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In Memoriam
Kathy Acker

1948-1997

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along solemnly (and I would almost say patriarchally), would have made me divine in him the author of *Justine* and *Juliette*, in the same way the inspection of his head would have caused me to absolve him from responsibility for such works; his skull was in every point alike to that of a Church Father." (Ibid)

(It is difficult, confronted with this extraordinary text, to avoid thinking that this study was put together before the death of the Marquis, as a last joke, on the part of Sade and his doctor . . .)

21. Robespierre.

22. The beginning of *The Princess of Cleves*.

23. The Marquis was arrested on the morning of the next day, 8 December 1793, at ten o'clock. This is an extract from the register of the clerk's office at the prison of Madelonnettes, Paris, rue des Fontaines: "François Desade, aged fifty-three years, native of Paris, man of letters. Height five feet two-inches, eyes bright blue, nose average, mouth small, chin round, face full and oval."

Differential Practices

Alistair Welchman

IT IS RARE—NOTWITHSTANDING THE INFLATED hyperbole of dust-jacket writing—that a writer can be called unique. But it is the least one can say about Donatien-Alphonse-François, Marquis de Sade: he is, as he often says of his characters, "unique in his genre."¹ No one before or since has ever produced an oeuvre so intransigently committed to a philosophical pornography; and it is even true to say that no pornographer before or since has produced works as profoundly shocking as Sade's. His contemporaries, such as Laclos, are tame in comparison; and our contemporaries (Bataille's or Miller's novels; *The Story of O*) are radically limited in graphic scope by their pressing need—hardly relevant for Sade—to dismantle a choking romantic heritage. Even the most hard-core porno flick presents only what would, with Sade, have been dispensed with as a tedious preliminary initiation on the first of several thousand pages.

Corpses, covered with blood, shit, and sex, are strewn across these pages as casually as heads are picked off daisies. The lib-

ertines commit parricide, infanticide, incest, and genocide; they torture and sacrifice innocents; they immiserate families, towns, entire cities; and they screw each other, the corpses of their victims, animals, while doing it. At the same time, scenes of orgiastic destruction are interspersed with theoretical diatribes aimed at eradicating all the values associated with human social and even organic consolidation—gratitude, conscience, regret, religion, life after death, virtue, humility, virginity, the freedom of the will, love, fraternity, marriage, pity, the family, hospitality, and concern for one's neighbor—while justifying with equal ferocity vice, cowardice, murder, theft, adultery, prostitution, crime, fraud, deception, assassination, hypocrisy, tyranny, blasphemy, misogyny, misanthropy, and, most of all, atheism.

If today some enjoy the luxury of finding a number of these polemics quaint blasts against something long-forgotten—who cares about the moral value of virginity any more?—it is nevertheless surprising how relatively few these cases are, and how quickly Sade moves on to attacking something that is still constitutive for us. There is little that is acceptable in Sade; he rails incessantly against every basis of sociophysical organization. To reject Sade is a condition of (social) survival. It is therefore no surprise at all that his works have been burned, that he was understood as an implacable enemy by ancien régime, revolutionary Republic, and Empire alike and incarcerated by all three, and that he was almost universally execrated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What is surprising—perhaps incomprehensible—is his rehabilitation in the twentieth.

Sade achieved at first grudging, then less grudging, recognition from some poets on the fringes of society (Swinburn, Apollinaire, and Bréton), then from some theoretical writers on the fringes of the academy (Bataille, Klossowski, Blanchot, and Lacan), and finally, he has become a regular object of scholarly discourse produced by literary critics, sociologists, and other bona fide members of the academy (starting with Barthes), generating theoretical dispute and textual discussion in colloquia and collections of articles. In France, it is now possible to purchase Sade's works in no less than three handsome editions, including the prestigious *Pléade*.

II

That things should have reached such a pass, that it is feasible to find Sade's works unthreatening, is a situation that demands some explanation. It comes about at a time when the law no longer takes any interest in these works, that is to say, no longer tries to annihilate them, the only interest the law could conceivably have: The last major court case directly involving Sade's writings attended their republication by Jean-Jacques Pauvert in the 1950s in France, the same time that French intellectuals started to perceive Sade's importance for their own work. Indeed, many of them testified, as it were, in Sade's favor, at the trial. This period also corresponds to that of a generalized decline in the West of the use of written language for the mass dissemination of information, and was followed, probably in unconscious response, by a compensatory hypervalorization or fetishization of "literature" and "writing" in the remaining (and now ostracized) literate elite of the academy.

Sade has been permitted a literary exultation rather than an extraliterary execration only because, as literature, the scandalous libidinal and political effects (or antieffects) of his work can be safely contained within the rarefied space of critical arcana. As Bataille has pointed out, moral condemnation, thoughtless though it is, is more to the point than an admiration for Sade that contrives to bypass his outrages by consigning them to the ideal effects of discourse: "By praising Sade, we make his thought more palatable."² This situation itself perpetrates a scandal on Sade, and one that the Marquis himself can surely not have been prepared for: *to be discussed*.

Although the alternative between moral indignation and aesthetic beautification is surely not exhaustive, it is not irrelevant to draw attention to the hypocrisy necessary to affirm the atrocious: Again, as Bataille says, no one can take these works seriously,³ and if one is to be anything other than appalled, then some amount of hypocrisy is inevitable. Such contortions are not restricted to Sade: Any vigorous atheism, any anthropomorphism, is at its core a violent negation of the principles that assure the social and organic integrity of the human species. But it is Sade, perhaps more than anyone, who forces the stakes. Was Sade a hypocrite? Of course, and so are these words. La Rochefoucauld, however, was wrong

about hypocrisy. It is not the necessary "tribute vice pays to virtue," but the cunning required of contestation in a social field so overwhelmingly—that is to say, transcendently—devoted to enforcing conformity: "Hypocrisy is an essential vice in the world."⁴

Literary "readings" of Sade clearly circumnavigate, without actually coming into contact with, anything that might be challenging in Sade's work. Some of Barthes' comments on Sade and the law nevertheless contain elements of tactical ingenuity: "It often happens that we give to the moral reprobation aimed at Sade the disillusioned form of an aesthetic disgust: Sade is declared to be *monotonous*. . . . When, no longer invoking the monotony of Sadian eroticism, but, more honestly, the 'monstrous turpitudes' of an 'abominable author,' we come, as does the law, to ban Sade for moral reasons, it is because one refuses to enter the only Sadian universe, which is the universe of discourse."⁵ It is certainly an acute observation to suggest that aesthetic critiques of Sade are merely moralism in such bad faith that it cannot even achieve righteous indignation; one could even be cynical enough to interpret Barthes's attitude toward the law here as a hypocritical perjury designed for a defense witness in the courtroom.

But the main drift of Barthes's attitude, and that of the many critics who have followed him, is that critical linguistics has made any invocation of the "referent" of a text an unconscionable dogmatic naïveté. Sade's interest, therefore, stems solely from the formal properties of the structure of his discourse, and any heterodoxy that he might display emerges decidedly not from the vicious politicolibidinal content of his work but only from recombinations of various levels of discursive units. The obscene object is foreclosed a fortiori because *all* objects have been foreclosed; the specific and vital obscenity of Sade's language remains occluded because *all* language is obscene in a purely textual sense.

No one can wish a return to a precritical representational account of language; nor would such return be possible even if one did wish it. But this critical impetus, like Kant's before it, must be disengaged from the idealist architectonic that connects up with it in order to mitigate the cruelty of its destructions. (Sade's work is peculiarly intertwined with Kant's, and it is a salutary thought that Sade was a judge in the *Section des piques* at the time Kant's *Critique of Judgment* was published.)

How could anyone have thought that Sade's language is anything other

than materialist? His language is inspired by nature, and functions as a part of it: not representing, but accelerating the circulation of violently disruptive affect. Here the pornographic nature of these texts cannot be ignored; it is central to his project. Sade writes at the beginning of *The 120 Days of Sodom*:

Many of the extravagances that you are going to see depicted will, I know, doubtless, displease you, but you will find some there that will excite you to the point of costing you some fuck, and that is all we want.⁶

And the entire structure of this document responds to this primary exigency: The sequence of six hundred passions is traversed by means of four storytellers whose task is to excite the libertine audience sexually. Like the prisoner in Kafka's *Penal Colony*, this is a language that is directly transcribed on bodies, that is exhausted in the production, distribution, and consumption of affects. In the last passion effected in *The 120 Days*, for instance, the victims' flesh is branded with a number that determines the details of their fatal torture.⁷ This is the language of an active pragmatism—the immersion of language in extralinguistic reality and of the non-linguistic effects of language—that is not a marginal supplement to syntax and semantics, but their basis. The etymological construction of the word pornography includes in this respect an important ambiguity: not only writing *about* prostitutes, but also writing *on* prostitutes.

In passing it might also be noted that prevalence of blasphemy and the widespread use of expletives in Sade's work responds to the same demands as his pornography. Indeed swearing is often attended by the same castigations as Sade's work as a whole is: It is either (if one is honest) outrageous; or (less honestly) boring. But, aside from certain technical problems involved in the apparently self-defeating nature of blasphemy, the use of expletives is a residue of the immediate capacity of words to produce affect of their immediate libidinalization.

In both cases—the use of pornographic description and of the vocabulary of imprecation—Sade is paring his language down to an irreducible performative force. His choice of these two modes in particular is motivated by the fact that most speech acts that are loaded with performative effect are tied to the very social institutions (examples in literature often

traditionally implicate such reactionary exemplars as marriage, promising, and judging) with which he is most impatient, and whose grounds the rest of his work aims at undermining. Pornography and imprecation are, however, performatives of the body, composing corporeal affective states that operate below the ideal level of representation and that attack the reactionary social configurations of affect that make possible and sustain representation. Recent work in neurolinguistics demonstrates in fact that creative obscenity is possible even after brain lesions wipe out all other linguistic functioning, indicating that such activity is much older than representation, and wired directly to affect sources in the subcortical region or reptile brain.⁸

What one might have called the descriptive or scenic phase of Sade's writing is therefore shot through with libidinal shocks to the nervous system that jolt it out of a composition that acts as the support of reactionary social institutions. "It is just a question of shaking up our nervous system with the most violent shock possible," Sade's *plaisir du texte*.

Such a language is, however, not to be *opposed*, dualistically, to spiritual, mental, or semiotic language; the latter are rather to be thought as material effects. "Meaning," like any other spiritual entity, is never produced as such; there is only an entirely material process of semanticization that effaces its own genealogy and attempts to differentiate itself specifically from what is now presented as only the material transport of meaning. In some of the performative passages of his work, Sade makes the debased values of linguistic materiality sing. But even the most highly spiritualized uses of language, those of communicative reason, are ultimately still refinements (even if highly complex ones) of corporeal performatives, so that it is not only the pornographic segments of Sade's texts that act directly, but even the most philosophical arenas are suffused with charges of libidinal intensity. The two act linguistically in a system of relays: orgies giving rise to philosophical disquisition, and philosophy hooked up to libidinal practice. Juliette observes in the present tense of reasoning that "We get excited by (*jouit*) the principles with which we are being inculcated" and in the past tense of the Sadist scene: "We soon lit the fire of the passions with the torch of philosophy."¹⁰

The positively charged libidinal nature of Sade's language is his prime matter, and other language uses in Sade must be seen as distortions or

refinements of this material linguistics (generalized pragmatism). Specifically, the two deployments of a representational reason apparently independent of this matter must be seen as based within it: *internal complications* of imprecation and pornography. These two deployments are the apparently encyclopedic pretensions of the orgy, and the apparently philosophical pretensions of the dissertation.

III

Not only is Sade's writing resolutely unsublimated, and therefore an inappropriate target for theories whose sole value is that of the text, but his writing also shares almost none of the values traditionally associated with "literature." Although some of Sade's work—notably his many theatrical productions—is quite conventional (although by no means particularly outstanding), most of it is almost completely lacking in the characteristics of literary texts. In this respect *The 120 Days of Sodom* represents a kind of limit case of Sade's trajectory, something unwittingly attested to by the fact that it is often thought to be the culmination of his oeuvre (it was certainly the one most cherished by its author), even though it is, chronologically, practically the first. *The 120 Days* is the work that is least ornamented (tarnished) by literary convention, plot development, characterization, or moral foible. Annie Le Brun says: "It starts out as a historical novel, that transforms itself into a theatrical production, into a philosophical dialogue, tapering off into an enumeration that ends up finally as a subtraction."¹¹ This is not to be thought however as a protopostmodern genre mix-and-match, but as a process of sloughing off literary conventions. The book *dwindles down* from a composite of novelistic and theatrical norms designed to illustrate a passage through the six hundred perverse passions that are the real heart of the book, to a pure enumeration of these passions, and finally to a subtractive accountancy of the immolated victims that is of a positively reptilian coldness and inhumanity.

Doubtless it is his encyclopedic motivation that permits Sade to dispense with literary and theatrical conventionality: the series of disconnected fables are linked not by any such principles, but only by an inexorable and absolute frigidity, rationally and exhaustively exposing the entire

field of a taxonomy. But, what is most important is *that* he eliminates literacy and succeeds in inventing an entirely new material-linguistic function. Indeed, one cannot escape observing that the incompleteness of *The 120 Days* reveals its fundamental truth more starkly than a completed version could possibly have; in fact Annie Le Brun argues that the work must be regarded, and was regarded by Sade, as complete or at least unfinishable.¹² The last three parts consist *only* of numbered sequences denuded of any vestige of descriptive merit, and interspersed, decreasingly frequently, only with what Sade must have considered to be the most essential illustrative tortures persecuted by the nominal protagonists. And these numerical sequences, sparse and terrifying as they already are, become, on occasion, deprived even of the very last resources of humanity, and plunge into an abyssal algebraic notation: "*The tenth*. He makes girl A, and another, B, shit; then he forces B to eat A's turd, and A to eat B's turd; next, they both shit, and he eats both their turds."¹³

Sade's extensive experience in the theater leaves a dramaturgical residue in the lexicon of, especially, dialogic pieces like *Philosophy in the Boudoir* and, to a lesser extent, the novels. In the short fourth dialogue of the former, Sade writes of "tableaux," of "directing the scene," of "denouement," and of "crisis,"¹⁴ and this way of framing orgiastic scenes persists, although with slightly diminished frequency, in the novels, whose form is more remote from the theater. But this vocabulary in fact introduces a Sadist conception of the scene that is very far removed from anything one might call drama. This is because all notions of dramatic development or suspense have been projected both above and below conceptions of character¹⁵ or plot, which are thereby evacuated. Above, in that, as *The 120 Days* shows, grand overarching plot development has been replaced by the need to plot (now in a purely geometrical sense) a line through the encyclopedic space of possible passions according to a principle of increasing outrage. (Yvon Belval, very concretely, locates this principle operating in the graded quantitative increase in penis size through *Philosophy in the Boudoir*,¹⁶ and the same principle is also at work in Juliette; compare, for instance, Claude¹⁷ with Minski¹⁸. Below, in that the typically sublimated male sexual response structure of dramatic buildup of tension followed by release is radically desublimated into *actual* sexual tension and release, such that the only drama of the scenes is in fact their

progress toward orgasm (crisis); and this is itself a vacuous drama in that it follows with simple and unvaried inevitability—Sade himself alludes to the monotony of this procedure.¹⁹

Thus, when, in *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, Dolmancé says, "It seems to me that we are all four perfectly attached to one another; we have but to begin,"²⁰ he says it as if something could follow from this positional attachment; but nothing does. Climax seals the specific pleasure of the position, but its quality is contained entirely in the position itself. A little later he makes this clear: "It seems to me that we've got our necklace well strung together; now let's not think any more about anything except discharging."²¹ The formula is repeated, indifferently substituting "discharge" for "beginning," because there is, from this point of view, no difference between beginning and ending. If there is a theatricality here it is that of a rehearsal (not a performance) in which the director announces "Positions!" but then freezes the action at that instant. Time is arrested, but not eradicated, and synthetically combined with space, *a more geometrico*. Reference even to a "director" humanizes the situation unnecessarily, since the directions are usually, even in the novels, phrased absolutely impersonally: *on arrange . . . le tableau se compose*.²²

This scopic writing that defines the field of Sade's scenic tableaux is derived from a primary Sadist imperative: that everything must be seen. But this must be understood in a very specific sense: All combinatory possibilities of corporeal part objects must be rendered in a pure geometrical intuition that evades conceptuality. Within each combination, the voluminous body-part arrangements must be projected onto a flat visual surface, just as the totality of all combinations must itself be projected onto the flatness of an encyclopedic table. The visual mechanism that performs this function is the mirror, or rather, mirrors in the plural. Barthes rightly distinguishes with some strictness between the two.²³ A single mirror is the dominant philosophical trope of modern subjectivity (determining self-consciousness as narcissistic *reflection* or *speculation*), as well as of modern objectivity (determining correlative loci for subject and object through the vanishing point). An ensemble of mirrors on the other hand is both an erotic multiplier that annuls the mediated identity function of reflection by parodying it (as Kafka and Proust annul Oedipus by extending it, multiplying it, and pushing it too far); and a hammer that crushes the depth out of representation, laying

everything out—now violently disfigured—on a flat plane on which everything is visible. Madame de Saint Ange instructs Eugénie thus about mirrors in *Philosophy in the Boudoir*.

They are there in order that, repeating the postures in a thousand different directions, they multiply to infinity the very pleasures in the eyes of those who savor them on this ottoman. By this means, no part of any of the bodies can be hidden: everything must be in view.²⁴

And Marcel Hénaff is correct to point out that the single mirror, ensuring that the unified depths of expressive subjectivity (*visagéité*) and expressive objectivity (*paysagéité*) can be caved in, is entirely absent from Sade's works.²⁵ There is only this vast *cubeism* of bodies, organs, and orifices, seen from all sides, subjected to the most viscous torsions (the kind that can only be undergone by an embryo) and flushed with shadowless light, containing no secrets, only betrayals.

The apparatus of philosophical representation theory is directly lifted from the practical procedures of the arts of classical representation. The epistemological drama of alienation and recovery constitutive of the modern subject as much in Descartes as in Hegel is drawn from the form of the classical novel, hollowing out an expressive mental medium. Hume, honest enough only to have a theory of the absence of the subject, can think this absence only on the basis of a dramaturgical vocabulary.²⁶ This expressive subjectivity (eloquently attested by the valorization of the face in the plastic arts), imbued with secret thoughts and projects, is constantly confronted with a realm of objectivity construed in its own image (correlation of face and landscape): What is Kant's transcendental connection between subject and object but a massive philosophical pathetic fallacy?

Sade's withdrawal from literary conventionality makes his writings therefore not just aliterary, but inhuman (subjectless and objectless). Underneath the obvious security requirements of the solitary châteaux in which debauches occur is a colder, purer reasoning: The libertines are withdrawing from the human race. "Do you really think that you are men? . . . We are gods."²⁷

It is easy to misunderstand Sade's gesture here, to make of it contemporary dialectic: how to make a literature out of antiliterature (after all,

Sade did write books . . .); how to construct or reconstruct a subjectivity out of its ruin (after all, Sade was a subject, a person . . .). But that is not at all Sade's trajectory: He meticulously chips away at the apparatus of (literary) representation, and leaves in the end something else, rarely attempted in Western history: a libidinally infused geometrical and arithmetical intuition (a residue whose existence has, outside of Sade, perhaps only even been conceived of by Spinoza and J. G. Ballard). *The 120 Days* is Sade's response to Spinoza's challenge: "Up to now, no-one has determined what a body might be able to do."²⁸ And it is (again following Spinoza) an elaboration of everything a body might be able to *do*, thus omitting mere passivities, what is merely undergone by bodies, that is, *Christian* virtues.

Just as important as the asubjective, asignifying, anobjective nature of Sade's tableaux is their counterconceptuality. The hegemony of the concept is what has assured the stability of transcendental subject/object relation at the highest, that is to say, philosophical, level. But again Sade's counterconceptuality must be thought in an entirely positive and affirmative way, not as a dialectical (Hegel), transcendental (Kant), or indifferent (Schelling) presupposition of conceptuality itself, but as *intuition*. Sade here taps into what seems like a side obsession of early modern thought, but is really what makes it peculiarly modern, an obsession with the positive irreducibility of intuition to concept (in, for example, Kant), the correlate positively counterconceptual nature of space and time (as forms of intuition) and hence of their sciences (geometry and arithmetic). These are in a sense only questionably philosophical issues, since they bypass philosophical considerations of conceptuality. But geometry and arithmetic are Sade's real concerns: a geometry and an arithmetic of effect.

In a sense Barthes is right that Sade's scenic writing is producing a *combinatoire* of the passions; but for Barthes this is to say that both Sade's scenic and his discursive moments are covered by the same structural rules, rules that are themselves derived from language: "The scene is merely discourse,"²⁹ and this is to miss *both* the material constitution of Sade's language, *and* the irreducibility of his scenic language function to a conceptual-discursive function.

Sade does not delineate an Aristotelian rational encyclopedia of the specific differences of the passions, but the *smallest possible differences* that operate below conceptual difference at the level of the *infinitesimal* and of

the *fluxion*; he is not so much interested in counting up passions as with the *largest possible number* of repetitions of a singular passion (infinitesimally different from its neighbor) such that the nonconceptual nature of the singular gesture of the perverse act is the (finite) sum of its (unlimited number of) repetitions: "Immensity must accompany delicacy."³⁰ Finally, he is concerned with the geometrical effectuation of movement, that is, with the *instantaneous velocity* of affects. This is directly effected by his writing, which is, in the scenic tableaux, imbued with a directly geometrical function of irrationality (what mathematicians call the continuum, or even more pithily, the *real*).

This function is very different from using words to paint a picture, that is, descriptively, as can be seen from the entirely formulaic nature of Sade's attempts to "paint" victims, often, in fact, simply saying that they are "fit to paint." It is equally distinct from actually using a visual medium, as Sade makes clear:

Ah! How much an engraver would have been necessary here, to hand down this voluptuous and divine *tableau* to posterity! But luxury, crowning our actors too quickly, would perhaps not have given the artist time to capture them. It is not easy for art, which has no movement at all, to realize an action whose whole soul is movement. This is what makes engraving at once the most difficult, and the most thankless, art.³¹

Sade activates an artistic "disorder of all the senses" that, by giving words a specifically visual function, produces an entirely new effect capable of rendering in a geometrical instant the affective movement of a passion; he produces the differential of an affective movement that instantaneously combines the spatial element of the posture and the temporal element of its activity.

These parts of Sade—operating at the limit in *The 120 Days*, but forming the skeletal structure of the other major novels too—are grandiosely inhuman. But they are not therefore *affectless* (Sade does not write from the point of view of scientific neutrality even in his scenic moments), rather they are populated by unheard of affects. These pages are saturated by a cold, but savage, joy; immensely distant from the humanity of expressive depth, of landscapes fashioned after these depths (of which science, despite all the modern rhetoric of disenchantment, is nevertheless

a part), and from the concepts that furnish our abstract unities with content. In these passages, conscience, regret, and the petty passions of everyday life are not even refuted; they have simply disappeared. Heidegger once said: "German Idealism did not collapse, rather the age was no longer strong enough to remain [its] equal."³² Of the last three parts of *The 120 Days*, one might say that no merely human age is equal to them.

IV

Everything must not only be *seen* but also *said*: "Have we not" as a result of the Revolution "acquired the right to say everything?" he writes in the political pamphlet *Frenchmen, Another Effort If You Want To Become Republican*.³³ This right is characteristically invoked at the end of Sade's works, the last words that Juliette speaks, for instance, are that "philosophy must say everything."³⁴ This sense is built into the French *tout est dit*, which is also an elegant formula for breaking off or ending (compare the English phrase, "There's nothing left to say"). This sense of finality, of not just having the right to say everything, but of using it up until there is nothing left that could possibly be said, is imbued with a sometimes horrifying *practical* power. In the final dialogue of *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, at almost the culmination of the tortures imposed on Eugénie's mother, Dolmancé whips her out of a dead faint. When she eventually regains consciousness, she implores him, "Oh heavens! Why are you calling me back from the heart of the grave? Why are you bringing me back to the horrors of life?" and Dolmancé's reply is (Sade adds that he continues to whip her all the while): "Ah! Truly my little mother, it's because everything is not said."³⁵ It is not until the final page of the dialogue, after infecting her with a sexually transmitted disease, and sewing up her orifices, that Dolmancé dismisses her with the now chilling words: "Everything is said."³⁶

The two imperatives—that everything has been seen *and* said—seem consonant, but since they are mutually irreducible, it is actually difficult to grasp their interrelations. Yvon Belval remarks that, contrary to what one might think, "The action does not illustrate the philosophical discourse: no argument gives rise to a *tableau*, no postures give rise to an argument."³⁷ This is a characteristic experience of reading Sade: the jarring effect of

repeated and sudden transitions from philosophical monologue to perverse tableau where the discursive argumentation seems to bear, at best, only an oblique relation to the scenes of debauchery with which it is interspersed.

The discursive rationality of the libertines' dissertations has proved to be the focal point for the generation of Sade enthusiasts who paved the way for Barthes, the theoreticians: Blanchot, Bataille, Klossowski, and Lacan. There is—unsurprisingly for theory—a transcendental or even a dialectical ring about their arguments over Sade. Blanchot for one is unashamed about this: "I do not see any anachronism in calling the essentially Sadian claim, to found the reasonable sovereignty of man on a transcendent power of negation, dialectic in the modern sense."³⁸ Apart from Bataille (whose readings of Sade are somewhat cursory, but who, aside from these readings, shares with him a deep complicity), the other three major French theorists have a collective strategy: They do not canonize him as literature, but understand him as primarily philosophical, although more precisely as philosophically self-defeating.

This argument crystallizes around the notion of *transgression*. The thought is most gracefully expressed with respect to blasphemy: It is self-defeating to blaspheme because, if God exists, then you only injure yourself; and if he doesn't, then there is no one to insult, and you are not blaspheming. But it has wide-ranging application, most especially to the law—or to any normative system. In this context the idea is that if you transgress *the law*, then you presuppose it. Although you break it, you do not go beyond it. Sade however seems to want to do just this, to go definitively *beyond* the law to a material realm of lawless nature. If this is the case, then you simply do not believe in the law (there is only matter in motion) and there is nothing to *break*, hence there is no possibility of transgression as such. The gist of the French *argument* with Sade is that he is caught on the horns of this dilemma, wanting, perhaps for personal reasons,³⁹ to have it both ways; that is to be *both* transgressive *and* a materialist.⁴⁰

There is ample evidence of such a contradiction in Sade. Juliette puts her finger very nicely on the theological version of the argument when she says that Clairwil made her "supply and sustain, almost on my own, the caustic profanities that she wanted to hear addressed to the supreme Being, in whose existence the slut did not believe any more that I did."⁴¹ They even have an argument about this a little later:

—As soon as we do not believe in God, my dear, I said to her, the profanations that you want are only useless infantilism.
—I agree, she said to me, but I like them, they excite my head.⁴²

Similarly, an ambiguous attitude to transgression or crime in general is evident all over Sade's writings. Noirceuil is content to demonstrate that "crime is the soul of lubricity" and only a few paragraphs later to declare that "there is nothing real in crime; in truth, therefore, there is no crime at all."⁴³ Indeed this ambiguity achieves in many cases a real pathos, since if crime is necessarily attached to *jouissance*, then the nonexistence of crime deprives the libertines of their pleasures. Delbène argues, for instance, of libertines, that

the habit of breaking through all barriers makes them constantly find all too easy what would have appeared before to them as revolting, and, step by step, they arrive at monstrosities to whose execution they are still unequal, because there must be real crimes to give them true pleasure (*jouissance*), and, unfortunately, there is no crime in anything.⁴⁴

The power of the transgression argument however really derives not from its textual support in Sade's words, but from its transcendental generality. Sade is a part of the repressed materialism of the French tradition—and he makes constant reference to la Mettrie and Baron d'Holbach. And it is repressed, not least, by seeing *only* the self-defeating logic of transgression at issue in Sade. This imposes (anachronistically) on Sade an ideal structure that only with great difficulty is able to articulate the possibility of dualism, let alone materialism. In trying to transgress the law as such Sade ends up reaffirming the law, and thereby even this tentative gesture towards a materiality external to the law is made only with the greatest difficulty, as the unthought, unspoken, essentially silent impossibility inscribed within the contradictory movement of Sade's thought. The upshot of these arguments is that the violence of Sade's texts is supposed somehow also to be "impossible."

It would do a great violence to Sade's work—as well as being almost impossible—to try to make it a consistent philosophical treatise: Individual characters enunciate incompatible beliefs, each character has a specific the-

oretical perversion, and none of these can, in what are, after all, fictional texts, be simply assimilated with Sade's own views. Nevertheless, it seems that to make Sade's account of crime into a performative contradiction that forecloses the possibility of even considering his materialism requires some willfulness. The resources of materialism in the eighteenth century may have been relatively unsophisticated, but even they are not so easily brought into contradiction. All that Sade can be convicted of—in this respect anyway—is an unwillingness to compromise with traditional morality, and hence a certain impatience with his fellow materialists' attempts to derive just this moral structure from a material base (nature) with which it was plainly incompatible. This leads him to use the term "nature" in two senses (which are always well distinguished): on the one hand, nature itself, and on the other, that ugly torsion of nature that is the result of trying to derive Christian values from it.

For Sade, law, morality, and the Christian virtues are neither natural (as in Rousseau), nor are they thereby transcendental (antinature). They are rather the result of a particular configuration of forces. He is quite clear about this:

The system of love for one's neighbor is a chimera that we owe to Christianity and not to nature; the follower of the Nazarene—tormented unhappy, and consequently in that state of weakness that makes one cry out for tolerance and humanity—had necessarily to establish this fabulous relation of one being to another: he preserved his life by succeeding in doing it.⁴⁵

The scenario is positively Nietzschean, albeit compressed and simplified. And this initial impression is constantly confirmed, through Sade's use of a symbolic bestiary in close proximity to Zarathustra (in the same place Sade pursues an allegory of Eagle and Lamb—repeated in *Juliette*⁴⁶—that follows Nietzsche's use of this biblical vocabulary closely), as well as through the following comment that recalls both Nietzsche and Spinoza: "Vices are creative, and virtues merely created; or, if you prefer, vices are causes, and virtues merely effects."⁴⁷ The moral terms virtue and vice are the effectuations of states of force, the one overwhelmingly reactive, the other active.

Sade is, of course, well aware that, in the West at least, reactive forces have won an almost complete victory (that Sade thinks this victory was then complete only in the West is made clear by his prolonged use of anthropological evidence, as well as his valorization of the classical world). This victory has been won by cunning (how else could the weak defeat the strong?), and, most notably, through the arduous and cruel installation of *conscience* by the priests. The libertines are thus in a difficult position: Strong by nature, they are also victims of an internal policing mechanism, whose existence Sade would be the last to deny, but of whose materiality he was convinced, even if an adequate genealogy of its construction would have to wait for Nietzsche. Lest the libertines suffer the same fate as Pascal, the internal but material constraints of Christianity must be eradicated. What the French theorists call transgression is nothing other than the practice the libertines have invented to achieve this. Sade calls it, alluding to Stoicism, *apathy*; one might just as well say *deprogramming*. The libertine does not reaffirm the law by attempting to transgress it, something that could only make sense if the law were already transcendental and ideal; rather, the libertine accepts the existence of the knots of reactive libido that constitute laws (and Christianity, conscience, and so on), and, quite practically, wants to dissolve them.

Reason, therefore, in Sade doubly evades the narcissistic mirroring of subject and object made possible by concepts, and does so, curiously, in exactly the same way as Kant. That everything must be *seen* facilitates (perhaps by way of a residual encyclopedism) a pure affective intuition that is impersonal, irrational, and irreducible to conceptuality, fusing passion in a synthesis of space-time as a continuum. Similarly, that everything must be *said* realizes a critical reason that, in its pure form, is *directly practical*, an algorithm that introduces conceptual personality only as the contingently given object of its destruction.

If the extent of the libertines' apathetic ascesis is considerable, it is not because they have a theological taste for making themselves suffer, but because what the theologians have done to them—to the West, to humanity—is so terrible. It is the scope and intensity of slave values that determines the number and ferocity of Sade's diatribes. This ascesis is a practical program for interior or intensive decolonialization, a project that is full of horrors and of almost insuperable difficulties, not least among

which is the fact that one of the most successful strategies of the colonizers (the priests) is to make their values cover the entire field of value, leaving the insurgent no point of application. (This is the sense in which Aquinas' use of the term *transcendental* elides with Kant's, and monotheism with the critical philosophy). One cannot negotiate with them; that would presuppose their terms. One cannot counterpose *other* values; any value would be taken as transcendently implicating colonial values. One is left with no choice: "In the period of decolonialization, the colonized mass ridicules the values of colonizers, insults them, vomits them up without reserve."⁴⁸

And vomit them up Sade does, starting, at the core of the matter, with God. No one in the history of Christendom has been so violent an atheist as Sade, no one has nursed such a distended bitterness towards Christianity as Sade, Nietzsche—to whom he is unexpectedly close—included. Of God, he writes: "The idea of such a chimera is, I admit it, the only wrong that I could never forgive in man, I excuse him all his foibles, I am sympathetic to all his weaknesses, but I cannot stand calmly by while he erects such a monster,"⁴⁹ an exception that is put into excessively sharp relief in view of Sade's almost unlimited indulgence for the rest of humankind's viscous caprices and weaknesses. God is subjected to a rapid-fire artillery barrage of proofs of his nonexistence (there are nine in the space of a few pages at the beginning of *Juliette*), and atheism is the absolutely basic intellectual requirement for libertinage. But this rationality does not even start to appease the "profound horror"⁵⁰ of the libertines for the deity. One of them, Bressac, goes as far as to declare himself ready to die for the cause of atheism: "When atheism wants its martyrs, let it only say so, and my blood is ready."⁵¹ Saint-Fond puts God in the dock, and finds Him to be a "monster of unreason, injustice, malice and atrocity"⁵² Saint-Fond is accused by Clairwil of himself "forging a God just to hate him,"⁵³ a motivation that is heartily embraced by Dolmancé in *Philosophy in the Boudoir*.⁵⁴

This kind of atheism is almost incomprehensible to us today: For us the choices seem to be between a fanatical theism and an indifferent atheism (perhaps even an agnosticism). But for Sade, theism (and hence atheism) is not an epistemological issue, an issue about maintaining or withholding one's rational assent to an existential proposition. Of theism he writes: "If all that had resulted from this were some false reasonings, the

impropriety would be mediocre."⁵⁵ It is rather about the priestly values proliferated by a variety of *practices* associated with the institutional arrangements of the church (including conscience, that internal institution of the church). To approach atheism merely propositionally is to leave what is important about theism absolutely intact. The object of Sade's hatred is not a transcendent or transcendental conception of God (in a way it speaks *worse* of the West that God *doesn't* exist), but the extremely widespread (although still entirely empirical) system of values of which the proposition "*Credo in unum Deum*" ("I believe in one God") is a bloodless condensation. In this sense even Sade's blasphemy is not contradictory, but represents a thin sliver of pity in his otherwise callous oeuvre: To invoke God only to execrate him is to want there to have been a *reason* for humanity's degeneration other than the stupidity and weakness of the mass, the cunning weakness of a few; to want there to have been a reason commensurate with its effects.

The movement of internal decolonialization has its dangers: disinvesting in monotheism (vomiting God up), but then speculatively reinvesting in humanity (secular humanism). This, however, is a trap into which Sade certainly does not fall, and his hatred for God is perhaps only matched by his scorn for humanity, as Saint-Fond admits:

There is not an instant in the day during which I have not the most violent of plans for injuring humankind: there is no more frightful species. If this man, this dangerous thing, is powerful, forest tigers cannot match him in wickedness. If he is wretched, how base, how vile he is, how disgusting! Oh! How often it happens that I blush with shame to have been born amongst such beings! What pleases me, is that nature abhors them quite as much as me, because she destroys them daily; I would like to have as many means as her to annihilate them from the earth.⁵⁶

The movement of apathy therefore contains several separable moments of hatred, indifference, and passion. Hatred of the instruments of reactive, passive, weak forces is the precondition, the first manifestation of strength. Indifference, or apathy as such, reengineers the libertine soul, protecting it against the internalized intrusions of reactivity. And passion—but *inhuman* passion—emerges as the product of this libidinal trial: This is

the very passion that is laid out in the scenic writing of *The 120 Days*. The soul "achieves a type of apathy that soon metamorphoses into pleasures a million times more divine than those that weaknesses would obtain."⁵⁷ One of the reasons this is so grossly insupportable is because it is explicitly a result of a long and terrible effort: "The mind must therefore be prepared" before it can achieve "the most complete inhumanity."⁵⁸

Just as reactive forces are constituted by turning active forces against themselves, that is inward, carving out the interiority of a lyrical personal identity, so the libertines reactivate reactive forces by turning *them* against themselves. Clairwil reveals this "infallible secret" to Juliette with these words:

... as soon as an instant of calm lets virtue in under the form of remorse, ... as soon as you perceive it, perform at once the action that you regretted: by the fourth time, you won't hear any more [from your conscience], and you will be at ease for the rest of your life. ... As a result of virtue itself, you will no longer even think of repenting, because you will have become accustomed to doing evil when virtue shows itself; and, in order not to do evil anymore, you will have to prevent virtue from appearing.⁵⁹

It follows from the fact that reactivity is constituted by turning active forces inward that traces of still-active libido can be detected in conscience (representing the "perpetual expenditure of energy" required to keep the lid on the system). Freud (as much as Nietzsche) recognizes this when he attributes the intransigent cruelty of the *superego* to its direct connection to the *id*. Sade himself recognizes something like this when he maintains that "cruelty is only human energy that civilization has not completely corrupted."⁶⁰

One batch of commentators—the critical theorists—are forthright enough not to try to disengage Sade from his violence by arguing that he could not have possibly have meant *that*, and try instead to understand it. These—Horkheimer and Adorno⁶¹ and Deleuze⁶²—think that Sade's cruelty is that of an absolutely untamed *superego* (that is, morality gone mad) or that of reason itself (reason gone mad). What is important about this passage is that it shows how this view is partially true, but only partially. Sade takes the cruelty of the *superego* (conscience) and redirects it, through

apathy, *at the superego itself*. Sade is interested in the cruelty of conscience because it represents the residually active energy that alone is capable of sustaining reactivity, and is equally the only available resource of destructive energy that can be used *against* the *superego*.

Christianity, humanism, and structural linguistics are certainly not transcendental (because nothing is); but they are hegemonic. If Sade is unacceptable to all possible decency (to what Bataille calls the "normal man"⁶³), and he is, then the least that he can be said to have transmitted is just what is at stake in atheism, antihumanism, and generalized pragmatics. Nietzsche was prepared for humanism as the secularization of theology (the shadow of God hangs over us still). What he was not and could not have been prepared for is an anemic and academic antihumanism, against which Sade is the most powerful antidote yet.

Notes

1. The Marquis de Sade, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 8 (Paris: Éditions du Cercle du Livres Précieux, 1962–1964), pp. 247, 557, 598.
2. Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 10 (Paris: Gallimard, 1970–1988), p. 702.
3. *Ibid.*, vol. 9, p. 244.
4. Sade, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 8, p. 287.
5. Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1971), pp. 40–41.
6. Sade, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 1, p. 79.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 443 f.
8. Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), pp. 301, 334.
9. Sade, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 3, pp. 447–48.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
11. Annie Le Brun, *Sade, aller et détours* (Paris: Plon, 1989), p. 40.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Sade, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 1, p. 372.
14. *Ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 455f.
15. Marcel Hénaff, *Sade: l'invention du corps libertin* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1978), pp. 26, 55.

16. Yvon Belval, Préface à *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), pp. 11–12.
17. Sade, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 8, p. 474.
18. Ibid., p. 598.
19. Ibid., vol. 3, p. 468.
20. Ibid., p. 459.
21. Ibid., p. 476.
22. Hénaff, *Sade*, p. 32.
23. Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, pp. 142–43.
24. Sade, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 3, p. 399.
25. Hénaff, *Sade*, pp. 127 f; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie*, vol. 2: Mille plateaux (Paris: Minuit, 1980), p. 7.
26. David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selbey-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 253.
27. Sade, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 8, p. 271.
28. Baruch de Spinoza, *Opera*, vol. 4, part 3, prop 2 n.
29. Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, pp. 33 f, 37.
30. Sade, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 8, p. 262.
31. Ibid., p. 251.
32. Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, Zweite Auflage (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1958), pp. 34–35.
33. Sade, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 3, p. 525, emphasis added.
34. Ibid., vol. 9, p. 582.
35. Ibid., vol. 3, pp. 556–57.
36. Ibid., p. 560.
37. Belval, Préface à *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*, p. 14.
38. Maurice Blanchot, *Sade et Restif de Breton* (Paris: Éditions complexe, 1986), p. 75.
39. Pierre Klossowski, *Sade, mon prochain* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967), p. 24.
40. Ibid, pp. 24, 37; Maurice Blanchot, *Lautréament et Sade* (Paris: Minuit, 1963), p. 35.
41. Sade, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 8, p. 321.
42. Ibid., p. 471.
43. Ibid., pp. 204, 206.
44. Ibid., pp. 130–31.
45. Ibid., vol. 3, p. 176.

46. Ibid., vol. 8, pp. 163, 212.
47. Ibid., vol. 9, p. 171.
48. Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (Paris: Maspero, 1968), p. 12.
49. Sade, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 8, p. 68.
50. Ibid., p. 426.
51. Ibid., vol. 3, p. 84.
52. Ibid., vol. 8, p. 396.
53. Ibid., p. 426.
54. Ibid., vol. 3, p. 437.
55. Ibid., vol. 8, p. 83.
56. Ibid., p. 271.
57. Ibid., p. 502.
58. Ibid., p. 367.
59. Ibid., pp. 469–70.
60. Ibid., vol. 3, p. 449.
61. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1969).
62. Gilles Deleuze and Leopold Von Sacher-Masoch, *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch* (Paris: Minuit, 1967).
63. Bataille, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 9, pp. 176 f.