereuses has three principal story lines hooked to one plot. Arguably the chief strand is the liaison of the Marquise de Merteuil, a widow whose virtuous public persona masks the motto "Il faut vaincre ou p"rir" (letter 81), with the Vicomte de Valmont, a noted libertine. These characters seem on the point of renewing a former erotic relationship via letters concerning a joint project: the ruination of a convent girl (C"cile de Volanges) before her marriage to a man they both have reason to loathe (Gercourt). The seduction of C"cile is the second strand in the plot. Merteuil's and Valmont's comparable gifts for calculation and

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19 [19] This founding premise for criticism of a "first-rate artist or philosopher" appeared in one of Voegelin's letters to Robert Heilman: July 24, 1956 Eric Voegelin Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, box 17, folder 9.

viciousness issue in an epistolary competition that sets them off from the rest of their society. Each contrives assiduously to be unique. I am tempted to think, writes the Vicomte to his partner, that in all the world it is only you and I who are worth anything/je suis tent de croire qu il n y a que vous et moi dans le monde qui valions quelque chose (letter 100). A less ironized worthiness defines the third principal character, the Pr sidente de Tourvel. Like Merteuil, Tourvel has a reputation for virtue, but she is also known for her religious devotion and a happy marriage. That Tourvel deserves her reputation launches the third strand of the plot: Valmont plans to enhance his fame by seducing la c leste d vote (letter 44).

Numerous symbolic complexes move through the rhetoric with which these and other correspondents fill their letters and advance their desires. The Merteuil and Valmont correspondence abounds in metaphors having to do with theater, myth, law, history, and, ultimately, war. C cile s seduction by both Valmont and Merteuil generally evokes the language of education. But for all their diverse and colliding aims, all the characters make use of religious language or symbols. This has been relatively neglected in the critical literature. Milan Kundera s measured caveat (of the epigraph) notwithstanding, I wish to pursue the strange fortunes of piety in *Les Liaison dangereuses* as a means to interrogate the storyteller s consciousness.

In the *Liaisons*, religious symbols can be reasonably configured into two categories. There is a constellation of symbols that have to do with doctrine, rituals, institutions and offices: sin, contumacy, penitence, disgust with the world; sacraments of marriage, penance, and extreme unction; convents, priests, and confessors. A second constellation includes symbolizations of the Divine. There are two subcategories here. In one category are formulations of God as an inscrutable, or at least remote, judge. In the other subcategory belong formulations in which human beings substitute for, or in some way claim to possess, Divinity. I will examine

several of these and some of their entanglements at length, with primary attention to utterances and activities of Merteuil, Valmont, and Tourvel.

Merteuil's use of pious language has mainly to do with the three things she holds dear: knowledge, power, and pleasure. Her direction of the erotic education of C€cile affords her all three. When its advances precipitate a crisis, appeals come both from the pupil, who is titillated by a flirtation with the Chevalier de Danceny, and from her mother Madame de Volanges whose delicate role it is to guard chastity while gathering C€cile into society's libertine orbit. Amused to find identical statements in their letters--€it is to you alone that I can look for consolation€/€C€est de vous seule que j€attends quelque consolation€--Merteuil writes to Valmont, €There I was, like God, acknowledging the conflicting claims of blind humanity, changing not a syllable of my inexorable decrees€/ €Me voil€ comme la Divinit€, re€evant les voeux oppos€s des aveugles mortels, et ne changeant rien € mes decrets immuables€ (letter 63). Later in the letter she informs Valmont that she has given up playing God and has assumed in its place the role of consoling angel (€J€ai quitt€ pourtant, ce r€le august, pour prendre celui d€Ange consolateur€).

Valmont's self-consciously amused mastery of a spiritual idiom, aimed chiefly at seduction of the devout Tourvel, flatters and entertains his confidante, the Marquise de Merteuil, as he keeps her informed of his progress. Given her own zeal and fervor, writes Valmont, Merteuil has amassed far more €conversions€ than he: €if our God judges us by our deeds, you will one day be the patron saint of some great city, while I shall be, at most, a village saint€/ €et si ce Dieu-la nous jugeait sur notres oeuvres, vous seriez un jour la Patronne de quelque grande ville, tandis que votre ami serait au plus un Saint de village€ (letter 4). When addressing Merteuil, he can be as flippant about religion as she is, even as he touches the fine theological points of works and grace. But Valmont and, as we shall see later, Tourvel take their

aspirations to divinity far more seriously than does the Marquise. In his accounts of the process of seduction Valmont talks of taking Tourvel away from God and substituting himself as the god of her choice. After spying on her prayers, Valmont writes to Merteuil, What God did she hope to invoke? . . . She will look in vain for help elsewhere, when it is I alone who can guide her destiny/ Quel Dieu osait-elle invoquer? . . . En vain cherche-t-elle pr sent des secours trangers: c est moi qui r glerai son sort (letter 23). The language Valmont uses to seduce Tourvel is the language of love, laced with religious references to unworthiness, conversion, repentance, and reconciliation. Appealing both to her spiritual and profane vanity, he enumerates the wrongs she has laid at his feet:

> A pure and sincere love, a respect which has never faltered, an absolute submission to your will: these are the feelings you have inspired in me. I would have no reluctance in offering them in homage to God himself. O fairest of His creation, follow the example of His charity! Think of my cruel sufferings. Consider, especially, that you have put my despair and my supreme felicity on either scale, and that the first word you utter will irremediably turn the balance.
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> Un amour pur et sinc re, un respect qui ne s est jamais d menti, une soumission parfaite; tels sont les sentiments que vous m avez inspir . Je n eusse pas craint d en pr senter l hommage la Divinit m me. O vous, qui tes son plus bel ouvrage, imitez-la dans son indulgence! Songez a mes peines cruelles; songez surtout que, plac par vous entre le d sespoir et la f licit supr me, le premier mot que vous prononcerez d cidera pour jamais mon sort (letter 36).

The foregoing epistolary speechifying has several important components. Valmont comes very close to tempting Tourvel to imagine herself not just as an imitator but as God. This is a reverse, rhetorical certainly, but perhaps indicating as well that Valmont's mastery of the situation is somewhat ambiguous. Because Tourvel is vulnerable to this kind of flattery, we find her later tumbling to the idea presented by her confessor Père Anselme that Valmont must meet with her in person to effect what she believes will be his reconciliation to God. Tourvel's willingness to place herself in such an important position suggests more than just the sin of pride. It identifies her eagerness not just to serve God but to supplant God. In fact, Tourvel is more like Merteuil and Valmont than she seems. And we might even say what they do not: that the indirect battle between Tourvel and Merteuil, which nobody wins, is rooted in the words "No man cometh unto the Father but by me" (John 14:6). The rhetorical device, also observed above, of abdicating responsibility and declaring one's fate to be in the power of another ("le premier mot que vous prononcerez décidera pour jamais mon sort"implication: "it's up to you; whatever happens, it will not be my fault"), is used by nearly all of the characters in the novel and may well be its most significant unifying leitmotif.

The reasoning that Tourvel uses to convince herself (via a letter to Madame de Volanges) that Valmont is not the reprobate of legend reveals a claim to know the mind of God. When to impress Tourvel Valmont casts himself as the savior of a poor family, she wonders whether God would permit "the wicked to share the sacred pleasures of charity with the good" / les méchants partageraient-ils avec les bons le plaisir sacré de la bienfaisance?" and allow Himself to receive gratitude for the actions of a scoundrel (letter 22). Tourvel concludes that for God such a thing would be impossible. Valmont must be a decent fellow after all. The implication of her belief that the judgments and workings of God cannot be inscrutable to a Tourvel either makes her faith seem very simple-minded, which is unlikely, or it complicates her

status as a devout character. And as the echo of a comment by Valmont in letter 21 to the effect that the virtuous may simply have been hoarding this type of pleasure, the episode suggests again her vulnerability to the sin of pride, a sin she will later try unsuccessfully to master.

The letters are also infused with familial symbols, some of which are metaphorical. Because they eventually become entangled with the symbols of piety, it is worth looking at these. Beginning with the actual family bonds, the characters whose letters appear in the novel are related as follows: C�cile de Volanges and Madame de Volanges are daughter and mother; Madame de Volanges (and therefore C�cile) and Merteuil are some manner of remote cousin; Valmont and Rosemonde are nephew and aunt. Other family ties are the Pr�sidente de Tourvel and the Pr�sident de Tourvel (husband and wife) and, for a brief time before her miscarriage, the parental relationship of Valmont and the ravished C�cile with their unborn child. With the notable brief exception of Valmont, and by extension the cuckolded fianc� Gercourt, the reader encounters neither fathers nor sons.

The formulation of other familial relationships by characters is significant. Early in the drama of her fall at the hands of Valmont, Tourvel invokes her bonds as a defense against the seductive efforts of Valmont:

> I shall never forget what I owe to myself, what I owe to the ties I have formed, which I respect and cherish, and I ask you to believe that if ever I am reduced to making the unhappy choice between sacrificing them and sacrificing myself, I shall make it without a moment�s hesitation.
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> Je n�oublierai jamais ce que je me dois, ce que je dois � des noeuds que j�ai form�s, que je respecte et que je ch�ris; et je vous prie de croire que, si jamais je me trouve r�duite � ce choix malheureux, de

> les sacrifier ou de me sacrifier moi-m&#65533;me, je ne balancerais pas un instant (letter 78).

To what bonds, other than connubial and religious, does she refer? Over the course of Valmont&#65533;s pursuit of her, Tourvel addresses two of her correspondents as &#65533;mother:&#65533; these are Madame de Volanges and later, as the first correspondence falls off, Madame de Rosemonde. Accordingly C&#65533;cile de Volanges is, for a time, her avowed &#65533;sister&#65533; (letter 8). Tourvel&#65533;s husband, a judge, is presiding in a distant province, and while readers hear of his letters, we do not read them.20 [20] The putative mother-daughter relationship of Tourvel and Volanges is underscored by Volanges&#65533;s insistent warnings concerning Valmont. At one point Tourvel&#65533;s defense of him will include the comment that she could reasonably and gladly consider him a brother: &#65533;Had I a brother in Monsieur Valmont I could not be better pleased&#65533;/ &#65533;si j&#65533;avais un fr&#65533;re, je d&#65533;sirais qu&#65533;il f&#65533;t tel que M. de Valmont se montre ici&#65533; (letter 11).21 [21]

The invention, by Tourvel, of these would-be relatives is an attempt to extend the bonds by which she defines herself. But for her absent husband, Tourvel seems actually quite untethered, and while she draws the notice of the worldly society she abjures, she makes a point of excepting herself from its system. Her self-styled uniqueness, and her concomitant insistence on numerous occasions that she is not like

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20 [20] Valmont intercepts one of them, but doesn&#65533;t think it worth reading.

21 [21] The French of the original is significant here. The words &#65533;se montre&#65533; connote an exhibition. Valmont&#65533;s careful assessment of what Tourvel wants to hear, as well as what she doesn&#65533;t, is on target. He doesn&#65533;t treat her like other women; in secretly accepting him as a brother, she has capitulated.

the general run of women, is an important clue in understanding first Valmont's obsession with delaying the moment of her Fall and later with rupturing the affair. Tourvel is known for devoutness. But her piety and the pride she takes in her relationships mask a deformed consciousness remarkably similar to the consciousness Voegelin identified with James's governess in *The Turn of the Screw:* "a demonically closed soul; of a soul which is possessed by the pride of handling the problem of good and evil by its own means; and the means which is at the disposition of this soul is the self-mastery and control of the spiritual forces . . . ending in a horrible defeat." No less descriptive of Tourvel is Voegelin's description of the mechanism whereby the governess allows her charges to become engulfed in evil: "the soul's vanity is tickled by the divine charge of salvation by proxy"(Voegelin on James, 136, 137).

The brief discussion of the *Liaisons* story and characters above has introduced provisional points of contact with Voegelin's principle of submission to the fictional text. We proceed now to the question of the storyteller's consciousness. The situating of Henry James and the symbolist movement more generally on a deformative continuum extending from Milton through Blake to the twentieth century is a familiar component of Voegelin's approach to consciousness in history. His ensuing discussion of the consciousness of storyteller and the consciousness of the critical reader may help to illuminate the problems that critics have attempted to pursue into the mind of author Laclos.

In the "Postscript" discussion opens with the problem of correspondence of the Jamesian symbols to what had seemed to Voegelin an authentic reading using different symbols. For us the relevant variables of his analysis concern both author's and reader's "critical consciousness of reality" as well as the reader's ability to diagnose either (1) the author's critical insufficiency as manifested in indistinct

symbols insusceptible of analysis, or (2) the reader's own insufficiency in penetrating them. "The conscientious interpreter," Voegelin concluded, "cannot simply follow the symbolism wherever it leads and expect to come out with something that makes sense in terms of reality" (Voegelin on James, 152). The critical reader must proceed to an analysis of the deformation, which is to say an identification of the components of reality that, in the story, have been eclipsed. Framing this particular is Voegelin's discussion of the historical process of deformation, in the course of which, increasingly, artists can be found whose consciousness of deformation has advanced and is accordingly evident in the work, indicating that the "artist knows what he is doing." The mastery of "representing satanic humanity" advances historically, with, for example, a William Blake a good deal more aware of the deformation of consciousness than a John Milton (Voegelin on James, 156). A critical artistic consciousness such as Blake's can recognize and analyze the insufficiencies of Milton while participating in and documenting a similar deformation.

The deformation Voegelin tracks in the "Postscript" is the deformed reality experienced by the "contracted self," living in the "Freedom of the Vacuum," with its numerous manifestations. "It takes centuries indeed," Voegelin observes, "to build the vacuum into a social force,"

> to live through the possible variants of dreaming, to wear down the
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> opacity of consciousness through the constant friction between imagination
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> and reality, to bring it to reflective consciousness as a structure in the closed
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> self, and to develop the categories by which the phenomenon of deformed

existence can be made intelligible (Voegelin on James 158-159).

“The game is up,” says Voegelin, in that we may now understand the deformity, but the recapture of reality is much more difficult. We must fall back on a modest, if interesting, question, “where in the history of the garden do we place James’s *Turn?*” (Voegelin on James, 159-160).

Voegelin then pursues the problem of James’s “dustiness,” its permeation beyond characters to “language, imagination, and construction,” the aesthetic mastery that accomplishes it, and the reader’s futile hope that, given the amplitude of his “critical distance,” James will get to work “on the open existence which seems to form the background to his ironic study of closure” (Voegelin on James 165). Voegelin emphatically differentiates between the “ambiguous consciousness” of a James, as manifested in the “preference, without a reason, for the wayside dust, though the world is open for a profitable journey” and that of the artist who “partakes of the deformity he explores so strongly” that

> he cannot characterize his figures by the shadow their deformity would cast if they were exposed to the light of open reality, but will rather become a
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> “realist” who describes a real deformation of reality without being quite clear
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> about the reality deformed (Voegelin on James, 166, 163).

With these relevant points of Voegelin's "Postscript" in mind, we can return to Blake's contemporary Laclos and the eighteenth-century epistolary novel. We can also begin to ask where Laclos fits on the continuum.

Epistolarity depends above all on the idea of absence. Letters may recount shared time or space and even, as Janet Altman has suggested, reflect an epistolary craving for the stage.22 [22] But letters embody, of course, the lack of these things. What does epistolarity place in shadow? In the "Postscript" Voegelin approaches the idea of absence through his discussion of what part of reality must be continually eclipsed to sustain the ambient deformation in which an author creates. Laclos approaches this, in the best traditions of the eighteenth-century novel, through the prefatory material. The fictive editor's preface forecasts the ambiguous status of the divine ground with its nod to pious readers, those who "will be angry at seeing virtue fall and will complain that religion does not appear to enough effect"/ "se f"cheront de voir succomber la vertu, et se plaindront que la Religion se montre avec trop peu de puissance (LLd 22). The relentless religious irony of Merteuil and Valmont demonstrates that a divine ground of being has been all but banished,

22 [22] Altman, *Epistolarity*, 135.

subsumed in what have become vestigial pieties overlaid with libertine double entendres.

Les Liaisons dangereuses is truly a jeu de miroirs, as Seylaz and others have indicated.23 [23] Every event has its mirror image. The most famous example of this is Valmont's desk letter (letter 48), in which a courtesan's body provides both a writing surface and a diversion from the rigors of correspondence: the very table on which I write, never before put to such use, has become an altar consecrated to love/la même table sur laquelle je vous écris, consacrée pour la première fois à cet usage, devient pour moi l'autel sacré de l'amour (letter 48). The recipient is Tourvel who reads nothing but the truth, for Valmont deals in double-speak. A copy goes to Merteuil, who can enjoy and admire the erotic in-joke. Valmont's libertine fear of satiation is mirrored in letters from Merteuil, in which she reveals her plan to break with the tiresome Chevalier de Belleroche. She will make him dispatch himself by providing him with an excess of her erotic attentions: it will be physical torture for Belleroche, but the account of it will be mental torture for Valmont. Merteuil's suggestion that he should hurry things along with Tourvel brings a revealing response:

> having no one but me for guidance and support, and unable to blame me any longer for her inevitable fall, she implores me to postpone it. Fervent

23 [23] Mylne, *Techniques,* 238.

> prayer, humble supplication, all that mortal man in his terror offers the Divinity, I receive from her. And you think that I, deaf to her prayers, destroying with my own hands the shrine she has put up around me, will use that same power for her ruin which she invokes for her protection! Ah, let me at least have time to enjoy the touching struggle between love and virtue.

> n�ayant plus que moi pour guide et pour appui, sans songer � me reprocher davantage une chute in�vitable, elle m�implore pour la retarder. Les ferventes pri�res, les humbles supplications, tout ce que les mortels, dans leur crainte, offrent � la Divinit�, c�est moi qui le re�ois d�elle; et vous vouler que, sourd � ses voeux, et d�truisant moi-m�me le culte qu�elle me rend, jemploie � la pr�cipiter la puissance qu�elle invoque pour la soutenir! Ah! laissez-moi du moins le temps d�observer ces touchants combats entre l�amour et la vertu (letter 96).

Tourvel may want to delay the inevitable, but Valmont wants delay as well. Valmont knows that he is, in this respect, fundamentally different from Merteuil: "it is, I know," he writes to her, "only the finished work that interests you" / "vous n'aimez que les affaires faites" (letter 96).

As Suellen Diaconoff has pointed out, there is a strain of asceticism in the libertine code: "in order to thrive the erotic requires the potential of change, abrupt and spontaneous, coupled at times with deprivation. . . . it is clear that the erotic experience is not susceptible of being sustained indefinitely in routine life, but must

be re-invented constantly.[24] [24] The ambivalence of the libertine produces many ironies and odd reflections. Valmont's statement (in reference to his education of Cécile) "it is only the unusual that interests me now" / "il n'y a plus que les choses bizarres qui me plaisent" (letter 110) surely also prompts his assault on the pious Tourvel, but it is to a large degree his fear of her uniqueness that will drive him off again. Immediately following the culmination of his pursuit of Tourvel, he writes to Merteuil. The letter is a jarring mix of detached clinical observation and rapture, in which Valmont emphasizes the need to avoid

> the humiliation of thinking that I might in any way have been dependent on the
>
> very slave I had subjected to my will, that I might not find in myself alone
>
> everything I require for my happiness; and that the capacity to give me enjoyment
>
> of it in all its intensity might be the prerogative of any one woman to the exclusion
>
> of all others.
>
> l'humiliation de penser que je puisse dépendre en quelque manière de l'esclave

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24 [24] Diaconoff, *Eros and Power,* 57. "Asceticism" is the word applied by Anne Deneys, "Political Economy," 50.

> m�me que je me serais asservie; que je n�aie pas en moi seul la pl�nitude de mon
>
> bonheur; et que la facult� de m�en faire jouir dans toute son �nergie soit r�serv�e
>
> � telle ou telle femme, exclusivement a toute autre (letter 125).

Such reversals cannot be accounted for solely in terms of MacArthur's reminder that epistolarity presents us with "a series of unenlightened present moments."[25] In fact, letter 125 brings libertine confusion--is it repetition or variation he is after?--nearly to the level of consciousness. Arnold Weinstein has neatly set this ambivalence in the context of the whole work. The novel is

> a story of individualism gone wild; more than the self as authority we see in
>
> Laclos's epistolary novel the self deified. . . . yet Laclos demonstrates that the
>
> relationship is concomitantly the desired or feared transcendence of self, seen as
>
> both loss and apotheosis. These two poles define the dialectic of love and pleasure
>
> which articulates the novel.[26]

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25 [25] MacArthur, *Extravagant Narratives*, 9.

26 [26] Arnold Weinstein, *Fictions of the Self: 1550-1800* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 181.

As we have observed, given the Laclosian affinity for ironic juxtaposition, every event and even minute details can be paired, or rather completed, with another formulation that in some way reflects, opposes, or glosses the first.27 [27] In the constellation of religious symbols we generally find, more specifically, a mechanism by which the reflecting event or symbol has

drained the first of its transcendent content.28 [28] I would like briefly to point to the most important

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27 [27] Altman, *Epistolarity*, 180.

28 [28] Here I reference Voegelin's terms from his essay on immortality. While the context is slightly different, there are enough correspondences in this discussion to the line I am following in Laclos that I have reproduced some of it below:

> There must be a factor whose addition will change the reality of power over
>
> nature, with its rational uses in the economy of human existence, into a terrorist's
>
> dream of power over man, society, and history; and there can hardly be a doubt what
>
> this factor is: it is the *libido dominandi*, that has been set free by the draining of reality

of these: the confession of guilt and its fulfillment in atonement and its deformative shadow, the abdication of responsibility configured in the phrase "It is not my fault"/"ce n'est pas ma faute."

The sacraments of penance and extreme unction are prominent in the novel, if sometimes ironically cast. It is Madame de Tourvel's confessor Père Anselme who is absent when she needs him most and who arranges the fateful meeting between Tourvel and Valmont. He also administers last rites as she lies dying. Père Anselme's name underscores his unique status in this novel as a symbol of faith seeking understanding, but for Valmont, the confessor is no more than a tool and an

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> from the symbols of truth experienced. . . . The shell of doctrine, empty of its engendering
>
> reality, is transformed by the *libido dominandi* into its ideological equivalent. The
>
> *contemptus mundi* is metamorphosed into the *exaltatio mundi;* the City of God into
>
> the City of Man; the apocalypse into the ideological millennium.

Eric Voegelin, "Immortality: Experience and Symbol," In *Published Essays 1966-1985*, edited by Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 76.

opportunity to regale Merteuil: “I shall follow him presently to have my pardon signed. With sins of this kind, there is only one formula which confers absolution, and that must be received in person” / “j’irai moi-même faire signer mon pardon: car dans les torts de cette espèce, il n’y a qu’une seule formule qui porte absolution générale, et celle-la ne s’expédie qu’en présence” (letter 138). When Cécile believes she must give up Danceny, she prays often for the strength to forget him (as a means, notes the cynical Merteuil in letter 51, of saying Danceny’s name constantly). Cécile’s confessor proves a convenient scapegoat to blame for the revelation of her secret correspondence.

Tourvel vacillates continually between a readiness to assume responsibility for her mistakes and the pride and doubt that make it difficult. Before receiving Valmont under the sponsorship of Père Anselme, she writes to Madame de Rosemonde, asking why it is that Valmont’s happiness (meaning, at that time, his reconciliation to God) must rest on her own misfortune:

> I know it is not for me to question the Divine decrees: but while I beg him
>
> continually and always in vain, for the power to conquer my unhappy love,
>
> He is a prodigal of strength where it has not been asked for, and leaves me
>
> a helpless prey to my weakness.

> Je sais qu’il ne m’appartient pas de sonder les d’crets de Dieu; mais tandis
>
> que je lui demande sans cesse, et toujours vainement, la force de vaincre mon
>
> maheureux amour, il la prodigue ’ celui qui ne la lui demandait pas, et me laisse,
>
> sans secours, enti’rement livr’e a ma faiblesse (letter 124).

On the brink of the actual seduction, we find Tourvel writing as if her fall had already occurred, and, moreover, distressed by the silence and inscrutability of God. By contrast, the letter she writes in her final hours (letter 161) is indeed an admission of guilt, a genuine *mea culpa*’but it also is an epistolary mad scene: hallucinatory, recriminating, addressed to everyone and therefore to no one. As one critic has suggested, letter 161 embodies a state ’somewhat akin to the loss of consciousness.’29 [29] Tourvel is arguably the most pious and innocent character in the novel. But behind her, even within her own consciousness of guilt and atonement lurks the shadow of ’ce n’est pas ma faute.’ 30 [30]

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29 [29] Peter Conroy, *Intimate, Intrusive, and Triumphant: Readers in the Liaisons dangereuses* (Philadelphia: Benjamins, 1987), 7.

30 [30] Worth noting in the mad scene is Tourvel’s claim that her absent husband has been kept from knowing of her transgression and returning because God, fearing that her husband will be merciful, wants to guarantee the severity of her punishment: ’il a craint que tu ne me remisses une faute qu’il voulait punir. Il m’a soustraite

The idea behind ‘ce n’est pas ma faute,’ as we have noted, has a history in the chain of letters. It is to the epistolary polyphony of *Les Liaisons* as the point of imitation is to a renaissance motet. For the most part it is implicated in the writer’s rhetorical strategy of declaring that the future depends solely on what the recipient does, in words such as ‘It is for you to

decide’ / ‘C’est a vous de voir’ (letter 62, Madame de Volanges to Danceny). Similar formulations can be found in letters 41 (Tourvel to Valmont), 94 (C’cile to Danceny), 131 (Merteuil to Valmont), and 137 (Valmont to Tourvel), to name a few. These strategies culminate, of course, in letter 153 (Valmont to Merteuil), which compels upon Merteuil the choice between peace and war. The explicit denial of guilt, ‘ce n’est pas ma faute,’ appears in letter 106 (Merteuil to Valmont) and in letter 138 to Merteuil, which Valmont opens with the words ‘I insist, my love: I am not in love, and it is not my fault if circumstances compel me to play the part’ / ‘Je

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’ ton indulgence, qui aurait bless’ sa justice’ (letter 161). Antoinette Sol has observed that ‘at its most secret level, *Les Liaisons dangereuses,* is about the subversion of the husband’s right to legitimacy. The most stable of social indicators’the patronymic’is shown to be an empty signifier, a receptacle for shifting signification. This novel is to be read as an attack on the infrastructure of French property and economics: if not indeed, as Kamuf has suggested, on the social contract itself.’ Sol, *Textual Promiscuities*, 176.

persiste, ma belle amie: non, je ne suis point amoureux; et ce n'est pas ma faute si les circonstances me forcent de jouer le r'le.'

This provokes the most notorious expression of the phrase in letter 141, Merteuil's response to Valmont's letter 138. 'Ce n'est pas ma faute' is most notable here as the suggestion with which Merteuil 'programs' Valmont to sacrifice Tourvel. She begins with the story of a man who becomes a laughingstock because he is in love. A female friend provides him with the means to break with the woman who is ruining his erotic reputation. He has only to declare himself not responsible for anything'his boredom, his deceit, the urgent call to another lover'using again and again the words, 'ce n'est pas ma faute.' Without hesitation, Valmont plagiarizes the words to destroy Tourvel and sends them to her. The break with Tourvel, and indeed the letter of rupture itself, will not be his fault. Nonetheless, he asks almost at once for the only kind of grace he understands: an erotic reconciliation with Madame de Merteuil. 'I am exceedingly eager to learn,' writes Valmont to Merteuil, 'the end of the story about this man of your acquaintance who was so strongly suspected of not being able, when necessary, to sacrifice a woman. Did he not mend his ways? And did not his generous friend receive him back into favor?' / 'je suis fort empress' d'apprendre la fin de l'histoire de cet homme de votre connaissance, si v'h'mentement soup'onn'

de ne savoir pas, au besoin, sacrifier une femme. Ne se sera-t-il pas corrig&#65533;? Et sa g&#65533;n&#65533;reuse amie ne lui aura-t-il pas fait gr&#65533;ce?&#65533; (letter 142).

Dorothy Thelander has argued that *Les Liaisons* is unified above all by &#65533;the need of both Valmont and Merteuil to &#65533;recognize&#65533; each other&#65533;to find some kind of permanent and stable relationship.&#65533;31 [31] In fact the theme of recognition&#65533;and concomitantly, for the two are linked, reconciliation&#65533;permeate the entire work. As we have seen, Valmont is able to trap Tourvel largely because he can make her believe that his reconciliation to God depends on a reconciliation with her. What is the link between reconciliation and recognition? For this, we consult again Voegelin&#65533;s reading of James&#65533;s *The Turn of the Screw*. The young governess, like Tourvel, enjoys the &#65533;peace of the just soul&#65533; marching on orders from God, who lacks only the sense that her righteousness is known. But &#65533;when a woman dreams of someone who will *know her*,&#65533; Voegelin writes, &#65533;she may be known by someone other than she dreamt&#65533; (Voegelin on James). Clearly, in the case of Tourvel, the knower she envisions is supplanted by the self-styled *Deus ex Machina,* Valmont.

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31 [31] Dorothy Thelander, *Laclos and the Epistolary Novel* (Geneva: Droz, 1963), 52-53.

We will recall that soon after meeting him, Tourvel was prepared to consign the dangerous Vicomte to the role of brother. Preparing much later to receive him as a penitent, she has written to her newly appointed ☐mother☐ Madame de Rosemonde, questioning God☐s reasons for leaving her so defenseless against him:

> But let me stifle these guilty complaints. Do I not know that the Prodigal son
>
> was received, when he returned, with more favour than his father showed the
>
> son who never went away? What account may we demand of One who owes us
>
> none? And were it possible for us to have any rights where He is concerned, what
>
> rights could I claim? Could I boast of the virtue I owe only to Valmont? He has saved me...
>
> No, my sufferings will be dear to me if his happiness is their reward. Certainly it was
>
> necessary for him to return to the Universal Father. God, who made him, must watch
>
> over his creation. He would never have fashioned so charming a creature only to make a
>
> reprobate of it. . . . ought I not to have known, that since it was forbidden to love him,
>
> I should not permit myself to see him?
>
> Mais ☐touffons ce coupable murmure. Ne sais-je pas que L☐Enfant prodigue, ☐ son

> retour, obtint plus de gr�ces de son p�re que le fils qui ne s��tait jamais absent�? Quel
>
> compte avons-nous � demander � celui qui ne nous doit rien? Et quand il serait
>
> possible que nous eussions quelques droits aupr�s de lui, quels pourraient �tre les
>
> miens? Me vanterai-je d�une sagesse, que d�ja je ne dois qu�? Valmont? Il m�a sauv�e,
>
> et j�oserais me plaindre en souffrant pour lui! Non: mes souffrances me seront ch�res,
>
> si son bonheur en est le prix. Sans doute il fallait qu�il revient � son tour au P�re commun.
>
> Le Dieu qui l�a form� devait ch�rir son ouvrage. Il n�avait point cr�? cet �tre charmant,
>
> pour m�en faire qu�une r�prouv�. . . . ne devais-je pas sentir que, puisqu�il m��tait
>
> d�fendu de l�aimer, je ne devais pas permettre de le voir? (letter 124)

As this passage indicates, Valmont's reconciliation to God will not, as Tourvel had hoped, let her be "known" for bringing him back to the fold. Instead, she will cast herself as the jealous brother in the parable of the prodigal son, (implicitly) imputing to Valmont the confession, "Father I have sinned against Heaven and before thee and am no more worthy to be called thy son" (Luke 15:18), a confession that he will surely never make. Her prediction that Valmont will make a fine brother has come full

circle. The feast of the prodigal son—to follow when Valmont arrives—will confer the mark of incest.

A study of the French Mother Goose tales convinced Robert Darnton that "France is a country where it is good to be bad."[32] [32] At the end of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses,* nonetheless, Valmont has been killed and Merteuil, now a Romanesque gargoyle with only a few jewels and no servants, has made for Holland. But Tourvel is dead. Cécile has taken herself to a nunnery, and Danceny has gone to Malta. As with Shakespeare's *Lear*, a few characters, by no means the prominent ones, are left to sweep the stage and gather up letters. And as with Shakespeare's *Lear,* some of them are reasonably decent people, but they aren't terribly interesting. And the social realm of the libertine still revolves.

Laclos's characters operate in and sustain what Voegelin has called "a satanized environment."[33] [33] Human beings have imagined themselves as gods and as God, and the symbols of piety are murky or emptied of meaning. If there are traces of conscience—Valmont's aside to Danceny, "que je regrette Mme de

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32 [32] Darnton, *Cat Massacre,* 65.

33 [33] Eric Voegelin, "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme: A Meditation," in *Published Essays 1966-1985,* edited by Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 340.

Tourvel (letter 155), for example there is surely no question of a balance of consciousness or its recovery by these characters. One critic has described the ending as a nuclear explosion,34 [34] but at some level the carnage is *trompe l oeuil.* Having written a novel of worldliness, Laclos leaves his survivors as he found them. We are left at best to wonder why there is no transformation; at worst, with the sense that we have been thrust into a promiscuous identification with all sides.35 [35] And we are left with questions for a storyteller whose consciousness is opaque and thoroughly embattled by critics who impute to him a thesis novel or suggest that he is simply playing a game of authorial hide and seek36 [36] with characters, with form, or even with the reader. Feeling, and rightly, that the novel resists understanding, many readers have objectified Laclos from a sense, it seems, that he has objectified them. Christine Roulston, for instance, writes that in the prefatory material, Laclos provides the clues by which a seductive reading of his novel can be resisted. The effect of this is to place the readers themselves, both male and female, in the structural position of the libertine subject. . . . nevertheless subject to another form

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34 [34] Weinstein, *Fictions of the Self,* 199.

35 [35] Sol, *Textual Promiscuities,* 9.

36 [36] DeJean, *Literary Fortification,* 255.

of seduction implicit in the libertine model: the seductiveness of mastery itself.[37] [37] Is there a focus on the reader as an object, rather than a focus on the tensions to be created by the story? Is Laclos guilty of the desire to be known? It is likely that he wanted immortality for his work. There is an oft-quoted but perhaps apocryphal comment to this effect: Je résolus de faire un ouvrage qui sortât de la route ordinaire, qui fît du bruit, et qui retentît encore sur la terre quand j'y aurai passé/ I was determined to create something out of the ordinary, which would make a noise and endure in the world after I had gone.[38] [38]

Paul Caringella's article Voegelin: Philosopher of Divine Presence tells us that in the struggle to maintain a balance of consciousness, the storyteller's consciousness is in the greatest danger when it comes into the fullness of the reflective distance of consciousness, at which point the greatest skill is required of the human imagination to keep the balance so as not to sever the tie that binds divine and human in the movement. Here...the human storyteller is most

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37 [37] Roulston, *Virtue*, 148.

38 [38] Quoted in Winnett, *Terrible Sociability*, 52, from *Mémoires du Comte Alexandre de Tilly pour servir a l'histoire de la fin du dix-huitième siècle* in Choderlos de Laclos, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Maurice Allem (Paris, Pléiade, 1951), 732.

godlike, most the image of God. And here, too, he can enter into his greatest rivalry with God...39 [39] As close observer of a world that incubated self-deification, and as creator of Merteuil and Valmont, who deified themselves, Laclos understood the dangers. Laclos was not the grand puppeteer that some critics have imagined.40 [40] But he lived in a world in which the language of piety was irretrievably deformed, and from which the symbolization of the metaxy had disappeared into the tensional system of the libertine. Although the language of the spirit was available to him, and thus to his creations, it was no longer carrying the burden of tension toward the divine ground of being. Certainly, we can apply the language of tension to Laclos's sense of what he was doing, but it seems likely that for all his acuity Laclos himself would have understood better the tensional formulations, not of faith seeking understanding, but of his eighteenth-century context. For this we might turn to the philosophes, for example Diderot on how to sustain the illusion created by the proscenium, the fourth wall, in theatrical productions. Here in the very secular

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39 [39] Paul Caringella, Voegelin: Philosopher of Divine Presence, in *Eric Voegelin's Significance for the Modern Mind,* ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 178.

40 [40] This is Wohlfarth's phrase, although not his position on Laclos. Irving Wohlfarth, The Irony of Criticism and the Criticism of Irony: A Study of Laclos Criticism *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 120(1974), 295-296.

language of stagecraft is advice from the eighteenth century on abjuring the desire to be known:

> And the actor, what will become of him if you have concerned yourself with
>
> the beholder? Do you think he will not feel that what you have placed here or
>
> there was not imagined for him? You thought of the spectator, he will address
>
> himself to him. You wanted to be applauded, he will wish to be applauded.
>
> And I no longer know what will become of the illusion.41 [41]

Epistolarity aspires not to the life of the spirit; rather, all letters have dramatic aspirations, as the many stage metaphors of the *Liaisons* would confirm. Eric Voegelin's analysis of *The Turn of the Screw* amply demonstrates that piety and theater don't mix. James's governess went beyond wanting to obey the splendid young man; she was performing for him. Laclos's Tourvel suggests that the author understood the collapse of tension that attends the confusion of piety with performance. Accordingly he could well, himself, have taken to heart more advice from Diderot even as he so carefully crafted un ouvrage qui sort t de la route

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41 [41] Quoted from Diderot's *Discours de la po sie dramatique* in Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, c1980), 94.

ordinaire.[?] [?]Jouez,[?] said Diderot to the actor, [?]comme si la toile ne se levait pas.[?] [?]Act as if the curtain never rose.[?]42 [42]

42 [42] Ibid., 95.