

DE SADE AND THE DEAD-END OF RATIONALISM

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O thou my friend! The prosperity of Crime is like unto the lightning, whose traitorous brilliancies embellish the atmosphere but for an instant, in order to hurl into death's very depths the luckless one they have dazzled.

Marquis de Sade, Preface to *Justine*

Re-evaluating de Sade

In an extraordinary reversal, de Sade, whose writings have been excoriated for two centuries as "dirty, dangerous, violent", has been gradually disinterred by radical intellectuals and made the subject of increasingly sympathetic re-evaluation. Indeed, since the lifting of the ban on his work in the '50s and '60s, the Divine Marquess has not only become established as a polite topic of intellectual conversation, but he has been virtually rehabilitated as an ideological figure.¹ The climate of discussion has changed so much in the past twenty years that David Cook is moved to suggest in his recent essay that the old problem of how to justify publication (must we burn Sade?) has been superseded by a new one of how to resist trendiness (must we read him?).² The question is more than rhetorical, for it is impossible to reflect critically on the intrinsic meaning and value of de Sade's work and thought without simultaneously, and first, reflecting on the changed meaning it has begun to acquire in the contemporary cultural context.

Rather than confront the problem head on, Cook offers a corrective strategy which aims to clear the ground for critical appropriation by detaching de Sade from contemporary myth (he was not proto-Freud) so that he can be properly grounded in the ideological world whence he sprang. Despite the care with which this is done, however, Cook's re-interpretation works within the general framework of rehabilitation, and to this extent merely exemplifies the trendiness problem he has raised. Since Sade wrote to rationalize (in every sense) the instinctual vicissitude to which he gave his name, what is signified by the current intellectual interest and sympathy for this project? What are we to make of the paradoxical process whereby the author of such ostensibly inhuman books as *Justine* and *Philosophy in the Bedroom* has been semi-recuperated by some of the finest modern minds into the tradition of emancipatory thought?

In part, it must be said, the current revival is a transitory event: the product of a search for literary arguments to justify the lifting of a puritanical censorship of

DEAD END OF RATIONALISM

his works. But although this was certainly the immediate context for the flurry of de Sade scholarship in the '50s and '60s—particularly in France—it does not explain the persistence of interest into the present, nor does it take into account the underlying process of valorization also at work.

Within radical humanist circles (leaving aside the ideologically ambiguous case of Nietzsche) the modern receptivity towards de Sade can be traced to two distinct moments of reinterpretation. The first, expressly undertaken in the excursus on *Juliette* in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, retained but pivoted on the traditional grounds of anti-Sade critique.³ Like those who banned his books, Horkheimer and Adorno had no doubt that de Sade was a moral monster. However, they moderated the critique by rejecting the ascetic and liberal-humanist values that have always subtended conventional expressions of outrage. Thus, they insist that the objection to de Sade's cruel and mechanized eroticism not be confused with the rejection of sexual freedom and enjoyment as such; and, further, that the anti-human dimension of his thought should be read not as the antithesis but as the very fulfillment of Enlightened ethics. In the eyes of Critical Theory, de Sade disclosed the erotic *telos* of dominated reason: Belsen in the bedroom. At this pedagogical level, and despite himself, de Sade has positive value as an honest and illuminating spokesman for Enlightenment rationality: closer in truth-value if not in piety to the liberal-rationalist tradition that hypocritically silenced him and whose authentic representative he nevertheless really was. It should be noted that the Frankfurt School's ironic employment of de Sade as an ally in their civilizational critique belongs to a more general fascination evinced by radical thinkers for the black tradition of bourgeois thought. Blunt voices of repressive realism like Machiavelli, Hobbes and Ricardo have certainly been accorded greater respect by many socialists and anarchists than more humane—and mystified—ideologues like Locke, Kant and Mill: presumably because the former speak the truths of a social order founded on domination and scarcity which the latter, hoping for an easy passage to a better world, play down as real obstacles to progress.

The Frankfortian interpretation paved the way for a positive appropriation of de Sade by dialecticizing the critique without actually crossing that line. For actual absorption into the emancipatory tradition to be possible, a more directly sympathetic line of interpretation had to be established. This was the work of a second current, originating in the late 19th-century avant-garde and extending into both existentialist and structuralist corners of the modern French intelligentsia which read de Sade as a tragic, romantic figure: the parable of an insurgent imagination incarcerated by a repressive social rationality. From such a perspective, what is noteworthy about de Sade is less the deformed character of his fantasy life than the fact that he insisted on the right to fantasize in the first place. Indeed, the human value of his fantasies becomes a purely secondary issue in so far as it is precisely fantasy (and not necessarily its enactment) that is at stake. De Sade, whose writings champion murder for thrills, was himself no murderer. Conversely, the symbolic play of his unconscious was no respecter of persons. Abstract libertarianism, always more sensitive than censors to the

ANDREW WERNICK

difference between language and reality, opens here onto a genuine insight. However, revolutionary modernists from Baudelaire to Barthes go much further insisting, as a practical goal and not only as a matter of epistemological principle, that the disassociation between sign and referent be regarded as absolute—the better to shatter the actual relation and transform them both. Such a project evidently requires an anarchist poetic to break the thrall of words and codes and open up a space for free symbolization. From this perspective, it has been possible to assimilate de Sade not merely as real-life victim of cultural repression but as a fully-fledged revolutionary artist. For surrealism, in particular, the will-to-power of Sade's imagination automatically converted him into a progressive. In effect, a second line in the valorization process was thereby crossed: psychosis transvalued as iconoclasm.

Cook, in commendably ecumenicist spirit, pitches his own evaluation and interpretation of de Sade somewhere between the Frankfurtian moment of critique and the symbolist moment of appropriation. Thus, while he accepts the vision of de Sade as imagination locked up by reason in the tower of *Liberté*, he denies Sade's pedigree as a neo-Freudian libertarian and insists that he be "returned to the Enlightenment". Only by locating him in that tradition, argues Cook, can we derive a clear understanding of the ideological deformations to which his "dominated imagination" was necessarily subject. De Sade exhibited, without transcending them, all the cultural limitations of his times. His libertines' fantasies unfold within the strict limits of a Hobbesian universe, and his anti-Christian metaphysic of human emptiness (desire as lack, the other as empty receptacle) merely secularize the ontological tenets of the Christian adversary. Overall, de Sade is to be read as a kind of satirist, pushing the contemporary ideological universe, in all its contradictoriness, to a logical and absurd conclusion—in part as self-justification, but also as a deliberate assault on the hypocrisies of Church and State in the degenerate, pre-revolutionary France of Louis XV and XVI.

It is hard to disagree with these theses, and Cook's paper offers both an interesting extension of the Frankfurtian critique and a valuable corrective against any reduction of de Sade's thought to mere literature. Barthes may be correct to see in de Sade's writings a quasi-reflexive meta-discourse on the formal relation of desire to language, but Cook is surely also right to object that such treatment bowdlerizes their meaning. To grasp the real ideological substance of the Sadian message we must indeed "render the text dangerous". But I do not think that Cook has rendered the Sadian text dangerous enough. If Sade is to be critically appropriated by the emancipatory tradition at all, it is not sufficient to emphasize his external points of reference. We must also come to terms with the meaning and content of his inner imaginings in all their brutality and violence. In fact, the disturbing question is why that violence has not proved an insurmountable obstacle to his reception into an ostensibly humanist tradition—a process that Critical Theorists in the '30s and '40s, obsessed as they were with the onset of terroristic total administration, could only have understood on the literal plane as dominated reason gone mad.

DEAD END OF RATIONALISM

The Sadian Eros

For all his insistence on disengaging the referential substance of the text, Cook tends like Barthes to metamorphosize Sade into (political) metaphor. But why avoid the obvious? On the most direct level, as act and expression, Sade's writings were sexual. Their main aim was to describe, justify and celebrate a way of sexual life Sade terms *libertinage*. The explicit contestation of sexual and moral taboos that even the representation of such a programme entailed demands and deserves a response.

This is no easy matter since de Sade's *libertinage*, like the renunciatory ethics to which it is angrily counter-posed, conceals the difference between liberated and non-liberated forms of sexual freedom. Contemporary critique must preserve the full force of the distinction, however, and not, as is the current temptation, lapse into the liberal relativism of anything goes (particularly on paper). Cook's argument that Sade's criticism was restrained by his "dominated" imagination understates the problem which verged on the fascistic. The mere, if important, fact that de Sade affirmed the worth of human sexuality does not make his actual sexual programme any less antithetical to the vision of a liberated *eros*.

To mention only the most obvious points: First, Sadian sexuality is autistic; there is no sexual interaction or intersubjectivity of any kind, orgasm is a solitary experience, and the physical dimension of sex is reduced to fluid exchanges between orifices. Secondly, the Sadian sexual drive aims to dominate what it desires. This has nothing to do with formal passivity or aggression in the sexual act: the sexual objects vanquished by the libertine may be required to flagellate or penetrate from a theatrical position of power, but the actors are still slaves. Thirdly, not possession of the object but its violation and destruction provide the pinnacle of ecstasy. If willing objects provide the highest pleasure it is because domination is the more profound in their case: compliance affords no protection against torture, since pain and misery in the victim *per se* provide pleasure to the libertine. Fourthly, the master/slave asymmetry is mapped not only by convention but also as the expression of a special animus in the distinction between male and female. De Sade was profoundly and pathologically mysoginist. *Philosophy in the Bedroom* culminates in the orgiasts congratulating themselves on the just vengeance they have just wreaked on the initiate's moralistic and interfering mother: with her husband's compliance, the woman is raped, after a frenzy of indignities, by a syphilitic dragged in off the streets, and then stitched together to prevent the disease's escape. The only good women are those like Juliette, smart enough to make it in the male libertine's world as sexual entrepreneurs or as partners in patriarchal crime. Sade's libertines also prefer anal to vaginal intercourse. While this reflects, in some measure, the low contemporary level of birth-control technology, and thus a rational shift in sexual aim, it also reflects a revulsion against the female organ as such. Moreover, as Barthes observes, the consistent choice of this mode where the sexual object is

ANDREW WERNICK

female also affirms and extends the (male) power of the libertine. Anal entry doubles the cultural possibilities and effectively neuters femininity by reducing women to the functional equivalent of males.

While we can appreciate, in retrospect, that the dialectic according to which the anti-puritanical irruption of Desire in an unreconstructed hierarchical and instrumentalist world was bound to be distorted and one-sided, and in these qualified terms endorse the positive dimension of its protest against "Sunday wife" morality, there is no reason to flinch from criticizing Sade's infantilism, cruelty and heterophobia. Indeed, in his extreme authenticity, in his will to reveal the sexual fantasies that lay under the mendacious surfaces of the *ancien régime*, he revealed, unself-consciously, the contemporary psychological connections between patriarchy, egotism, power, instrumental reason and destructive fury: his ratification of this complex as "natural" (in the Hobbesian not Rousseauian sense) merely ontologized a cultural moment that emancipatory reason longs to surpass.

It must be emphasized, finally, that Sade's espousal of "crime" was no mere effect of libido overflowing the bounds of established order: rule-breaking in and of itself provided erotic stimulus. Such extreme antinomianism renders insoluble the conflict between the reality principle of social order and the anarchy of pleasure. As an abstract negation of all socially instituted impulse controls, de Sade leaves the Western morality debate suspended in its stupid oscillation between "freedom" and "order". De Sade was driven by reason and instinct to transgress: the emancipatory project seeks to transcend.

The Black Tradition

On one level, as I have suggested, modern receptivity toward de Sade, inaugurated by Horkheimer and Adorno's somewhat mischievous conjugation of Kantian moralism with *Juliette*, flows from critical reason's ambiguous respect for the black, anti-liberal counter-tradition on the fringes of classical bourgeois thought. Whether forced back on itself in civilizational despair or driven in the context of actual political struggle to be tough-minded and "practical", critical reason has always tended to posit illusion rather than bad intentions as its principal ideological antagonist. However, the "dark side" from Machiavelli to Mandeville and beyond evidently exerts an appeal in its own right, and there is more than a fine line to be drawn between respect for candour and an identification with the "evil" that a perverse candour may contestatively embrace.

Where the temptation to cross the threshold has proved particularly irresistible, especially for anarchists, has been in the case of hard polemics against Christianity and its secular residues. Prime examples are provided by the radical revival of Nietzsche—and "behind" him, de Sade. Marxism itself, born as a

DEAD END OF RATIONALISM

humanist critique of its own Judaeo-Christian roots, has always retained a certain ambivalence towards religion. The most violent and thoroughgoing anti-Christian positions (from de Sade to Breton) have in fact arisen and taken root outside the predominantly collectivist and communitarian ethos of the Left, in the Bohemian, anarcho-individualist world on its artistic periphery. It is just here that "left" and "right" critiques of bourgeois society have tended to merge and become confused.

For both Sade and Nietzsche (and indeed for Hobbes also) the absolute, counterposed to the God of Christianity and the Man/Society/Community etc. of religious humanism, is Nature—red in tooth and claw. This nature (unlike that of Aristotle, Rousseau and Hegel) is far from benign. It is almost deliberately cast in the Christian image of sin. But whereas Christianity (and transformism in general) envisages the possibility of *redeeming* nature (particularly, fallen human nature), anti-Christian naturalists (like Sade and Nietzsche) *ontologize* it in all its arbitrariness and imperfection as the starting-point for a demystification of conventional morality.

Emancipation also demands this unmasking, and on the purely critical level is attracted even to those whose programme (with which it disagrees) is to return the species, disabused of pious illusions, to a primordial Hobbesian condition. There is evidently, however, a problem: The Nietzschean locomotive moves relentlessly towards "rank values" and eugenics, and the Sadian towards masturbatory fantasies of victims tortured exquisitely to death. Where do we get off? What are we getting off *on*?

The questions are linked since the nature that grounds the logic is the same as the nature which emotionally drives it along: for Sade and Nietzsche, the nature that matters is the force of human instinct. A dialectical counter-critique of Sade and Nietzsche begins, then, with a critique of their writings' deformed instinctual character. This requires more than an examination of the way in which their imaginations were totally trapped in the dichotomies of master/slave and male/female. The fixation on little-boy infantilism is undeniable, but there is also a sustained fury and hatred which is instinctually irreducible to it. Sade, faithful to his own impulses, named this additional aim "crime"—an ever-escalating will to annihilation which Beauvoir ascribes to his autism and Klossowski to his Hobbesian vision of "nature as destructive principle". Nietzsche, with greater historical reflexivity, situated his own mission of aggression (philosophize with a hammer) in the contradictory space between Dionysus whose spirit he wished to revive, and modern nihilism, which had (as asceticism and *ressentiment*) undermined the vital strength of the species and had now to be assisted in the necessary process of its own self-destruction. For de Sade, as for Nietzsche, the rage to destroy was sublimated into an ideological project: the cultural liquidation of Christian morality and all its metaphysical idols. But de Sade's imagery in the service of this project was the more direct as his actual urge to destroy was the less under control: with him, what Nietzsche called nihilism was represented literally as dismemberment. Herein, I believe, lies the disagreeable secret of Sade's current

ANDREW WERNICK

intellectual appeal. The road that has led, with the post-structuralists, from anarchism and semiology to the rediscovery of Nietzsche, proceeds to a friendly encounter with the less-nuanced deconstruction of the Divine Marquess.

The Current Appeal of de Sade

Of course, the intellectual resonance of de Sade is not (consciously) at a level of the first order. Whatever the vicissitudes of their instincts, post-structuralists are not turned on by torture. Sade's appeal to writers like Barthes lies rather at a second-order level where the Sadian narrative figures as a plane of expression for a more abstract message: the message constituted by the structure of the text. The modern discovery that realism is a literary code and not an authentic duplication of reality theoretically sanctions this well-nigh universal de-emphasis of the referent. For Barthes, it is not just that Sade's writings *as writings* are to be carefully disengaged from their immediate authorial context, but even their historical significance as a cultural event flows less from the sexual values they directly express than from the new relation between imagination, desire and language the structure of the writing exhibits and installs.⁴

The shift in focus brought about by the semiological mutation of critical analysis is startling. Whereas Frankfurt thinkers, engaged in ideology-critique, were struck by Sade's mechanistic rationalism (hypothesized in *Juliette's* notorious sex machine), Barthes is fascinated by Sade's baroque formalism (orgies as *rangements* and *tableaux*, passions classified and sub-classified, meals as ceremonies punctiliously prescribed etc). Barthes' dissection of the form and substance of the cultural code which mediates enunciation of the Sadian sexual sign is quite brilliant—and yet his formalism (like Sade's) ultimately inhibits attention to the explicit ideological meaning that sign bears. The inhibition can be considered symptomatic, especially when placed alongside Barthes' equally symptomatic occlusion of any consideration of the teleological dynamic that powers Sade's stories simultaneously towards destruction, dissolution and orgasm. Justine, at the climax of degradation, is struck by lightning; the final days at Silling culminate in mass mutilation and massacre of the playmates. The linguistic transcription which depicts Sade's work as a destruction/reconstruction of sexual coding limits the reflexivity with which the perverse appeal of his role as transgressor can be grasped. *Le crime* is not merely (for us) a figure for the shattering of language; in any case the cultural significance of linguistic deconstruction itself needs to be decoded (and not merely as the otherness of liberation).

Rather than papering over this problem by seeking out the positive, reconstructive moment in de Sade, we should perhaps reverse the operation in order to uncover the sadistic dimension of the rationalism with which his

DEAD END OF RATIONALISM

writings seem to resonate. Post-structuralism, as expressed variously in the thought of Derrida, Barthes, Baudrillard and Foucault, represents the moment in which critical reason, having despaired of discovering logic in history, intentionality in praxis and apodicticity in language (objectivity's final refuge) moves at last to reject the *ratio* of signification itself. The outcome, as a mode of criticism, displays a wild parallel: just as post-structuralism deconstructs the idea of selfhood and disarticulates texts, so too de Sade, in fantasy, destroyed actual selves and dismembered real bodies. In the mirror of Nietzsche, whose revival prepared the ground for that of de Sade, reason become criticism of reason could enjoy the image of the destructive rage that gives that nihilism its critical momentum. As reconstituted in the current intellectual *imaginaire*, the figure of de Sade functions as an unrecognized simulacrum of what reason, without cognitive ground or satisfaction, has finally become. In search of knowledge and finding only an unstable and refrable prison-house of language, the moment of illumination at which mind aims has been displaced by an urge to destroy categories and in that anti-Cartesian and anti-anthropological emptiness achieves (with de Sade) a painful and never actually consummated moment of black pleasure.

Must we then read de Sade? Perhaps so, if we seek a little intellectual self-knowledge. But if we seek heroes from the sexual demi-monde of bourgeois literature surely Genet and Wilde would be healthier candidates. The instinctual basis of de Sade's intellectual project, like that of the modernist criticism that currently finds him congenial, is a complete, if understandable, dead-end. Emancipatory reason, the crushed flower of enlightenment, seeks its own instinctual basis in a quite different *eros*: one that is fully liberated, self-affirmative and strong enough to be suffused, intellectually speaking, with an ecumenicist pathos that can even learn from de Sade.

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Notes

1. D.A.F. de Sade, *Collected works*, in 3 vols., Grove Press, N.Y., 1966-7.
 2. David Cook, "The Dark Side of Enlightenment", *CJPST*, Vol. V No. 3, pp. 3-14.
 3. M. Horkheimer and T.W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Herder and Herder, N.Y., 1972.
 4. Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1971.
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F. Goya
Capricho no. 43