

Madame de Sade and Other Problems

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The complex equation of the Marquis de Sade, his persona and his message, may never be solved, for even as the bicentenary of his death -2014- approaches, some of its terms are not yet available to us. However, we have continued evidence of the other, his passion for the theatre which caused him to dramatize all the situations in his life, his obsessional preoccupation with sexuality (at least in his books), his relationships with women, real or fictional, and his devotion to *la philosophie*, i.e. a deep, as it were, intuitive distrust of accepted ideas, linked with an exclusive reliance on the authority of reason.

These three obsessions are hard to separate, for they overlook Sade early in life. The man who led *la philosophie* into the boudoir in 1795 was not one of the *philosophes*, but he had been hearing or reading about them with enthusiasm ever since he had been a young man. His father, Le Comte de Sade, had in the past known Voltaire and even exchanged verses with him; this was virtually the only sign of cultural life in a devious man who became lazy and depressed as he grew older, a man who made no attempt to understand his son and was preoccupied with marrying him off as soon as he could, his only hope of solving his own desperate but unexplained financial problems. When the young Marquis was supervised by a better educated man, the Comte's brother, the Abbé spent several years writing a long book about Petrarch, inspired no doubt by the family's best known ancestor, Laure de Sade, who had made such an impression on the poet in the fourteenth century. The Abbé, who lived at one of the family châteaux in Provence, set his young nephew an example of a worldly life with much female companionship, but also a life of reading and studying.

As far as women were concerned, at least three were important to Sade during his early years, but not his mother, who, as lady in waiting to the Princess de Condé, was usually absent. Sade himself became devoted to his paternal grandmother, and later said of her (speaking through the hero of his *Aline et Valcour, ou Le Roman Philosophique*) that she spoilt him, but he loved her deeply. He also acknowledged the

help of another woman about whom comparatively little is known- Madame de Saint- Germain, his governess when he was a boy; she does not appear to have been an intellectual, but she had obviously read widely and later in life he still respected her literary judgement. He also knew from childhood Marie-Dorothee de Rousset, with whom he later exchanged letters, mainly literary in nature.

His father at least sent him to the well organized Jesuit Collège Louis-le-Grand, where Voltaire had been before him. It was here that he first heard discussion on the history of thought and saw teachers and students taking part in various theatrical performances. No doubt he took part himself. In *Aline et Valcour* again, writing surely about his own youth, he regretted that he had had to leave the Collège in order to go to military school: he was fourteen at the time and he indicated, still speaking through his hero, that he would surely have made a better army officer if he could have continued his general education longer.

Little is known about his life in the army, which lasted until the end of the Seven Years' War in 1763, but from his surviving letters we learn that he slept a lot and read a lot. We learn too that through his first experiences with women, he had some notion that in addition to sex there could possibly be something more in such relationships: 'Alas', he wrote to his previous tutor, the Abbé Amblet, 'does one ever really enjoy happiness that is bought, and can love without delicacy ever be really affectionate?' He had begun to think about the whole problem: 'My *amour propre* is hurt now at the thought that I was loved only because I probably paid better than the next man'. At the same time, army life could not have been too demanding, for the young Sade somehow managed to put on a play at Hesdin in the Pas de Calais. Did he write the play? Did he produce it or act in it? We do not know, but we do know that the performances were interrupted because his much loved grandmother had died. He did not complain that his favourite pastime was curtailed by family duty, and in fact he never seems to have complained about any event or behaviour within his own family. He accepted everything they did. Perhaps it was the awareness that the family of de Sade, with its long history and its many branches, especially in Provence, conditioned his entire life and provided a permanent

decor. He did not have to search for his place in society. He knew that he was the only male heir to the Comte and that he would one day inherit the title, the châteaux and estates. He was not aware that he would inherit little beyond problems and debts, for his father had barely tried to cope with them.

Although Sade was not born until twenty five years after the death of Louis XIV in 1715, he grew up against the confused political moves that followed the Regency and the succeeding reign of the Sun King's great-grandson Louis XV, which lasted from 1723 until 1774, controlled for the most part by Madame de Pompadour. In French intellectual life there were two important developments: the growth of salons, organized of course by women, and the compilation of the *Encyclopédie*. If the salons did not interest all intelligent people - Diderot, for instance, did not enjoy these fashionable, elitist gatherings - those who attended them were all potential subscribers to the *Encyclopédie*, if not actual contributors. By the late 1740's there had been several incidents proving that writers showing any tendency to criticism of political or social conditions were dangerous: in 1734 Voltaire's *Lettres Philosophique*, or *Lettres Anglaises*, were burnt by the public executioner. Montesquieu's *L'Esprit des Lois* caused no such trouble, but Diderot, in 1749, was not so lucky, for his controversial *Lettres sur les Aveugles* sent him to the prison at Vincennes, where he was kept for over three months. He might have been sent to the Bastille, but that famous jail was already full. The young Marquis de Sade was still a schoolboy, but he was soon to hear these stories and to hear too of other books which challenged accepted beliefs in other fields, such as Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle* which appeared from 1749 onwards.

There had been other works too, equally calculated to upset the world which conventional people thought would never change. Some time before Diderot found himself in Vincennes there had been other persecutions. Julien Offray La Mettrie, born in 1709 and educated by the Jansenists, abandoned the priesthood for medicine and worked as an army surgeon. He embodied much of his physiological knowledge and observation in the materialistic *Histoire Naturelle de l'âme* (1746), causing such outrage that he left France for Leyden. Three years later came his best known work, *L'Homme machine*, convincing readers that he was an atheist and forcing him to leave France for good. Fortunately

he was given shelter by his admirer, Frederick the Great. Other works followed, all equally admired by the King who prefaced La Mettrie's complete works (1774) long after the author, aged only 42, died following a copious meal.

La Mettrie's materialistic thought developed within the long and honourable tradition of Lucretius, Locke, Descartes and the Italian Vanini (1585-1619), whose lives and fates were some of the most melodramatic, tragic even, of the previous century. Sade knew and quoted all these thinkers and those who followed La Mettrie, such as the encyclopédiste Helvétius, whose best known work *De l'esprit* (1758) aimed to show that sensation is at the origin of all intellectual activity. It was immediately successful with those intellectuals who were able to read it before it too was publicly burnt by order of the *Parlement de Paris*. Another far-sighted *philosophe* was of course the Baron d'Holbach, whose *Système de la Nature* appeared in 1770.

Perhaps it was the Abbé de Sade's influence, combined with that of his tutor at the Collège Louis-le-Grand, the Abbé Amblet, which had led the young Sade to seek the 'consolation of philosophy'. It was the intellectual fashion and the young man enjoyed it as much as he enjoyed the company of young actresses, especially after his marriage. Before the 'affair of the poisoned sweets' (Marseille, 1772), Sade had had time and money to build up a library at the Château de La Coste; it included all these authors writing in the modern version of the materialistic tradition, classified as *philosophie nouvelle* and specially bound, for Sade entitled this collection as *Recueil nécessaire*.

A letter he wrote in 1783, when he had been imprisoned for the fifth time, after two escapes, illustrated how much the *philosophes* meant to him, how far he was regarded as a danger to the public, and possibly even to the state. His reading was censored. At the same time, it becomes clear that if he was in prison because of his behaviour towards women, and because of his mother-in-law's intervention in his affairs, he was now entirely dependent for contact with the world outside, on one woman: his wife. In November of that year he wanted her to borrow from a *cabinet de lecture* a copy of D'Holbach's *Système de la Nature*, four works by Helvétius, and another by

the *philosophe* Fréret. But his wife had no luck: 'I've been told', she wrote, 'that they are all forbidden books and they would not get through'. The censors seemed to be in a state of confusion, for Sade had been allowed to receive *La Réfutation du Système de la Nature*, and enjoyed it. He wrote that he knew these books by heart but needed D'Holbach's original work in order to appreciate the later one more fully.

His wife, Renée-Pélagie de Montreuil, had become the key to his existence. He had virtually no men friends, apart from a few who were in Provence and unlikely to visit the prisoner, ever if they had been allowed to do so. Maybe some men had been alarmed by the various court proceedings and the details of Sade's behaviour - although probably not very different from their own - and obviously Sade had never been a man for the salons. His 'friends' were the men who wrote the textbooks of the new *philosophie*; he had little chance of ever meeting them and now he could not even read their books. His contacts with the authorities were mostly bad, usually destroyed by bureaucratic regulations about letter-writing, visits - which were denied - and prison conditions generally.

The prisoner Sade was not allowed to see his wife for three years. He had not complained about the marriage which had been arranged for him in 1763, although he had been hoping to marry another girl from Provence; he was still writing emotional letters to her while his anxious father was negotiating the marriage arrangements with the future in-laws, the Montreuil. He had possibly even tried to acquire a fiancée during his theatrical interlude in Hesdin and wrote later that he wanted marriage in order to avoid a lonely old age. The results of his marriage may have surprised everyone. The old Comte had not paid much attention to Renée-Pélagie beforehand, he was only interested in her parents' money, but he eventually noticed that she was not 'ugly': 'Elle est fort bien faite. La gorge fort jolie'. Her arms and hands were very white, 'rien de choquant, rien, caractère charmant (...)'. It was too early for him to realize that his son was marrying the woman who in some ways was perfect for him; for the new menage was very happy, the young people were even good friends as well as satisfactory sexual partners. Nobody knew, but Sade himself probably foresaw, if unconsciously, that he had married the kind of person who, much later, would be labelled a masochist.

For a time the old Comte kept an eye on them and the bride was lucky enough to avoid a mother in law, for the Comtesse de Sade, who lived separately in a convent - it was cheaper than maintaining a town house à deux - remained aloof, refused to give her diamonds as part of the settlement, and did not attend the signing of the contract. Sade's mother was almost always absent from his life.

But Sade himself, as is well known, acquired a mother-in-law who was to influence, in one way or another, the rest of his life and, indirectly, his writing. Madame de Montreuil was still in her early forties, a woman whose charm no doubt served her social ambitions to some extent. She was delighted by her new 'son', called him 'un drôle d'enfant', took part in the amateur theatricals he arranged and possibly 'fancied' him, as the phrase goes. If much was forgiven to young aristocrats at the time, it was hard to ignore Sade's first quasi-criminal sexual offence in the autumn of 1763, a few months after his marriage, and the Rose Keller affair of 1768. Yet his mother-in-law paid off the women involved and his wife continued to forgive and love him. Women formed an essential part of his life at all levels and if the nature of these relationships was to change, they never came to an end.

How soon did Sade, the happily married womaniser, begin writing? He had written plays for the actresses he pursued during the mid-60s, for he had a theatre built at La Coste and took at least one of the actresses there. The modern school of Sade biography and criticism, notably Jean-Jacques Pauvert, refuses to accept that Sade became a writer because of his long imprisonment. Just as he had read widely when young, he also began to write, and not only plays for his current favourites among the actresses. Before 1777 some of his plays were known in Bordeaux, although they may not have been actually performed. He had found time to travel in the autumn of 1769, spending a month in Belgium and Holland and was able to finance his journey through his writing: what writing? Not the account of his journey, which remained unpublished until the twentieth century, but something he wrote in the style of Aretino, to use his own words. This has been lost, but it seems to have been a successful piece of eroticism, for it paid for 'mes menus plaisirs dans une des premières villes du royaume, et m'ont fait voyager deux mois en Hollande sans y dépenser un

sol de mien'. Did he take his pleasure in Bordeaux, or in Lyon or Marseille? Nobody, not even Pauvert, knows, but apparently Sade had at least found a helpful printer in Holland where a great deal of erotic literature was published.

It is not known either whether Sade's loving wife or his watchful mother-in-law knew about this early and successful erotic writing, but if they did, they would no doubt have preferred it to the beating of a widow (Rose Keller) on Easter Day. There was even some unsolved mystery about a 'book' which might have been lost in his *petite maison* at the time of his very first offence. Perhaps it had been erotic too, or contained erotic drawings. Sade and Renée-Pélagie continued in their marital partnership, their eldest son had been born in 1767, their second during the year of the trip to Holland, and their daughter in 1771. Yet in 1771 another woman began to play an unexpected part in Sade's life, and this was his sister-in-law, Anne-Prospère de Launay. Evidence of their relationship is on the whole circumstantial, and although it may not have been incestuous, it might be said to prefigure some of the endless group sex episodes in the major works. The girl was a *chanoinesse*, apparently destined for a religious life, by not yet ready to take her vows. She was obviously intelligent and at one point conducted a correspondence with the Abbé de Sade, which seemed to indicate emotional fencing of some kind.

If Renée-Pélagie objected to this new family situation, no evidence has survived; but it is obvious that Sade was not satisfied by relationships with a faithful wife and an intelligent sister-in-law. 1772 was the year of the much-publicised 'affair of the poisoned sweets' in Marseille and the start of Sade's eighteen 'black' years. The time between this year and 1790, a melodrama in fact, can be summarized briefly as follows: in autumn 1772, Sade was sentenced to death in his absence but fled to Italy, allegedly with his sister-in-law. Re-arrest, imprisonment, escape. After two quiet years at La Coste, still preoccupied with the theatre, Sade organised mysterious sexual orgies with young girls and at least one young man at the Château, apparently involving his complaisant wife. Second flight to Italy. In 1777, re-arrest in Paris, allegedly due to the machinations of his mother-in-law. The following year the death sentence was quashed, but Sade was still a prisoner and after

one more escape, he was back in the Vincennes prison until his transfer to the Bastille in 1784. In the crucial year 1789, he was transferred to Charenton but was released a year later. He was to see Charenton again.

These biographical insertions are not as irrelevant as they might seem, for his readers profit from knowing how he had spent the time before his serious writing began. He had read the *philosophes*, notably the materialists; he had written plays and possibly pornography; his life was dominated by women - wife, mother-in-law, sister-in-law, Madame de Saint-Germain, Marie-Dorothee de Rousset, and the young women, always now in groups, always working class, professional or amateur prostitutes. Men? Few, for his father-in-law, the Président de Montreuil, was an eminent *robinocrate* who left family management to his wife. Those he knew included the staff who attempted to manage his affairs in Provence, at least one lawyer soon to be in the pay of Madame de Montreuil, visiting actors, whose company Sade enjoyed, and two valets, often important participants in the violent episodes of the Marquis's extra-marital sex-life.

The male company Sade enjoyed by proxy was that of the *philosophes*, denied to him in prison. Although not in solitary confinement, his early years in Vincennes left him in an obvious state of angry gloom; his letters show a loss of confidence, personal and intellectual isolation, many health problems. It is easy to understand how the uncertainty of his situation affected him: he was detained under a *lettre de cachet*, which meant imprisonment without trial and for an undefined term. 'The cry goes up, how long?' It appears to have been in 1782, soon after he had been eventually allowed to see his wife, that he finished the first surviving piece from his middle age - he was 42 when he wrote *Dialogue entre un prêtre et un moribund*. There seemed no point in writing plays now, but the dialogue was a popular literary form which Sade was to use intermittently in much of his later work. All the concepts put forward by the materialist thinkers are there: there is no God, no life after death, and no reason for failing to indulge in one's 'natural' instincts, for if anyone went wrong, in the conventional sense, Nature would punish you. All Sade's role-model thinkers had attacked the church and the priesthood, and Sade did the same, but he took his attack one stage further by making his

priest a near-actor. (This dialogue has in fact been produced on the stage in both France and England.) The conclusion embodies the Sadean message: 'Renounce the idea of another world - there is none. Do not renounce the pleasure of enjoying and causing happiness in this world. That is the only chance that nature offers you of doubling or extending your existence'.

'My friend, sensual pleasure was always the dearest of my possessions. I have worshipped it all my life (...)' . The priest is told that with the help of six women, he can 'forget (...) all the vain sophistries of superstition, all the ridiculous errors of hypocrisy'. At the very end Sade twists the knife: 'the preacher became a man corrupted by nature because he had not known how to explain what corrupt nature was'. In *Le Système de la nature*, D'Holbach had stated with some irony that if man could not understand God was it not possible that priests also would fail to understand Him?

'With the help of women': this is one of the dimensions that Sade the writer adds to the *philosophes*. The thinkers who made up his *Receuil necessaire* had not said much about women, apart from indicating the obvious need to provide them with education. The women in Sade's life who had not received any education at all had received it in the convents or from private tutors. Anne-Prospère de Launay might have had the makings of an intellectual or even a feminist, but since she died suddenly, possibly of smallpox, at the age of 37, she had little chance to develop. Seventeenth century writers had not neglected the problems of women, and Molière himself, although attacking the *precieuses* and the *femmes savantes*, still protested against enforced and arranged marriages. Bossuet and Boileau were no friends of women, but in 1673 Poulain de la Barre published *De l'égalité des deux sexes*.

In *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Simone de Beauvoir pointed out that the eighteenth century was 'divided' in this matter and 'some writers tried to prove that women had no immortal soul. Rousseau dedicated woman to husband and maternity, thus speaking for the middle class. (...) The democratic and individualist ideal of the eighteenth century, however, was favourable to women; to most philosophers they seemed to be human beings equal to those belonging to the stronger

sex. Voltaire denounced the injustice of woman's lot. Diderot felt that her inferiority had been largely made by society. Montesquieu believed paradoxically that "it is against reason and nature that women be in control of the home (...) not at all that they govern an empire". Louis- Sébastien Mercier, in his *Tableau de Paris* (1761-1790), exposed the horrors of cheap female labour, while 'Condorcet wanted women to enter political life, considering them equal to man if equally educated. "The more women have been enslaved by the laws", he said, "the more dangerous has been their empire. (...) It would decline if it were less to women's interest to maintain it, if it ceased to be their sole means of defending themselves and escaping from oppression".¹

There was no escape for women in *Les Cent Vingt Journées de Sodome*, which Sade presumably began to write in 1782. The girls he included fulfilled the traditional role of sexual objects, but the remarkably detailed portraits of four older women, the story-tellers, seem to show how the author, now in his early forties, was taking his revenge on the society which had committed him to prison largely through the efforts of one rich woman. As for the four ladies in waiting, all old and ugly, no naturalist novelist of one or two centuries later ever provided such revolting creatures. Yet the author's explanations as to why his principal characters wanted these creatures are of more interest to us: Nature's 'disorder', expressed through 'old, disgusting and filthy' objects, is more attractive than beauty. It had not taken Sade very long to develop a total pessimism about Nature, his vision and interpretation of Nature's laws are the very opposite of the calm optimism expressed by La Mettrie and D'Holbach: 'Beauty is a simple thing; ugliness is the exceptional thing. And fiery imaginations, no doubt, always prefer the extraordinary thing to the simple thing'. On the same page Sade took care to point out that 'all these things depend upon our constructions and organs and on the manner in which they affect one another, and we are no more able to change our tastes for these things than to vary the shapes of our bodies'.² Beauty and health, he thought, analysing the attitudes of his characters, were simple, while ugliness and degradation create a much stronger 'commotion', causing a more lively 'agitation'.

These much quoted statements, appearing on early pages of *Les Cent Vingt Journées*, show how quickly and totally Sade's

thought had developed. In this vast, if incomplete work, he contents himself with adapting the theories of the materialists and taking them to the furthest extent possible, without actually quoting his sources, as he did in his later fiction. Surely it was that unchangeable 'construction' that led him and all his characters into the darkness; that was the way he saw the world. Would his vision have been different if life had been different? Any such speculation is a waste of time, but why, in this first book, did Sade progress no further than the 'simple' passions and the thirtieth day? Perhaps he had not yet developed the intellectual and moral strength necessary for the 'complex', the 'criminal', and the 'murderous' passions. His notes at the end are proof of his ambitious and mathematical approach to his work: 'Under no circumstances deviate from this plan, everything has been worked out, the entirety several times re-examined with the greatest care and thoroughness'. Perhaps he wanted unconsciously to preserve his own life, for only sixteen people survived out of the original forty-six who spent the winter in the Château de Silling. On a 'materialistic' note, three of the survivors were cooks, otherwise nobody would have survived. Readers of *Les Cent Vingt Journées* have to tolerate passim, coprophilia, coprophagy, individual sexual perversions and group sex acrobatics, but they will be fascinated by Sade's undoubted skill in story telling: he had surely remembered Marguerite de Navarre and Boccaccio, with their stories within stories. However, he set to work on most of the Sadean themes, taking the ideas of the materialist *philosophes* downhill so to speak, to the edge of some unexplored moral darkness. Crime and destruction produce sexual excitement, for one's own pleasure is the most important thing in life. Nature, far from benign, can unfortunately cause frustration, and Durcet, for example, is aware that he cannot achieve the ultimate in crime: 'I must declare', he said, 'that my imagination has always outdistanced my faculties; I lack the means to do what I would do, I have conceived of a thousand times more and better than I have done and I have ever had complaint against Nature, who, while giving me the desire to outrage her, has always deprived me of the means'. In this work, and indeed in his work as a whole, Sade seems to be reaching out for the infinite. He had read Hobbes on the subject, and D'Holbach had quoted him: 'Whatsoever we imagine, is Finite. Therefore we can have no idea, or conception of any thing we call infinite. No man can have in his

mind an Image of infinite magnitude; nor conceive infinite swiftness, infinite time, or infinite force, or infinite power'.³

If Sade was unwilling to give up his search for the infinite, he compensated by his lifelong efforts to justify all those acts which man-made laws had decreed to be crimes, and therefore punishable. The Bishop, for instance, explains the rewards of homosexual behaviour, and in this context it should be remembered that sodomy, at the time, was a capital offence. 'Consider the problem from the point of view of evil, evil almost always being pleasure's true and major charm; considered thus, the crime must appear greater when perpetrated upon a being of your identical sort than when inflicted upon one which is not, and this once established, the delight automatically doubles'. Sade enjoyed arguments of this sort, specious but inevitably stimulating in a sinister way because one is presumably too naive to have thought of them before.

There must surely be unconscious links between the fascination of ugliness or depravity and what Sade calls 'dishonour' or 'turpitude'. He dwells on this and, in quoting (through Curval) an example of how masochism, like crime, can cause pleasure, he seems to be quoting an enhanced version of his own story: even punishment produces enthusiasm, and public disgrace has been known to produce sexual excitement. 'Everyone knows the story of the brave Marquis de S*** who, when informed of the magistrates' decision to have him burnt in effigy' (the precise definition of the court at Aix in 1772) was so thrilled by the 'opprobrium and infamy' that he immediately experienced orgasm.

All that Curval has to say about 'Nature' and 'philosophy' is worth studying because, although a President (i.e. a presiding magistrate), he continually speaks as a defense lawyer prepared to turn every argument on its head on behalf of some unspecified prisoner who is either himself or the whole of humanity. He was much given to what he called philosophy and believed that it should not be affected by passions: it should remain constant. No doubt he represented the attitude of his creator. By the time he reached the 29th day, Sade bravely quoted the proverb *l'appétit vient en mangeant*, adding that the more horrors one commits, the more one wants

to commit. But he only added the deeds and discussions of one more day, because even he may have realized that he had already elaborated his basic 'philosophical' ideas, mostly centred in the unalterable will of Nature; and even he may have realized that the sexual elucidations he described were beginning to exhaust his possible readers. The participants were never exhausted. Before 1789 he has hidden his manuscript in the prison wall and it was not published until 1904, some twenty years after Krafft-Ebbing had brought out his class *Psychopathia Sexualis*.

Was there any further development in Sade's thought? By the summer of 1787 he had completed the first version of the Justine story- there were to be two or three more- and just two years later, he was transferred to Charenton, the hospice for the insane. At this point Renée-Pélagie de Sade again plays a vital role in the story, for if, on July 14th, 1789, Sade himself was safely out of the Bastille, his possessions, and most important of all to him, his manuscripts, were not. His wife was understandably anxious to leave the city and merely delegated, and although someone fortunately found the hidden manuscript, it was not returned to the author and he assumed it was lost. It has been generally thought that he attempted to re-write it, but in a different mode. He would develop the Justine story as a vehicle for his beliefs and would add the story of her sister, Juliette. Krafft-Ebbing apparently believed the two sisters were modelled on the two Montreuil girls, Renée-Pélagie and Anne-Prospère, but it seems more likely that Sade decided, no doubt unconsciously, to base them on the two sides of his own nature.

1791, the year after Sade's release from Charenton, brought the first publication of the Justine story, but the author remained anonymous. In 1795 the long work *Aline et Valcour, ou Le Roman Philosophique*, was published, this time signed, but the same year saw *La Philosophie dans le Boudoir*, unsigned. Much *philosophie*, and in the latter work a mixture of pornography and politics, the former no doubt intended to 'sell' the latter, for Sade was now short of money. Again Renée-Pélagie was involved, for no sooner was her husband free, no longer dependent solely on her, than she went to live in a convent and demanded a separation. This meant that Sade had to repay the dowry that had been the original reason for

his marriage. So once again he felt rejected, isolated, impoverished. Mercifully he met Marie- Constance Quesnet, who seems to have loved him, while the theatre, his first passion, allowed him to earn a miserable living. At least one of his plays was performed and he worked, for pittance, as a kind of stage-hand.

The story of Justine, the girl who constantly trusted everyone and seemed to invite cruelty, bears out the theory that beauty, moral beauty, is simple, for this virtuous creature never learns anything. However, like nearly all Sade's women characters, she is more interesting than the men who constantly ill-treat her, because she sometimes makes her own decisions, always the wrong ones. She is silly enough to fall in love with the homosexual Bressac - one is reminded of Violette Leduc and Maurice Sachs- and she helps a man whose life is in danger, allowing herself to be tortured and nearly killed because she trusted him. Sade uses Bressac as he had used characters in *Les Cent Vingt Journées*; the young man justifies the non-existence of God and the murder of his mother. Why should family ties be respected? We do not ask to be born and each of us is alone.

Juliette bears out Sade's theory that the ugliness of vice is more fascinating than virtue, inevitably reminding us of Swinburne's ecstatic evocation of the same theme. Juliette was no small-time criminal; she organized crime on a massive scale and she experienced sexual ecstasy through poisoning, murder and utter degradation, choosing at one point to let a servant drag her onto a dunghill before sex could be really enjoyable for her. When very young she made the mistake of showing pity, but soon learnt the error of her ways. Although she would naturally seduce men by feminine methods, her one aim was to acquire wealth and power and she soon behaved like a man herself. No doubt this is why Sade portrayed her as loving, or at least desiring so many women, before she enjoyed herself totally by destroying them. However, she was open to education and she relished discussion of many philosophical problems, usually with men or women occupying religious posts. Although it was agreed there was no God, these people who were so-called in His service were at least educated, even learned. Sade enjoyed introducing real people among his clerics, as though to prove that they were criminals or hypocrites, even if, like Cardinal Bernis, they discuss free

will, which we do not possess. The materialist beliefs are still all-important: 'All our ideas owe their origin to physical and material causes which lead us in spite of ourselves'. Archbishop Fénelon is quoted: 'I modify myself with God. (...) I am the real cause of my own will'. 'But', says Sade, 'Fénelon has not considered in saying this that since God is the stronger he has made Him the real cause of all crimes...'. And in addition to its discussion of abstractions, this extraordinary book completes the 'murderous' and 'criminal' passions that were missing from *Les Cent Vingt Journées*.

Juliette, ou les Prospérités du Vice, is essential reading for anyone who wishes to understand Sade, although like everything else he wrote, it contains repetition and longueurs. However, once one has read one or two episodes from Justine, the story of the poor virtuous girl tells us no more about Sade's thinking than *Les Cent Vingt Journées* had done. *Aline et Valcour* must be read too, for Sade was immensely proud of it and it reveals a less angry man, a frustrated traveller who tried to examine the customs of other countries as a kind of amateur anthropologist, a potential democrat who looked for Utopia and claimed that he had anticipated the ideals of the Revolution. Although nature is still supreme, she is not necessarily destructive, but if Aline's father can still cast incestuous eyes upon his daughter, he does not win. The same theme of incest is also explored in *Eugénie de Franval*, where the father utters highly specious arguments in favour of it, again supported by Nature. However, he does not win either, and story has a tragic end.

Many of Sade's stories might seem to be typical moral tales of the eighteenth century, and again the girls and women illustrate the author's apparent willingness to repent in a strange way for the destructive eroticism which has caused him so much trouble. The most memorable are named after their heroines: *Eugénie de Franval*, *Emilie de Tourville*, *Henrietta Stralson*, *La Châtelaine de Longeville*, *Ernestine*. In the last two the men are outwitted. It is worth noting that in one story at least, *Le Cocu de vie-même*, Sade reminds men that if women behave badly towards them, is that not the fault of the men themselves?

By the time he reached early middle age, Sade insisted

that he would never change, telling his wife and other correspondents that this was his situation. In a long letter to Marie Dorothee de Rousset (January 26th, 1782), he reiterated *en passant* to God: 'Enjoy life, my friend, enjoy life and judge not, I say; leave it to Nature to move you as she will and to the Eternal One that of punishing you (...)'. In his books he had insisted that Nature would punish the criminal. He sounded in some ways as though he had had a change of heart: 'accepted fancies, I grant you, do more for happiness than the dismal truths of philosophy'. He sounded also resigned, but more constructive than in his major works: 'Remember, in short, that it is to make your fellow-man happy, to care for them, help them, love them that Nature puts you in their midst, not to judge and punish them'; and here he remembered his own case, 'and above all not to shut them away in prison'.⁴

If Sade did not actually change as life and imprisonment went on, he revealed himself as a writer with many facets. *Aline et Valcour* was written as far as we know concurrently with that harsh final version of the Justine story; the *Historiettes*, *Contes et Fabliaux*, *Les Crimes de l'Amour* were the main moral tales, condemning incest, arranged marriages and marital dishonesty, while alternating themes contain effective if crude humour. In other stories women outwit their husbands, in some they suffer.

Yukio Mishima, in his moving drama *Madame de Sade*, concentrated on her refusal to see her husband upon his release from prison. He was no longer suffering, so she had no need to suffer on his behalf. She evaded any more suffering by retiring to a convent and demanding a separation. Since that entailed the repayment of her dowry, Sade was forced to add 'spice' to his latest work in order to sell it.

His three late historical novels - all with real-life heroines - are confused and barely readable, but while in Charenton, after 1803, he could truthfully have said 'in my end is my beginning', for the plays he wrote and produced for the patients in this hospice for the insane helped to alleviate their suffering, drew an admiring audience from the fashionable world and gave him some comfort. He saw a priest not long before he died and asked to have an unmarked grave, but was given a religious funeral. His separated wife had not arranged

to pay the Charenton expenses and his son asked the police to burn any surviving manuscripts.

If he himself refused to change, his messages have acquired constantly changing listeners: free-thinkers, revolutionaries, 'libertines', libertarians, surrealists, existentialists, have all taken Sade to their hearts, they have identified with him, they have needed him. The perceptive Apollinaire was right in one way, for he forecast that Sade would dominate the twentieth century. Unfortunately, too many readers, but more especially non-readers, think only of the Sade who committed a few acts of gratuitous violence, mainly directed against women, and accept his books, where these horrifying deeds are magnified into monstrosities, at their face value. The Sade who carries the rewarding message for the end of this century is the man who was ready to back the 'system of nature' and refuse any other, applying his own method of uncompromising logic. He was prepared to face, imagine and describe the entire potential within human behaviour which only latter-day psychiatrists and medical researchers have been able to envisage. Forgive his logorrhœa; accept, with Maurice Blanchot, that he achieved something unique, *un véritable absolu*.

But what of his political philosophy? Did it exist? The legend has spread that Sade's experience of the judiciary and the autocratic use of the *lettre de cachet* caused him to emerge from the Bastille in July 1789 as a militant revolutionary. Not so. It is true that he called himself Citizen Sade and in 1792 became secretary of the *Section des Piques*, one of the administrative districts of Paris; yet he never cast off his aristocratic background, he frequented former aristocratic acquaintances with moderate views. These included the Comte de Clermont-Tonnerre, whose wife was one of Sade's cousins. The new Citizen was sometimes regarded as suspect, he escaped trouble more than once through luck or politic, near-devious behaviour. In December 1791, he had written to his lawyer expressing his own kind of royalism which seems surprisingly liberal: 'I am anti-Jacobin, I hate them; I adore the King, but I detest the old abuses; I like a great many articles in the Constitution, others revolt me'. He wanted the nobility to regain their 'lustre', he wanted the King to lead the nation. However, he wanted no National Assembly, 'but two chambers as in England, which gives the King a modified authority'. The

clergy, who were useless, should not be given any power. 'That is my profession of faith. What am I at the moment? Aristocrat or democrat? Tell me please, lawyer, for I myself have no idea'. He tried to convince himself, perhaps, in *Aline et Valcour*, and in that stage of his thinking, that he was surely a potential democrat.

In other, sometimes related ways, he was a moderate: the man who had railed against the Montreuil family for decades could have sent them to the guillotine during his period of administrative power. But he said nothing and they were spared. The author who had trampled on God helped in the serving of Mass at Charenton in 1805, and the man whose major books are full of slaughter was opposed to the death penalty. He had probably caught up with the ideas of Beccaria. He believed that punishment could not be discarded, but he sincerely thought that prison was no solution.

But who could fail to be fascinated by that famous pamphlet *Français, encore un effort*, inserted into *La Philosophie dans le Boudoir*? Did Sade compose the corrupting sexual education of the innocent Eugénie simply to 'sell' his political idea through cheerful pornography, linking personal immortality to the anarchy of an immoral state? The piece recaptures all the violent energy and topsy-turvy logic of Sade's longer books, although Jean- Jacques Pauvert has seen in it a possible echo of the communism developed by François-Noël ('Gracchus') Babeuf, who was unsurprisingly executed in 1797.

There is not one moderate line in *La Philosophie dans le Boudoir*, published anonymously in 1795, allegedly a posthumous work by the author of *Justine*. It has a theatrical quality which reflects Sade's current efforts to have his plays produced. He tried hard, but he did not have much luck: he was thought to be old-fashioned. But there is nothing old-fashioned today about the 'freest spirit who ever lived'. He may not have invented a philosophical system but he created, out of his omnivorous reading and his woman-dominated life, a unique adaption of traditional and current trends in thought, creating a histrionic, controversial oeuvre which has come into its own two hundred years after it was written.

NOTES

1. *The Second Sex*, Part II, IV.
2. Translation (adapted by Grove Press, 1954) by Annette Michelson, quoted by Simone de Beauvoir, *Faut-il brûler Sade?* See bibliography.
3. *Leviathan*, Part I, Chapter 3.
4. *Selected Letters, The Marquis de Sade*, (translated by W.J. Strachan), edited by Margaret Crosland, London, 1965.
5. *Madame de Sade* was staged by Ingmar Bergman at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in May, 1993.

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The Divine Sade



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