



4. The Marquis de Sade: A Liberal Father to Them All

I reckon that for someone who wishes to reach the bottom of what man signifies, the reading of Sade is not only recommendable but perfectly necessary.

Georges Bataille¹

Back to France.
What was Sade (1740–1814)? And why do Bataille and the Foucauldians set so much store by his name?

Sade is extremely important for he is the full-fledged prototype of the authentic modern man. He is at once a Liberal and a sovereign son of the “devouring Mother.” And as such he could not but be one of Bataille’s literary fixations.

Sade’s pornography is a collection of vignettes that function,

in sequence, as raunchy preambles to an extensive cycle of lectures on life. They are monotonous tales of devout virgins continuously abused, guilty —so goes the moral— of imputing their haplessness and tribulations to their henchmen rather than to their own virtuous improvidence in a world naturally governed by injustice and bullying.

The reader is led to discover that imbecile benevolence is what loses the victims, and man in general. Sade was a Liberal in that he espoused fully the values of the Enlightenment: first and foremost, the worship of Nature and Reason. His insight, however, was far more trenchant than that of his buttoned-up (French and Scottish) scholarly counterparts, for he took the rational creed to its ultimate boundaries, jettisoning triumphantly the paralyzing hypocrisy of the enlightened *Encyclopédistes*. And so, he etched these characters, these blackguards and aristocrats —schizophrenic creatures of reasoned avidity and delirious savagery— with an earnestness that won him eternal fame.

With Sade, it is as if the archetype of modernity —Defoe's cold, fanatical, calculating and asexual Robinson Crusoe living solo on his island— had found itself invested with monstrous passion. To picture Sade, think of Crusoe, the stranded utilitarian, utterly bereft of Puritanical pudicity, if you will. Sade's and Crusoe's politics is the same. But there is more.

Look at Nature, the Marquis intimated in *Justine*: Hasn't she fashioned beings stronger than others? And if so, isn't this her tacit suggestion to the ones to enslave, tyrannize over the others? Beyond death there is nothing. Reason tells us so.² And so vices and good deeds equally disappear into eternal

insignificance at every moment. Why bother about morality or retribution if only the worms of the dirt await us after we shall have breathed our last? Now take the utilitarian's felicity calculus: if we agree that our goal in life is to maximize gain and pleasure (and therefore minimize pain), considering that strength is the law of nature and that death annihilates all, how then is it possible to pursue one's self-interest without hurting others and running roughshod over their will? It is indeed impossible, and therefore remorse for doing so and the appeal to moral sentiments were for the Marquis a belated cry of pharisaism and cowardice: "All men," he said, "are born isolated, envious, cruel and despotic; wishing to have everything and surrender nothing."³

Nature, Sade reiterated, wants us interested, selfish above all, and to wield force, be it the physical force of yesterday or the financial strength of today: the strong becomes the rich, the weak the poor.⁴

Selfishness, he sentenced, is the first law of nature.⁵ The wolf devours the lamb, and Nature does not protest, so why should we? "Let us accustom ourselves to evil," he counseled.⁶ Nature resolves herself into an equilibrium of nurturing good and devastating evil; and those notions in the end become relative, if not anodyne. Only the rhythm of this alternation of vivacity and rottenness seems to retain an enduring impression.

The state of Nature, syllogized the Marquis, is that of permanent war; it is the only one we know, the only one which truly behooves us. Why then, he taunted, should the strong and the weak resolve to stipulate a contract whereby each party is to barter a measure of jaundice for a modicum of

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peace? If men so did, the strong would lose the pleasure of privilege and the weak would surrender their feeble, though ever palpable, chance to overwhelm the bullies; and even if the weak failed in their violent bid to supremacy, a death sentence would still be immensely preferable to a beastly life of penury and squalor. Neither faction would gain. Yet since society is made of only weak and strong individuals, the pacific stipulation can claim no democratic basis in fact, and all sensible creatures shall therefore rebel against it.⁷

We are thus faced with two options: either the crime that makes us happy, or the gallows that prevents us from being unhappy.⁸

God. God is a “deific phantasm.” The mind inquires: Is there not a prime engine, a universal mind...? How much longer, Sade wondered, should our mind indulge the fine points of such a “pitiful extravagance”? “There is no God,” he retorted, “Nature suffices unto herself.”⁹ So religious myth is imposture, bungled tales, whose plots are as incongruent as they are repulsive. Worst of all, “most hateful” of all was to him Christianity’s “barbarous law.”

Of what worth is a leprous Jew, who, born of a slut and a soldier, in the seediest corner of the universe, dares to pass himself off as the instrument of the one that allegedly created the world!¹⁰

How can faith, he asked, resolve itself in the ritual consummation of God’s body, which the bottom of our entrails churns into excrement each Sunday, and all of this “for the satisfaction of this tender son, heinous inventor of this monstrous impiety?” If God had truly craved our love, Sade

raged, why would he speak to us in riddles, or by way of this “contemptible bandit” Jesus?¹¹ Why the mystery, the absurdity, and the absolute *senselessness* of the Revealed Word?

Nature. Nature, instead, did make sense to the Marquis: the passions of men are her ways; her laws are violent at times, but understandable. Nature wishes creation? It is with love that she thus inspires us. And if it be her wont that carnage should follow, she lodges in our hearts “vengeance, greed, lust and ambition,” making *criminals* of us all, “the credulous agents of her caprices.”¹²

A state of balance must be preserved; and it can only be so through crimes; crimes thus serve nature; if they serve her, if she demands them, if she craves them, can they give her offense, and who may be offended, if she is not?¹³

What of love, bonding, gifts (*l'aumône*)?

“The pleasure of charity,” sentenced the Marquis, “is nothing but the indulgence of conceit”: as if the act of gifting is made only to bend the recipient into the subjection of that most ignoble of all sentiments: *gratitude*.¹⁴ Sade inverted the logic of the almsgiving: if the acceptance of a donation is meant to bind us in a servile debt of thankfulness, the noble pride of strength then demands that we reject the offer, annul the exchange, secure what is needed by violence and/or subterfuge, and base thereby daily interaction on the sole principle of self-interested force. This is the *sovereign* conduct that would so profoundly captivate Bataille: a sublimated sense of (devil-may-care) haughtiness.

And woman? Woman, he said, is a creature of fierce temperament burning with the fire of erotic exuberance in far

greater profusion than man. That, too, is Nature's wish: and so let men break the "antinatural" conventions of matrimonial procreation and subjugate for their individual enjoyment as many women as they please; likewise let women possess as many men as will quench their (voracious) sexual hunger. If one adds to this feminism of sorts^{*} that the Marquis rejected capital punishment—for to punish with death a man that *naturally* killed another, Sade reasoned, is to remove senselessly two men instead of one—then it isn't surprising to see why he has been ranked among the champions of the Liberal utopia.¹⁵ Correctly so, but he went further: behind the invective is the dark, religious side of his apostasy. Sade was certainly one of those who hated out of despair. A God, he accused, that doesn't bring succor to his supplicants, that sends them to war, starves

* Which, of course, is tempered, if not altogether overshadowed, by famous misogynous outbursts that brought him to depict woman as "a weak creature, always inferior to man, infinitely less beautiful than him, less ingenious, less wise, built in a disgusting fashion, entirely opposed to what may please man, to what may delight him . . . an unwholesome being for three quarters of her life, incapable of satisfying her spouse throughout the time that Nature constrains her to child-bearing, of a bitter disposition, cantankerous, bossy: a tyrant if one grants her rights, low and groveling if held captive; yet always phony, always dangerous; a perverse creature [...]. The Persians, the Medes, the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Romans, did they lavish honor upon this odious sex, which we dare today make our idol? Alas! I see it oppressed everywhere, everywhere rigorously shut off from business, everywhere despised, debased, locked up; women, in brief: everywhere treated like beasts, which are disposed of in moment of need, and promptly shuffled back to the sheepfold" (D. A. F. De Sade, *Justine, ou les malheurs de la vertu*, Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1958 [1791], pp. 279–80).

them with famine, deforms them in the agony of epidemics; a good God, Sade concluded, that tolerates such evil, “ordering such disorders,” cannot but be a “barbarous God, a weak God.”

And so, once again, we are brought back to the tormenting question of theodicy —the paradox of a benevolent God towering over a devilish world— which reappeared in the memorable challenge of *The Brothers Karamazov*: Can the scream of a single child legitimize the inscrutable plan of a benevolent divinity? Sade, like many others, barked out a raucous “No” —a violent denial that slammed the gates open to his celebrated whirl of blasphemies and dreary smut. Sadean porn is a collection of imaginative skits, such as those of priests defiling with crucifixes defenseless maidens or sodomizing them after having inserted holy wafers into their anuses.¹⁶

Alternatively, in a variety of other (repetitive) settings, Sade featured bankers, magistrates, doctors, teachers, and noblemen each and severally gang-raping the girls and boys of their captive harems in keeping with a carefully scheduled curriculum of coprophilia, hard beatings, floggings, torture, interminable seances of rupturing anal penetration, bloodletting, and grueling orgies pivoting on one or more castigated victims of choice. And after the brutal consummation, the perpetrators regularly turn to the prostrated preys, inciting them, with a jeer, to conjure their protective God or the powers of providential retribution, which are stupidly believed to avenge the suffering of the just.¹⁸

The escalating fury of the orgy, which is fed by additional feats of arson, prepotence, theft, more rape, murder, private

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decapitations, etc., finds release in the culminating ejaculation of the volcanic protagonists, who, jubilant for having broken all laws with impunity, are satisfied to explain that the misdeeds have been committed for the sake of “spilling their fuck” (*le foutre*).

As stories of unrelenting excess, Sade’s novels are unreal. He might have acted out much of what he narrated (and gone to prison for it), but the novelty in his tales is less the Liberal sermonizing or the profanity than the very creation of *sadism*: that is, the union of sexual dissipation with “the need to hurt and kill.”¹⁸ Coupling the one with the other, his heroes strive to attain a cursed orgasm, which transcends entirely the sexual stimulation that sets the carnal throbbing in motion. This violent eroticism, which shoots forth with vehemence in the literature of modernity through the weaves of the extreme, but nonetheless authentic, Enlightened (rational) discourse, is what fascinates Bataille. For the latter, sick, deviated lust, debauch, or vaguely defined sexual perversion are all psychologistic attributions that have, in fact, nothing to share with the criminal attraction of Sade’s obsessive novels.

These are not stories built to edify the slothful lubricity of libertine aficionados. Sade’s libertines, who live for pleasure, are great, *sovereign*, said Bataille, because they have annihilated within themselves all capacity for pleasure. By destroying all benevolence in themselves they have in return accumulated an immense power of devastation, which finally finds itself attuned to a comprehensive, divine “movement of total destruction.”¹⁹ In Sade, Bataille recognized the eruption of aboriginal violence in its anguishing *sacrality*, whose essence

the Marquis had only dimly perceived. Bataille prized Sade's novels for their contemporary rendition of that holy flame of dissolution and surfeit that always burns, and that no organized religion, structure of power, or sentimental morality seems able to put out.

Sade is a father to the postmoderns for he is the first "classic" novelist who re-evokes, somewhat unconsciously, ancient, and once religious, practices of orgiastic violence in a modern, preindustrial setting; his is the earliest formulation of what Bataille envisioned as the "project." The project is a delicate art to insinuate silent, unspeakable (infernal) mysteries into the common-day syncopation of modern prose; to couch violence, blood, and the *silent* terror of the dizzying Abyss in the balanced propriety of philosophical argumentation.

As said earlier, such a project is a counterfeit: a neat, syntactically clean narration of a brutal orgy distances us from the heat of the violence; it attempts to make us conscious of a moment of emotional disorder, which is driven instead by unconscious bestiality.²⁰ It is a falsification, an artifice —a pretense, however, that Bataille thinks *necessary*. The greatness of Sade, for Bataille, was that, given the constraints of discourse, he nevertheless managed to afford violence a piece of conscience and allowed it thereby to *speak*, as when, for instance, the Marquis in real-life sadistic sessions offered himself up for flogging, but interrupted the castigation now and then to take a log of the lashes by incising with a knife notches on a tally.²¹

Nobody before [Sade] has captured the general mechanism associating such reflexes as erection and ejaculation to the

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transgression of the law. Sade ignores the fundamental relation of the interdiction and of transgression [...], but he took the first step.²²

If the project never goes beyond crafting forgeries, the whole exercise ends up being a futile pastime. But if the “perfects” within the post-modern fold—that is, the masters and their most talented disciples, such as Foucault—are capable of sublimating the forgery, of reconverting the fakery into something new and authentic, they will have perverted language and made it a vehicle of corrupting influence. In the words of Bataille, they will have achieved a project that escapes the project itself. This is a peculiar kind of alchemy—an alchemy of which Bataille said he held the key.

So, Sade “took the first step”: he recognized that the mating of sex and violence is not a casual form of debauchery but a pattern, a “need,” almost—a profoundly disturbing one. It recurs in men’s dissipate deeds and attractions everywhere too savagely and too often to be set aside as mere perverse deviancy. What the Marquis failed to comprehend, however, Bataille remarked, is that this explosion of brutality and eroticism is the vertiginous surrender to *our keen proclivity, as humans, to break the taboo, the forbidden*. Allegedly, Sade, blinded by his Liberal, individualistic fury, had not fully appreciated his own insights, as when he spoke of our world as being one full of vices, in which foulness, as one “vibration, becomes general.” In this environment, the Marquis believed that we live through “a multitude of mutual shocks and lesions, where everybody regaining what he has just lost, finds himself ever anew in a state of happiness.”²³

“Happiness” for Bataille, though, was not the issue: happiness is a Liberal construct, a fiction; to him, the true task was to devise a theory that accounted for *collective* behavior in a realm whose purpose is unknowable. Bataille found this theory precisely in assuming that our true activity is that of living, slaying, and dying —communing through those very “shocks, lesions,” and wounds (Bataille would borrow from the Marquis this and many other images)— and that *thought* (*la pensée, le discours*) is but an intermittent flicker of consciousness in the midst of this biological life process of expansion and contraction. A process punctuated by our raising the taboo (the interval of sanity) and our subsequent, insuppressible *transgression* of the interdiction (the interval of insanity). The ebb and flow, which ushers nowhere and cyclically regurgitates itself, is symbolized in Bataille’s vision by the headless monster (*l’Acéphale*).

From this imaginative account Foucault would derive the central notion of *transgression*, which would later become a pillar of his idea of “resistance at the margins.”

Notes

1. Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes* (OC) (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), vol. 12, p. 455.
2. Sade, *Justine ou les malheurs de la vertu* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert Editeur, 1957 [1791]), p. 279.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 310.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 219.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 277.

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7. Ibid., pp. 60–61.
8. Ibid., p. 61.
9. Ibid., p. 64.
10. Ibid., p. 89.
11. Ibid., p. 92.
12. Ibid., p. 98.
13. Ibid., p. 99.
14. Ibid., p. 311.
15. Camille Berneri, *Journey Through Utopia* (London: Freedom Press, 1950), pp. 179–82.
16. Sade, *Justine*, p. 232.
17. Ibid., p. 319.
18. Bataille, *L'érotisme* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1957), p. 202.
19. Ibid., OC, vol. 8, p. 154.
20. Ibid., *L'érotisme*, p. 212.
21. Ibid., p. 214.
22. Ibid., p. 216.
23. Sade, *Justine*, p. 348.