

In Memory of the Marquis de Sade

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My deceased prolific British travel-writer friend, Dr. Michael Jacobs, once had an assignment to teach a class outdoors in Lacoste, France, literally at the base of the Chateau de Lacoste, the ruined castle of the Marquis de Sade. As such, this title of my UMUC memoir is not alluding to anything at all salacious, like any of the writings of the infamous French marquis, such as Justine, Juliette or even The 120 Days of Sodom. Dr. Jacobs told me that story many years ago; my recent memory of it brings me now instead to pay homage to the crazy administrator who once talked Dr. Robert Speckhard into reworking a typical eight-week course by having it be taught in just three weeks! I do not know if any other Marylanders ever went through the same experiment that I was asked to endure in which the teaching of forty-eight hours was crammed into sixteen days over the course of just that three short weeks by going three hours per day, Monday through Friday, with the final exam scheduled for the Saturday morning after. Maybe with a class other than English Composition 105 it would not have been as hellacious. But to earn those three credits, the students were required to write the same number of compositions as those in the eight-week sessions, that is eight of them. They were turning in a new piece of writing every other day instead of every week. I also was made into some kind of grading machine, so that in addition to teaching those three hours daily, I somehow had to get all of those papers graded and returned to the class before each next assignment was made.

There is a key scene in Charlie Chaplin's famous silent feature film entitled Modern Times in which he literally is dragged into the machine that he is working on and gets pulled through the gears. That was how I felt at the end of that experimental course. Why did I even do it, one may well ask? Well, to be honest, for the quick money and also for the two carrots dangled in front of me in the form of promises to be sent to the next duty station of my choice and also to teach the two courses of my choosing. Being in Germany with a wife and children down in Ethiopia, the first choice was obvious. I wanted to be sent back to Kagnew Station. As for the courses, I wanted World Literature I and Creative Writing as a break.

So allow me to back up just a bit. When Dr. Speckhard made the offer to me to go to Wiesbaden for three weeks, he pointed out that one benefit would be the stability of location. No doing the dreaded "splits" and driving to a second base. That sounded attractive. Then, of course, I would be earning a full-course paycheck in a much shorter time period. It was to be a trial run to see if such a schedule was even feasible. It also was to happen in the month of August in 1972 when all of UMUC was basically on vacation. Then there were those two carrots that I mentioned. Dr. Speckhard seemed to have the confidence in me that I could handle

it. I thought it over for a bit, figured that there could not possibly be a full class willing to take on such a task, and gave my acceptance on a late Friday afternoon. That was when I was told, “Good. Drive up to Wiesbaden tonight and get situated. You have twenty-five students waiting for you at nine am on Monday!” That was when it hit me—I was the guinea pig being put into the field to try out someone else’s sadistic scheme.

So I gassed up my little lemon-colored VW bug and off I went for one hundred kilometers north to a new and somewhat scary venture as a UMUC English composition instructor. Getting there on a Friday evening did not allow me any chance to check in with the local Education Center to get some idea of the layout of the classrooms or whether the textbooks for the course had even arrived on time. There was nothing worse for a Marylander than to get to a new base only to discover that the student books were still en-route. I have had that happen more than once, especially when many of my teaching terms over the course of seven years were on the far reaches of the European Division map, such as Kagnew Station in Ethiopia or Incirlik AFB in southeastern Turkey. To have to start a course already cut in less than half its time with no textbooks would have been a complete disaster. I was barely able to find lodging in a BOQ and to have a quick dinner in time to relax and take in a movie at the base theater. What lay ahead for me on Monday morning was still fraught with anxiety, in spite of Dr. Speckhard’s vote of confidence. I used both Saturday and Sunday to ask around for where I was to go as class was scheduled for nine o’clock Monday morning. What little I discovered did not exactly overwhelm me with confidence, but at least I had my bearings.

Thanks to Ted Rose, textbook jockey extraordinaire, at least the books were all there when I checked in on Monday morning. Now came time to get through that first morning and to assign the first composition. Fortunately, Paper #1 consisted of just two full paragraphs of two hundred words minimum. One other sort of happy circumstance arose when I read through the class lists and noticed that there were actually a few female students scattered among this new group. Most Marylanders will attest that the usual makeup of classes with UMUC was almost exclusively male. Not that that mattered, as some of the best students I ever had over the course of my forty-year career were the dedicated GI’s, seamen and airmen who had full-time jobs in the military and who then used their evening free time to take courses and to further their education instead of just hanging around the base clubs and other such facilities every night. In this group of twenty-five at Wiesbaden there were actually five young females, including the cute-as-a-button daughter of a base colonel who soon found herself the object of attention of a number of her male classmates. I only bring her up here because of something that occurred at the very end of the course.

I soon fell into the rigorous routine of assigning and grading twenty-five sets of compositions every other day. The initial assignment was due that first Wednesday and the second one that Friday. For over the weekend, Paper III was set up, which the students wrote while I graded set number two. Paper III was turned in on

Monday and Paper IV scheduled for Wednesday with number five due on Friday, with me having to grade and return assignments in between. Number six fell due on that third Monday, then number seven on Wednesday and number eight on Friday. By that time, I thought for sure that the Divine Marquis had somehow been resurrected and had clearly had a shaping hand in devising this torturous schedule. But given that the students were all game and that no one had dropped the class, that left only the Saturday morning final exam to get through before I had to report back to Dr. Speckhard on Monday and pick up my fresh orders for Kagnew Station.

That was when a hiccup occurred that threatened to throw the whole murderous three weeks into a tailspin. At nine am on that Saturday, twenty-four students sat poised before me awaiting the return of Paper VIII and its role in the final course exam. The one missing student was none other than the colonel's daughter. Given that it was a Saturday, I had no way of having someone in the education office attempt to contact her as the office was closed. I waited for five minutes and then decided to distribute the final exam. Some students managed to finish within two hours, but the young lady was still MIA. By the end of the third hour, I had no recourse but to gather up the exams and to head back to the BOQ to sit at the desk in my room and become once again an enslaved grading machine. I was in a quandary about what to do as the young lady had been an excellent student up to that point and was on the verge of earning an "A" grade.

As I spread all of the exams on the desk, there was a knock on my door. When I answered the knock, there stood the colonel's daughter, dressed only in a fluffy pink bathrobe and wearing what I swear were pink bunny slippers! She stood there crying and apologized for missing the final, begging me to allow her to take the exam right now. To say the least, I at first wondered how she had even found my room, but then I assumed that she lived in the same building. Still in all, she must have created quite a sensation at the front desk, dressed as she was, and pleading for my room number. Her excuse was that she had partied the night before and that she had neglected to tell her parents about the Saturday morning exam. So I invited her in, being careful to leave the door unlocked (not wishing to invite an Oleanna situation) and moved all of the other exams to the easy chair on the other side of the room, and then administered the final exam to her. For the next three hours, she sat at my desk as I waited for my door to be breached loudly at any moment, while trying to carry on with the grading. It was quite understandably the most nervous I have ever been while giving an exam.

When she finished, she brought her exam over to me and we chatted casually for about ten minutes. She thanked me for allowing her to take the final, told me that she enjoyed the class, and was very glad to have completed that requirement in such a short time before she was to begin college full-time in earnest about two weeks later back in Colorado. I escorted her to the door, locked it behind her, and was glad when her perfume began to be diluted by the fan I turned on. She did well on the exam and earned the grade that she almost missed had it not been for a sympathetic desk clerk. When I finished grading the exams and making out final grades, I gathered my few

belongings, tossed them into the rear of my lemon-colored VW bug, and headed back south to Heidelberg.

If no other UMUC instructors ever had to endure the rigors of a full eight-week course taught in just three weeks, they may have me to thank. My somewhat negative review of that experience that I conveyed to Dr. Speckhard may have done the trick. Less than one week later, I was happily back at Kagnew Station, reunited with Toni and the kids, and taking a break from Sadean comp. classes for at least one term. I guess that in the long run it was all worth it; but during those three grueling weeks in Wiesbaden, when the shadow of Dr. Jacobs and his story of the Marquis hanging over his class felt too close for comfort to me, I would not wish this one experience as a vagabond Marylander on any other teacher.