

THE SLEEP OF REASON...
MR. WERNICK'S DEAD-END

"The sleep of reason begets monsters.
Deserted by reason the imagination begets
impossible monsters. United with reason
she is the mother of all arts and the source of
all wonders."

F.Goya
Capricho no.43

David Cook

Let us begin with Mr. Wernick's admirable division of the Marquis into parts. The first division is Horkheimer and Adorno's reading of *Juliette* as the "erotic telos of dominated reason."¹ The second, attributable to post-war French existentialism and structuralism, views Sade as "a tragic romantic figure: the parable of an insurgent imagination incarcerated by a repressive social rationality." I am placed somewhere in the middle and am granted agreement in linking Sade to the tradition from Hobbes. Otherwise I share with the others the crime of "rehabilitation" explicitly in my case of metamorphosizing Sade into a "(political) metaphor".

Mr. Wernick, on the other hand, in I am sure commendable catholic spirit, pitches his Sade "in his will to reveal the sexual fantasies that lay under the mendacious surface of the *ancien regime*, he revealed, unself-consciously, the contemporary psychological connections between patriarchy, egotism, powers, instrumental reason and destructive fury: his ratification of this complex as 'rational' (in the Hobbesian not Rousseauian sense) merely ontologised a cultural moment that emancipatory reason longs to surpass." The Marquis has been made whole again. Yet setting aside this Marquis who dons many masks there is in Wernick's analyses the claim that the true Marquis de Sade is found in what's before one's eyes, in sadism itself. It is the "instinctual character" of Sade's life and writings which links him in Wernick's analysis to Nietzsche, and what's worst, the contemporary dead end of post-structuralist thought which suffers from the "vicissitudes of their instincts". In this rejection of post-structuralism we are agreed but, of course for different reasons. In part Wernick's rush to put all of us in the second order has overlooked the profound difference within the order of the existentialist writers from the contemporary attractions in France who themselves are far from agreed. Courting the risk of again politicizing Sade I think we should return to Maurice Blanchot's claim that "Sade discerned clearly that, at the time he was writing, power was a social category, that it was part and

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parcel of the organization of society such as it existed both before and after the Revolution."² Wernick's own deconstruction of Sadean critiques to the instinctual level, despite its interest, must lead him away from the question of power to a depoliticized Sade: a return despite protestations to psychologism.

Wernick's analyses rest on the fundamental moment of interpretation in the description of crime. Crime represents both the negation of law in its natural and social contract forms, but also the progressive end-point of the Sadian plots. Each of Sade's major works follows the path of escalating crime set against the constant of sexual orgasm. Wernick in contrast returns crime to Sade's "own impulses", his own autism (which is undeniable in the sense of Sade's own life in prison though not of his thought), thereby seeing crime as an "additional aim". Crime is thus made superfluous as it is returned into the individual in a Freudian sublimation of the sexual impulse. We are then back to Freud and the literal Sade.

However much one wished to emphasize the sexual dimension in Sade there is a constant disappearing act going on. Wernick himself points out that the sexual act is merely an exchange which adds nothing to the actors, but serves as a prelude to crime. Crime here is precisely the vehicle that reaches outside, transcends negatively if you will, the negative shells that engage in fluid mechanics. To rejoin Blanchot, crime is a social act which I have claimed evidences, not the autism of denying social reality, but rather its confrontation in challenging the political and social ideologies. It is inextractable from the reality of the Enlightenment.

As a consequence the interpretation of the final crimes of *Juliette* and the atrocities at Silling should not be passed over en route to papering over the post-structuralists. The Président de Curval, one of the libertines inhabiting Silling in *The 120 Days of Sodom*, sets the dimension of crime, the Sadian 'metamorphoses', in this frequently quoted passage from the eighth day:

Ah, how many times, by God, have I not longed to be able to assail the sun, snatch it out of the universe, make a general darkness, or use that star to burn the world! Oh, that would be a crime, oh yes, and not a little misdemeanor such as are all the ones we perform who are limited in a whole year's time to metamorphosing a dozen creatures into lumps of clay.³

We are reaching with Curval the limits of Sade's thought in what I referred to earlier as the dark side of the enlightenment; here presented in the absurd image of the binary choice of a black hole or of a super nova begat as Goya suggests by an 'impossible monster'. The imagination 'deserted by reason' exorcizes the Christian and bourgeois myths through their realizations. In either case 'nothing' is left.

A similar progression is found in the storm scene which ends *Juliette*. The striking of the virtuous Justine is not, as Foucault comments, "Nature become criminal subjectivity"⁴ but rather man became God, the most impossible criminal of all the monsters. Again the systematic outcome of the extension of crime from

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the castle to the city in the penultimate scene and finally to the heavens. It represents Clairwill's desire to "set the planet ablaze"⁵ which is fulfilled in commanding, through the exercise of the libertines' will the death of Justine and ultimately their own mutual destruction. Again the perverse logic of the claim of the Enlightenment philosopher-king ending in the violence of the libertine-God.

The last section of Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, which I have referred to above, draws the conclusion that this violence holds out "the possibility of transcending (the Western world's) reason ..., and of recovering tragic experience beyond the promises of dialectic."⁶ This conclusion flows from the comparison he draws between Sade and Goya and in particular the last scene of *Juliette* referred to above, and the *Caprichos*. With Sade, as I have argued, there is no exit through violence. The forceable negation of the subjects which are already empty ends in a reciprocal nothingness. In the case of Goya, Foucault's ultimate abandonment of *Capricho no.43* to "that triple night into which Orestes sank" neglects the fact that with Aeschylus the violence of the Furies finally recedes. Although both Sade and Goya were consumed by the problems of power and violence their work directs us to the union of reason and the imagination. Goya claimed that *Capricho no.43* was the first 'universal idiom' that was to lead to the 'source of all wonders.' These wonders were to be denied to them both. It takes little imagination to see in the *Capricho* the awakening of reason—Minerva's owl—pen ready to be instructed by Hegel once again in the subjection of the imagination.

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Notes

1. Unattributed references are to Andrew Wernick's "De Sade and the Dead End of Modern Reason" appearing at the same time as this response. Wernick's article is itself in response to "The Dark Side of Enlightenment" *CJPST* Vol. V:3, pp. 3-14.
2. "Sade" by Maurice Blanchot reprinted in *The Marquis de Sade: Three Complete Novels*, Grove Press, New York, 1960, p. 42.
3. The Marquis de Sade, *The 120 Days of Sadism*, Grove Press, New York, 1967, p. 364.
4. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, Vintage Books, New York, 1973, p. 284.
5. The Marquis de Sade, *Juliette*, Grove Press, New York, 1976, p. 958.
6. Michel Foucault, op. cit., p. 285.