

Sade Reads d'Holbach:

Atheism, Materialism, and Atopy in the Rise of the Avant-Garde

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Introduction

For all Sade's insistence, in his 'Last Will and Testament' of 30 January 1806, that his burial should be arranged in such a way that "the traces of [the] grave may disappear from the face of the earth as . . . the memory of [his existence] shall fade out of the minds of all men", by the mid-twentieth century he had acquired a status of almost mythical proportions among the artistic vanguard in France.¹ From one of the most vilified aristocrats, who had been incarcerated under no less than four different political regimes and whose name had been employed to label an abhorrent sexual perversion, he had become the ultimate free spirit, an icon of obstinate revolt against all oppressive and restrictive systems of power. In his introduction to the first major anthology of Sade's writings, published in 1909, the French proto-modernist poet Guillaume Apollinaire, who famously invented the term 'surrealism', gladly invoked Sade as "the divine Marquis", thereby borrowing the moniker he had been accorded by the French medical doctor and historian Augustin Cabanès.² During the second half of the nineteenth century, Sade had already been the constant if silent companion to

literary greats such as Flaubert, Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Huysmans, Swinburne, and d'Annunzio.³ With Apollinaire's blessing, Sade would be discussed more openly as the most radical creative writer, away from the medico-legal and forensic textbooks in which he had featured prominently as the inveterate chronicler of the human sexual aberrations.

Nonetheless, Sade's gradual rise to fame as the supreme *monstre sacré* of the French Enlightenment is hugely paradoxical. Until the 1950s, when Gilbert Lely published the first in-depth biography of Sade in two massive volumes, much of his life remained couched in legend or mystery.⁴ Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, when modernism in the arts flourished and Sade-scholarship reached its peak, most of the books for which he had gained notoriety could only be obtained in clandestine editions, if at all. Other than a small handful of written descriptions of his physiognomy, there was not even a visual portrait of him during his years of maturity that could be deemed authentic.⁵ Sade may have been more unrestrained than any other writer who had come before him in giving expression to the products of his creative imagination, it is not as if he had been very successful in thereby overturning the political wheels of power. The books for which he had been arrested in 1801 and subsequently sectioned—as irreversibly afflicted with the bespoke mental illness of libertine dementia—represent but one part of his written output, which also includes political pamphlets, poetry, plays, rather conventional short stories and novels, and the occasional attempt at literary criticism. The contents of Sade's libertine works may have been more shocking than anything that had ever been written before (or since), stylistically they are arguably old-fashioned, the exuberant picaresque tales of superhuman victims and their tormentors barely facing up to the longueurs and

repetitiveness of blood orgies interspersed with philosophical disquisitions. There is no doubt that Sade was endowed with a fiery imagination, yet it did not always translate into brilliant, boundary-pushing writing, let alone literary experimentations with narrative structure, syntax, or punctuation.

Save the fact that his books had at one point landed him in prison and subsequently in the madhouse of Charenton, and that for more than a century after his death they continued to be banned, Sade was perhaps less of a revolutionary hero than many modernists wanted him to be. Here was a nobleman who had succeeded in describing the most abominable, stomach-turning scenes of sexualised torture, death, and destruction, whilst simultaneously providing a disturbingly rational, philosophical justification for these cruelties. But here was also a writer who, when given the chance to take revenge on the people who had been responsible for his imprisonment, shied away from acting upon his anger and resentment, because he thought it would be inhumane to do so.⁶

And what kind of free spirit truly deserving of that name is a man who vigorously denied that he was the author of the scandalous novels that the authorities held against him? In a long note written at Charenton, he claimed that he could not possibly be the author of the books for which he had been arrested: “Read [*Justine*] carefully and you shall see that . . . all the philosophical characters of this novel are gangrenous with villainy. However, I am a philosopher; all those who know me do not doubt that this is where my glory and profession lies . . . It is therefore not true that *Justine* comes from me. I’ll put it more strongly: it is impossible for this to be the case.”⁷ His abdication of responsibility for having written the incriminating libertine novels is pathetic at best and disgraceful at worst. Regardless of the question whether

Sade himself agreed with the libertine worldview that he had created, which is but another way of asking whether Sade himself was a sadist, one might reasonably expect an inspirational epitome of insurrection to take ownership of his words and deeds, to show courage in the face of adversity, and to be steadfast in his beliefs and convictions—like the Jacobins who lost their heads during the Thermidorian reaction.

For the modernist movement of the early twentieth century and especially the surrealists, Sade was an inexhaustible source of inspiration. However, to acknowledge this and to analyse the evidence of Sade's presence in painting, literature, cinema, performance art, photography, poetry, and other forms of creative expression is significantly easier than to describe and explain the precise nature of the source itself. In *The Marquis de Sade and the Avant-Garde*, Alyce Mahon has argued that the surrealists relied on Sade "to find a *new* rhetoric, new languages, to reawaken the moral spirit of the people."⁸ And indeed, at the height of the Spanish Civil War, André Breton pointed out the value of Sade as the inventor of a new, liberating style, which rises above gratuitous sentimentality, to celebrate the dissident, unruly force of desire. Breton's was a lofty ambition, yet whether it can be sustained by means of a return to Sade remains to be seen. Vehemently opposed as the Sadean libertines may be to all forms of sentimentality, their own desire "to set the universe ablaze" invariably reaches its limit when they are forced to concede that their actions are but a pale reflection of their fantasies.⁹ At the very end of *Juliette*, the eponymous libertine heroine proclaims that "[p]hilosophy must never shrink from speaking out [*la philosophie doit tout dire*]", but despite 1,200 pages of philosophising, and a cornucopia of orgasms and tortures, one cannot help but think that this moral

injunction has not yet been realised and that, more problematically, philosophy still has not even found the words to fully express itself.¹⁰

Contrary to other scholars who have endeavoured to look for the place from which Sade's inspirational grandeur flows, I shall argue in this chapter that it is not to be found in his singular style of exposition, nor in the power of his language, but rather in his fundamental atopy—in Roland Barthes' meaning of the term as an "outside-of-place", "unclassifiable, [and] of a ceaselessly unforeseen originality"—which in Sade's case is crucially conditioned by an exceedingly clever use of irony, satire, and black humour.¹¹ Sade is never where one thinks he is. He cannot be fully recuperated in any discursive structure. He never properly fits in, constantly defies expectations. It is next to impossible to know where and how he speaks with his own voice. Time and again, he manages to situate himself outside the frameworks that could provide him with a stable position, meaning, and identity. The main catalyst of this atopy, which traverses Sade's entire literary output, is to be found in his engagement with the philosophical systems of his time. As such, I shall use one instance of Sade's peculiar relation to an integrated, rational body of ideas as an emblematic index for the atopic presence that he maintains vis-à-vis his own oeuvre and its readership.

Sade's Enlightenment

Towards the end of November 1783, Sade wrote a letter to his wife from his prison cell at the Château de Vincennes, in which he implored her to provide him with a copy of d'Holbach's *Le système de la nature*, so that he would be better equipped to appreciate the refutation of its arguments in another book she had already brought for him. "It is truly and undoubtedly the basis of my philosophy," he stated, "and if

required I will show myself to be its supporter to the point of martyrdom.”¹² At that point in his life, Sade had not published anything and his writings only included some plays, a few letters to his former governess, a short dialogue, and a travelogue of his grand tour of Italy, where he had travelled incognito between August 1775 and July 1776 as a fugitive from French law enforcers.¹³ As his library at his château of La Coste evinces, Sade had already accumulated (and no doubt read) a large collection of philosophical treatises, but in 1783 he was still dreaming of being an established man of letters himself.¹⁴ It would be another year or so before he started writing *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* and another eight before the publication of *Justine*.

Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d’Holbach was a German born philosopher who spent most of his life in Paris and who is generally regarded as one of the key proponents of the so-called ‘Radical Enlightenment’, a sprawling yet cohesive intellectual paradigm that gained momentum during the second half of the eighteenth century.¹⁵ Radical Enlightenment thinkers did not just appeal to knowledge and reason as essential beacons of social emancipation, but advocated a range of revolutionary precepts, such as universal secularisation and unconditional social equality. Over a period of thirty-five years, from the late 1740s until the early 1780s, d’Holbach entertained a variety of like-minded and critical guests in his salon on the first floor of his lavish townhouse in Paris, which constituted the fertile soil from which his philosophical works sprang.¹⁶ In 1770, d’Holbach published *Le système de la nature*, in which he carefully laid out the theoretical foundations of his doctrine as well as the central principles of its political and moral implications.¹⁷

For d’Holbach, all human beings are the products of Nature, which is to be understood as a purely physical assembly of material components that relate to each

other according to the laws of cause and effect. However, as products of Nature, human beings also exist within Nature, which implies that they cannot detach themselves from it, rise above it, or move beyond it. The Cartesian dualism between body and mind is illusory, because the mind is also made up of matter and movement— the body-mind unity acting as one, singular manifestation of Nature’s force. Drawing on La Mettrie’s infamous 1747 volume *L’homme machine* and, further back in time, Spinoza’s monism and Lucretius’ poetic reworking of Democritus and Epicurus in *De rerum natura*, d’Holbach championed a vision of absolute materialism, in which human beings are merely organic successions of necessary exchanges between nerves, fibres, bones, flesh and fluids.¹⁸ It befalls upon human beings to acknowledge this process by developing experiential knowledge and acquiring an understanding of it by means of their senses. As d’Holbach postulated in the opening sentence of the preface to his book: “Man is only unhappy because he ignores Nature.”¹⁹

As the source and origin of everything that exists, d’Holbach also averred that Nature is its own creator and that any religious reliance on a higher, divine agency is a logical fallacy, which does not set people free, but turns them into obedient servants of an immaterial, spurious agency called God. Religion both causes and justifies human suffering, because it forces human beings to relinquish life’s pleasures and to accept pain as a punishment for their temptations. It even induces voluntary suffering as a form of redemption and as a conduit for gaining access to the purportedly blissful conditions of the afterlife. To d’Holbach, all forms of religious belief and all theological systems are merely driven by fear and based on ignorance. Only a commitment to atheism holds the promise of human emancipation from slavery, whereby the atheist

is a rational human being who courageously dismantles all the religious delusions that are detrimental to the human species, with a view to leading his fellow human beings back to Nature, to experience, and to reason.

Towards the end of *Le système de la nature* and in subsequent books on social systems and morality, d'Holbach went on to demonstrate—following the same style of rigorous, rational exposition—that radical materialism and atheism also lead to the articulation of a robust ethical code, which is more durable than any code of conduct that emanates from religious dogma. In this respect, d'Holbach propounded that human beings are not completely autonomous, and thus entirely free to do what they want, because they are always organic extensions of Nature. They know that their own happiness can only be guaranteed if they live together virtuously with their fellow human beings in a community of solidarity with others. In other words, d'Holbach acknowledged that each individual has to abide by the laws of Nature, but that self-interest needs to be balanced against the support of others. This does not mean that Nature and society are strictly antagonistic, but that society, including the restrictions it places on individual freedom, is quite simply the natural state of humankind. The moral system that d'Holbach presented is therefore an enlightened form of utilitarianism: the greatest good for the greatest number is not only the measure of right and wrong, but also the necessary and sufficient precondition for the happiness of each individual. In a rationally grounded principle of *quid pro quo*, helping others is the best way of serving one's own self-interest.²⁰

In light of the libertine novels he would start writing shortly after having received a new copy of d'Holbach's most important treatise, Sade's declaration to his wife that his own philosophy was entirely contained in *Le système de la nature* can

only strike as exceedingly odd. Materialism and atheism aside, the non-negotiable endorsement of vice and crime in the libertines' worldview seems irreconcilable with d'Holbach's plan for the creation of a virtuous community that is built upon reason, secularism, and equality. In a series of essays on Sade's engagement with the Radical Enlightenment, Jean Deprun has observed that Sade's protestation, in one of the notes written at Charenton, that as a philosopher he could not possibly be the author of *Justine* (and various other libertine works) does make sense.²¹ No Enlightenment philosopher, be it the Radical type of which d'Holbach was a prime example, would ever have gone so far as to promote the dubious ideology that encourages the Sadean libertines to lead a life of sexual crime.

In his reading of Sade, Deprun identifies three fundamental postulates that oppose the libertine *Weltanschauung* to any ethical or political persuasion that stems from Enlightenment thought. First, there is the libertines' unequivocal dedication to what Deprun terms 'intensivism', which refers to their alignment of happiness with excess. As I pointed out above, d'Holbach borrowed some of his ideas on happiness from Lucretius and Epicurus, yet for all the latter's common depiction as a radical hedonist, he only recommended that human beings seek satisfaction of the so-called necessary desires (nourishment, water, housing, friendship, leisure, etc.), warned against the overindulgence in extravagant desires (delicatessen, sexual pleasure), and totally opposed the pursuit of corrosive desires (power, fame, glory). Furthermore, in Epicurus's ethics the regulated satisfaction of desire (and the associated pleasure) was only ever intended as a means of obtaining a state of mental tranquillity. This is exactly the opposite of what the Sadean libertines stand for, because for them the only thing that matters is exuberance, intemperance, and limitless excitation. The second

postulate that runs counter to Enlightenment ideals is the libertines' isolism or solipsism. A Sadean libertine does not care about the happiness of others. Fellow human beings are only ever victimised, employed, and immolated as objects or tools for generating more enjoyment in the one who occupies a position of power. Even the bonds that the libertines form amongst kindred spirits are not based on friendship, let alone love, but on pure self-interest, which means that every libertine is always at risk of being disposed of whenever a like-minded character concludes that he or she is no longer needed, or not living up to the exacting standards of true libertinism. Third, and perhaps most important of all, the libertine conception of Nature diverges from that of d'Holbach, because it is uncompromisingly cruel, violent, and ferocious. Deprun designates this perspective as Sade's antiphysicism, but it might perhaps be captured more accurately as his 'physical amorality'. As the libertine's endless philosophical lectures demonstrate, they are fervent champions of a radical materialist view of the natural cycles of life and death, yet the actions and patterns they detect in Nature's movements are invariably vicious. Nature shows no mercy, no pity, no compassion, no respect, nor any other commendable feeling upon which all the traditional systems of human morality are constructed.

So Sade was right. No adherent of Enlightenment philosophy, be it the Radical version of d'Holbach, could have written *Justine*. But the problem is that Sade did write *Justine*. Is it, then, that he completely misunderstood the ideas that allegedly constituted the basis for his own philosophy? Deprun's answer, with which I agree, is that he actually read d'Holbach better than many of his contemporaries, so much so that he used the libertine's voice to expose the spurious assumptions and inherent contradictions of the Radical Enlightenment. First and foremost among these

misconceptions is the premise that Nature not only operates according to materialistic and rational mechanisms, but is essentially harmonious, virtuous, and beneficial to the emergence of a well organised and carefully regulated social order. Whenever the libertines listen to and act upon Nature, they hear a voice that professes exactly the opposite: living in compliance with Nature requires the acknowledgement that Nature does not care about morality and that any human ethical system that remains true to Nature can only be rooted in malice and depravity. In the first part of *Juliette*, the libertine nun Madame Delbène exhorts Juliette to read “the great theses of Spinoza, of Vanini, of the author of *Le Système de la Nature*,” but the resulting attitude, to which Juliette has already been exposed sexually, could not be further removed from what these source-materials propose.²² The absolute materialism remains firmly in place, for Delbène proclaims that “[a]ll moral effects . . . are to be related to physical causes.”²³ Atheism is equally ingrained, since God’s existence “is a shadow instantly to be dissipated by the least mental effort.”²⁴ But Nature itself “prohibits nothing” and “nothing is more immoral than Nature”, because “never has she burdened us with interdictions or restraints, manners and morals.”²⁵ In sum, “Nature’s single precept is *to enjoy oneself, at the expense of no matter whom*.”²⁶

Whether Sade himself is speaking with the voice of Delbène here, is open to debate, yet without explicitly saying so the depraved nun rationally lays bare the core irrationalities that contaminate the discourse of the Radical Enlightenment. Any carefully developed experiential knowledge of Nature reveals that it only functions according to the law with which Hobbes defined the state-of-nature: *bellum omnium contra omnes*.²⁷ Any kind of human social community that does not inscribe this law into its ideological foundations therefore operates contrary to Nature. If there is to be

an ethical code that deserves to be called Natural, it must promote self-interest as the only guideline that matters. And self-interest cannot be balanced against obligatory manifestations of altruism, as d'Holbach believed, partly because altruism does not exist in Nature, partly because each individual who tries to ensure the happiness of others as a means to increase his own happiness has fallen prey to a moral illusion that is merely designed to curtail his self-interest.

From Libertine Ideology to Atopy

When Sade disclosed to his wife that d'Holbach's *Système de la Nature* was the basis for his philosophy it would thus be erroneous to conclude that the libertine ideology he expounded, through the voices of hundreds of characters and in thousands of pages, is but a fictional extension of Radical Enlightenment thought. In effect, d'Holbach may have been the basis for Sade's philosophy, but as such it was also the starting point for Sade's indomitable expression of a sweeping philosophical critique. In pursuing this project, Sade did not return to the moderate, 'democratic' theses of Rousseau and Voltaire, but relied on the lingering irrationalities of the most rational amongst his philosophical contemporaries to elaborate an apocalyptic vision in which sexual crime and torture are elevated to the status of incontrovertible means for achieving the goal of absolute individual sovereignty.²⁸

Were we to halt here, one could indeed arrive at the conclusion that Sade was the supreme champion of unrestrained, pure freedom of expression—in words as well as in deeds, in thought as much as in action. Despite the blood orgies, the blasphemies, and the blatantly disgusting excesses to which the libertines have recourse to realise their aims, Sade would be the ultimate prophet of limitless enjoyment, the essential

guide to an earthly life that is completely free from any fraudulent form of social constraint. And this would give all those trying to escape, artistically or otherwise, from the restrictive rules and regulations of the social order more than a sufficient reason to honour his memory and salute his cause. One could easily understand why Sade captured the imagination of Flaubert, Baudelaire, and Proust, why the surrealists decided to glorify him, and why Beckett maintained a lifelong interest in his work.²⁹

Unfortunately, with Sade matters are not that simple. If his protracted critique of the Radical Enlightenment makes sense, the alternative, the triumphalist libertine ideology is equally fraught with logical inconsistencies, over and above the fact that no reasonable human being could possibly aspire to living in a Sadean world. Over the years, some of these inconsistencies have been judiciously identified by perceptive Sade-scholars and occasionally employed with a view to exposing the intellectual bankruptcy of his philosophy. Yet this does not imply that Sade himself was unaware of them, which may explain why Lacan, in his notoriously abstruse essay 'Kant with Sade', at one point averred that "Sade is not duped by his fantasy."³⁰ Coherent and persuasive as the libertines' carefully crafted speeches may be, Sade does not present the theories and their fictional authors as monolithic, conflict-free entities. In some cases, one libertine's viewpoint is ruthlessly unmasked as fundamentally misguided by another libertine. In other cases, the libertines themselves are forced to admit that they are unable to meet their own expectations. And Sade's own, sporadic authorial comments are generally geared to reminding the reader that all the complicated constructs he has described, whether philosophical or erotic, are not to be taken very seriously, or should only be taken seriously in their distinct lack of seriousness. In sum, what may appear as a bleak and frightening discourse of selfish brutality, whose erotic

implementations would only be titillating and arousing to readers endowed with their own sadistic proclivities, is on closer inspection a much more discordant and unstable exposition by a suspiciously duplicitous author.

The list of inconsistencies pervading the Sadean universe is long, but they can be broadly presented under four separate headings: paradoxical sovereignty, oppositional confirmation, ineluctable pleasure, and unsettling black humour. The first inconsistency was detailed by Maurice Blanchot in his 1949 essay 'Sade's Reason'.³¹ Without exception, all the libertines in the Sadean pantheon think of themselves, or are depicted, as superior life-forms who are not made from the same substance as ordinary mortals and whose omnipotence knows no bounds. When the libertine Dolmancé is introduced by Madame de Saint-Ange's brother in the first dialogue of *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, he reassures her that "[i]t would be impossible to find a better man: irreligion, impiety, inhumanity, libertinage trickle down from [his] lips as the mystical unction once trickled down from the lips of the famous Bishop of Cambrai."³² "Dolmancé," he continues, "is the most profound seducer, the most corrupt man, the most dangerous . . ."³³ When Juliette, who is no stranger to libertinage herself, meets the Minister Saint-Fond, she queries him and his companions about their predilections. "[A]ugust beings that you are," she wonders, "do you really think of yourselves as human?"³⁴ Saint-Fond's reply only confirms what she had already surmised: "[W]e are so many gods; as it is with them, so it is with us . . . [I]s it not obvious that among men, or rather above men, there is a class so superior to the weaker sort as to be what of old the poets termed divinities?"³⁵ Were a psychiatrist to delve into the taxonomies of mental disorder to find an apposite clinical label for the libertines' singular state of mind, the obvious pathology of sadism would

undoubtedly be paired with narcissistic personality disorder bordering on megalomania. However, a deeper investigation of the libertines' modus operandi indicates that their grandiose self-image is but a mirage of unqualified sovereignty, for the simple reason that they habitually need to have recourse to virtuous victims to validate their own supremacy. This is precisely the paradox that Blanchot outlined in 'Sade's Reason': "When 'being the master of myself' means 'being the master of others', when my independence does not come from my autonomy, but from the dependence of others on me, it is obvious that I forever remain connected to others and that I need them, even if only to obliterate them."³⁶

The second inconsistency was captured most poignantly by Pierre Klossowski in the third chapter of his 1947 volume *Sade My Neighbour*, which he included with the suggestive title 'Under the Mask of Atheism'.³⁷ In short, Klossowski argued that the 'atheist consciousness' of the Sadean libertines, even though it reflects one of the major building blocks of the Radical Enlightenment, is but a superficial layer of ideological veneer. Underneath this irreligious mask there is a secret yet conscientious dedication to God, the Creator, and the afterlife. A psychoanalytic perspective on the libertines' ostensibly unshakeable atheist convictions might designate God as its unconscious repressed core which, as it befits everything that has fallen under the spell of repression, occasionally returns in symptomatic form. In this way, Saint-Fond unwittingly signs his own death warrant when he declares to his brothers and sisters in arms that he has found a technique to ensure that the victims of his torturous acts continue to experience horrendous suffering after their death.³⁸ "Saint-Fond, there is no afterlife," Juliette retorts, "the sole authority vouching for that illusion is the imagination of those men who . . . merely expressed their desire to find later on a

more durable and purer happiness than what is our portion on earth.”³⁹ The conclusion is that Saint-Fond is a fake libertine and so he is dutifully bumped off. But there is also a more straightforward reason for the libertines’ ongoing confirmation of religion as a necessary, unsurpassable force. It is perhaps most clearly stated in one of Michel Foucault’s lectures on Sade at the State University of New York in Buffalo in March 1970. “[I]f God does not exist”, Foucault asserted, “can the libertine, convinced of this nonexistence, have any desire at all?”⁴⁰ What Foucault intended to show, here, is that the libertines only derive sexual enjoyment from desecrating holy wafers, immolating choir boys, and staging blood orgies in the Vatican with the Pope, because they implicitly accept that God exists. In pursuing sexual enjoyment by breaking the most sacred religious commandments, or in using holy principles as the necessary precondition for securing their own enjoyment, they effectively reconfirm the existence of what they so vehemently oppose.

In addition, the libertines are constantly confronted with the quandary that their criminal acts—no matter how many victims get killed, how many moral rules are transgressed, and how many orgasms are experienced—constitute but a poor reflection of the majestic scenes of sexualised destruction they fantasize about. Even the Pope has to concede that it is not within his power to fully accomplish his libertine vision: “Regret nothing but that we are unable to do enough, lament nothing but the weakness of the faculties we have received for our share and whose ridiculous limitations so cramp our penchants.”⁴¹ The libertines abide by the voice of Nature, in whose words they detect an indisputable command to follow the path of absolute annihilation, but each act of sexual carnage, carefully orchestrated as it may be, falls desperately short of what Nature dictates and what they obediently set out to do. And

so they are forced to try again, only to fail more, or to fail better. As Klossowski put it: the libertines are “caught up in tireless recommencements; no successful enterprise ever satisfies them, nothing is ever done once and for all.”⁴² In Lacan’s reading, this fundamental disparity between fantasy and reality is tantamount to the image of infinite bliss (*jouissance*) being constrained by the inevitable cycles of pleasure. When all is philosophically said and sexually done, Lacan posited, each libertine is left with “the humility of an act in which he [or she] cannot help but become a being of flesh and, to the very marrow, a slave to pleasure.”⁴³

Finally, the ideological foundations of the Sadean universe are undermined by the author’s recurrent recourse to irony, satire, derision, and other forms of humour. It is important to emphasize here that this periodic and generally unexpected tone of humour does not occur within the diegetic order of the text. The libertines do not find it funny when their orgies do not meet their expectations. They do not regale each other with comical stories of their (mis-)adventures. They do not tell jokes and cannot be heard laughing. Exceedingly far-fetched as some of their ploys may be, they are dead serious about their intentions and the execution of their plans. The humour is consistently superimposed by the author in an epigraph, a marginal comment, a short digression, or a brief footnote, in which Sade often directly addresses himself to his readership. For example, the epigraph of *Philosophy in the Boudoir* is “May every mother get her daughter to read this book”.⁴⁴ Admittedly, the bitter sarcasm of this line will only be appreciated by readers once they have reached the end of the book, but it completely alters the quality of the diegetic space and the spirit in which it has been constructed. Likewise, when at one stage in the proceedings of *Philosophy in the Boudoir* three male characters ejaculate at the same time, Sade inserts a comment in

his text in which he goes so far as to apologise to his readership: “The fear of monotony prevents us from repeating the expressions that are all alike in such instants.”⁴⁵ After having described how Juliette and her accomplice Clairwil are being extensively penetrated by the friars and novices of a monastery, Sade adds a footnote in which he states: “In such sort that these two winning creatures, not counting oral incursions—for mouth-fucking produces upon the fucked too faint an impression to merit consideration here—had, at this stage, been fucked, Clairwil one hundred and eighty-five times and Juliette one hundred and ninety-two, this both cuntwise and asswardly. We have deemed it necessary to provide this reckoning rather than have ladies interrupt their reading to establish a tally, as otherwise they would most assuredly be inclined to do.”⁴⁶

It is presumably authorial interventions such as these that emboldened André Breton to include Sade in his *Anthology of Black Humour*, yet to some critics Breton’s decision was totally unwarranted to the point of being inexcusable.⁴⁷ In ‘Kant with Sade’, Lacan claimed that Sade is “someone who has no sense of comedy whatsoever.”⁴⁸ In a recent study of Sade’s reception during the twentieth century, Eric Marty opined that Breton, at the point where he had listed Sade as a proponent of black humour, had shown himself to be the worst imaginable reader of Sade.⁴⁹ Could it be that for some readers the lack of seriousness Sade conveys through extra-diegetic additions such as those mentioned above is actually more troubling than the utterly barbaric yet deeply earnest eroto-philosophical scenarios to which the libertines commit themselves? Would it be unreasonable to think that Sade’s libertine reason, which is already an exceedingly astute yet fundamentally inconsistent parody of Radical Enlightenment thought, is far less disturbing than the intermittent mockery of

its theoretical premises and practical implementations? If, as Klossowski maintained, Sade's consciousness as a writer may not have been fully encapsulated in the atheist, materialist, and cruel consciousness of the libertine characters he created, it is next to impossible to propose that he was not present in the extra-diegetic space of the text and the notes of black humour that populate it.

The resulting picture, though, is that of an author whose own relation to the world he creates remains highly ambiguous. Sade makes himself present as a critical commentator on his own characters, yet this does not by definition mean that he does not share at least some of his characters' opinions. As such, the question as to where exactly Sade needs to be situated is left wide open. And this may be as true for his authorship as it applies to other aspects of his life, whether in freedom or behind bars. A revolutionary amongst the aristocrats, a creative writer amongst the prisoners, an aristocrat amongst the revolutionaries, an entertainer amongst the madmen, Sade is essentially atopic—not out of place, but 'outside-of-place' and therefore also unique in the sense that he cannot be reduced to one or the other discursive structure, regulatory framework, or psycho-social site of human consciousness. And this, more than any creative campaign for absolute freedom of expression, may very well represent the characteristic that captured and sustained the modernists' attention.

Conclusion

When Barthes glossed the notion of atopy as "unclassifiable, [and] of a ceaselessly unforeseen originality" it was not in his own essays on Sade, but in his fragments of *A Lover's Discourse* and in a small corner of *The Pleasure of the Text*, where he translated it as "outside-of-place."⁵⁰ "Being Atopic . . .," Barthes argued, "makes language

indecisive: one cannot speak of the other, about the other; every attribute is false, painful, erroneous, awkward: the other is *unqualifiable*.”⁵¹ Socrates remains the quintessential paragon of atopy, from which he not only instils love and fascination in those who, like Alcibiades, are infatuated with the radiance of the hidden gems behind his ugly countenance, but also confusion, anger, and bewilderment in those who, like Alcibiades, never obtain a satisfactory answer to the burning question what Socrates actually wants, how his desire should be interpreted, and what his interlocutors actually mean for him. In her *Socrates: Fictions of a Philosopher*, Sarah Kofman formulated the implication of Socrates’ elusive position as a rhetorical question: “If the problem of Socrates has caused so much ink to flow, in the final analysis, is it not because behind the ‘case’ of this atypical and atypical monster, each interpreter is trying as best he can to ‘settle’ his own ‘case,’ to carry out his reading in such a way that all his own certitudes will not collapse with Socrates, that his own equilibrium and that of his ‘system’—even if there is nothing systematic about it—will not be too seriously threatened?”⁵²

In this chapter, I have tried to demonstrate that the indefinability that defines Socrates applies equally to Sade and that his reading of d’Holbach may serve as the preeminent paradigm for grasping the rhetorical coordinates of his atopic singularity. It is true that d’Holbach provides the foundation for Sade’s own philosophy, yet Sade’s own philosophy is by no means a literary regurgitation of the Radical Enlightenment. Assuming that Sade’s philosophy is to be found primarily in the libertine ideology that emanates from his creative imagination, the moral maxims the libertines discern in the voice of Nature are but an elaborate parody of the precepts that d’Holbach and his acolytes ventured to promote. However, the Sadean parody is never intended as a

solid basis for the development of a consistent alternative to d'Holbach's *System of Nature*. Pervaded by numerous inconsistencies, of which the author may or may not have been aware, Sade elevates himself above the libertine ideology through the creation of an extra-diegetical space, in which his own voice invariably pokes fun at his libertines' sexual and philosophical exploits, which would of course not have existed were it not for the novels that he himself is in the process of writing.

Much like Socrates, Sade is thus exceptionally good at uncovering the implicit fallacies and contradictions in the systems of thought that he engages with, but he is equally shrewd in keeping his own cards extremely close to his chest. Sade's libertine novels (and his other, more conventional works of fiction, or his purportedly political writings) unfailingly succeed in implicating the reader, but the reader never really knows whether the contents of the books should be taken seriously.⁵³ Much like the lover in Barthes' description of the beloved's atopy, Sade's reader may start feeling vulnerable and fall victim to undisguised admiration for the other's unclassifiable character. And this was undeniably the case for many artists who discovered Sade during the first half of the twentieth century. However, as Georges Bataille declared, with a subtle touch of self-criticism, in his 1957 book *Eroticism*: "To admire de Sade is to diminish the force of his ideas."⁵⁴ (179). Unmitigated admiration may inspire, but it does not acknowledge the complexity, nor the originality of the relation between the reader and the text.

I agree with Lacan when he formalised Sade's works as a figuration of the object *a*, the object of desire, which in this case is not to be understood as an object that quells desire but rather as an object that elicits and perpetuates, or even causes desire.⁵⁵ As we have seen above, this principle first of all obtains for the libertines in

the diegetic universe of the text. No matter how hard they try to induce a state of unblemished satisfaction, they are constantly forced to start again. But it also informs the reader's relation to the Sadean text, insofar as the latter compels its readers "to square accounts with [their] own desires."⁵⁶ As an endless alternation between abstract philosophical lectures and concrete erotic exercises, Sade's books remain as unsatisfactory for the reader as the complicated constellations of excess are doomed to collapse for the libertines who participate in them. Reading Sade entails an insidious exhortation, as Kofman pointed out with reference to Socrates, to settle one's own case, whereby this unavoidable assignment is all the more challenging as the author himself remains forever 'outside-of-place'—present yet intangible, working yet uncontrollable, meaningful yet indefinable. Much more than the contents of Sade's works, or the sexual, moral, and intellectual emancipation that he supposedly adumbrated, this is what prompts a response, and what the modernists may have endeavoured to counter in their own celebration of the instability of the self-conscious voice.

Notes

- 1 Donatien-Alphonse-François de Sade, "Last Will and Testament," in Marquis de Sade, *Three Complete Novels: Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, Eugénie de Franval, and Other Writings*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse & Richard Seaver (London: Arrow Books, 1991), 157.
- 2 Guillaume Apollinaire, "Introduction," in *L'Œuvre du Marquis de Sade: Zoloé – Justine – Juliette – La Philosophie dans le boudoir – Les Crimes de l'Amour – Aline et Valcour* (Paris: Bibliothèque des curieux, 1909), 3. For an English translation of Apollinaire's text, see Guillaume Apollinaire, "The Divine Marquis," in *Sade: Sex and Death. The Divine Marquis and the Surrealists*, ed. Candice Black (London: Solar Books, 2010), 47-112. For Cabanès's appraisal of Sade, see Dr Cabanès, "La folie du divin Marquis," in *Le cabinet secret de l'histoire. Troisième série* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1900), 417-490.
- 3 For Sade's influence on the nineteenth century Romantics and Decadents, see the classic 1930 study by Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, Second edition, with a foreword by Frank Kermode, trans. Angus Davidson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 97-195.
- 4 Gilbert Lely, *Vie du Marquis de Sade. Tome premier: De la naissance à l'évasion de Miolans 1740-1773* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952); Gilbert Lely, *Vie du Marquis de Sade avec un examen de ses ouvrages. Tome second: Des années libertines de La Coste au dernier hiver du captif 1773-1814* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957). Lely's biography is only available in English in a heavily abridged format: Gilbert Lely, *The Marquis de Sade: A Biography*, trans. Alec Brown (London: Elek Books, 1961).
- 5 The only image of Sade that is generally believed to be true to life is a charcoal on paper drawing by Charles Van Loo from the early 1760s, which represents a profile of the Marquis in his early twenties. The Van Loo portrait has been reproduced in numerous books and exhibition catalogues on Sade. See, for instance, Annie Le Brun, *Sade. Attaquer le soleil* (Musée d'Orsay/Gallimard, 2014), 14; Judit Carrera (Ed.), *Sade. La libertad o el mal* (Barcelona: CCCB, 2023), 44.
- 6 During the summer of 1793, Sade occupied a powerful administrative position in Paris, which enabled him to take revenge on his in-laws, who had been responsible for getting him locked up in the dungeons of the Vincennes prison. But he could not bring himself to authorise their execution. As he wrote to his lawyer: "They [the republican constituency] wanted me to put to the vote a horror, an inhumanity. I categorically refused . . . During my presidency, I inscribed the Montreuil on a list of citizens to be spared." See Paul Bourdin (Ed.), *Correspondance inédite du marquis de Sade, de ses proches et de ses familiers* (Paris: Librairie de France, 1929), 342. Here and elsewhere, translations from the French are mine unless otherwise indicated.
- 7 Marquis de Sade, "Notes littéraires," in Sade, *Œuvres complètes du Marquis de Sade*, Tome onzième, ed. Annie Le Brun & Jean-Jacques Pauvert (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1991), 31-32.
- 8 Alyce Mahon, *The Marquis de Sade and the Avant-Garde* (Princeton NJ-Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020), 123.

- 9 The expression “to set the universe ablaze” is the libertine Dolmancé’s lyrical description of what he feels compelled to accomplish. See Marquis de Sade, *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 168.
- 10 Marquis de Sade, *Juliette*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (New York NY: Grove Press, 1968), 1193.
- 11 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York NY: Hill and Wang, 1975), 34; Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), 34.
- 12 Marquis de Sade, *Lettres à sa femme* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2007), 425-426.
- 13 Marquis de Sade, *Journey to Italy*, trans. James A. Steintrager (Toronto-Buffalo NY-London: University of Toronto Press, 2020).
- 14 For an annotated inventory of Sade’s library at La Coste prior to his imprisonment, see Alice M. Laborde, *La bibliothèque du marquis de Sade au château de La Coste (en 1776)* (Genève: Slatkine, 1991).
- 15 For comprehensive discussions of Radical Enlightenment thought, see Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity (1650-1750)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Jonathan I. Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton NJ-Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010).
- 16 For detailed accounts of d’Holbach’s intellectual salon, which Rousseau condescendingly termed the ‘coterie holbachique’, see Alan Charles Kors, *D’Holbach’s Coterie: An Enlightenment in Paris* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); Philipp Blom, *A Wicked Company: The Forgotten Radicalism of the European Enlightenment* (New York NY: Basic Books, 2010). Rousseau’s derisory term appears at the beginning of Book IX of his *Confessions*. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, trans. J. M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1953), 374, where it has been simply rendered as ‘the Holbach circle’.
- 17 Paul-Henri Thiry d’Holbach, *Système de la Nature* (Paris: Coda, 2008).
- 18 See Julien Offray de la Mettrie, “Machine Man,” in *Machine Man and Other Writings*, trans. & ed. Ann Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1-40; Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, trans. Ronald Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). For Spinoza’s influence on the Radical Enlightenment, see Jonathan I. Israel, *Spinoza, Life and Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).
- 19 d’Holbach, *Système de la Nature*, 5.
- 20 For a more detailed exposition of d’Holbach’s adherence to a utilitarian ethical system, see William Hardy Wickwar, *Baron d’Holbach: A Prelude to the French Revolution* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1935), 172-215.
- 21 Jean Deprun, “Sade et le rationalisme des Lumières,” *Raison présente* 3 (1967): 75-90; Jean Deprun, “Quand Sade récrit Fréret, Voltaire et d’Holbach,” *Obliques* 12-13 (1977): 263-266; Jean Deprun, “Sade philosophe,” in Sade, *Œuvres*, Tome 1, ed. Michel Delon (Paris: Gallimard/La Pléiade, 1990), lix-lxix.
- 22 Marquis de Sade, *Juliette*, 20.
- 23 *Ibid*, 15.
- 24 *Ibid*, 20.
- 25 *Ibid*, 51.

- 26 Ibid, 52.
- 27 See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
- 28 For an expansive discussion of the democratic, moderate Enlightenment of Rousseau and Voltaire, see Jonathan I. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights (1750-1790)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- 29 For Beckett's engagement with Sade, see Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Beckett and Sade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
- 30 Jacques Lacan, "Kant with Sade," in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 656.
- 31 Maurice Blanchot, "Sade's Reason," in *Lautréamont and Sade*, trans. Stuart Kendall & Michelle Kendall (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 7-41.
- 32 Marquis de Sade, *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, 8.
- 33 Ibid, 8.
- 34 Marquis de Sade, *Juliette*, 242-243.
- 35 Ibid, 243.
- 36 Blanchot, "Sade's Reason", 23.
- 37 Pierre Klossowski, *Sade My Neighbour*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (London: Quartet Books, 1991), 99-121. The reader should note that this English translation of Klossowski's book is based on the second edition of 1967, whose content differs substantially from the original version.
- 38 Marquis de Sade, *Juliette*, 369-370.
- 39 Ibid, 370.
- 40 Michel Foucault, "Lectures on Sade," in *Language, Madness, and Desire: On Literature*, trans. Robert Bononno, ed. Philippe Artières, Jean-François Bert, Mathieu Potte-Bonneville & Judith Revel (Minnesota MN-London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 130.
- 41 Marquis de Sade, *Juliette*, 781.
- 42 Klossowski, *Sade My Neighbour*, 119.
- 43 Lacan, "Kant with Sade," 652.
- 44 Marquis de Sade, *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, 1.
- 45 Ibid, 83.
- 46 Marquis de Sade, *Juliette*, 488-489 note 9.
- 47 André Breton, *Anthology of Black Humour*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (San Francisco CA: City Lights Books, 1997), 45-58.
- 48 Lacan, "Kant with Sade," 661.
- 49 Éric Marty, *Pourquoi le XX^e siècle a-t-il pris Sade au sérieux?* (Paris: du Seuil, 2011), 16.
- 50 Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, 34; Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 34.
- 51 Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, 35.
- 52 Sarah Kofman, *Socrates: Fictions of a Philosopher*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca NY-London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 245.
- 53 Elsewhere, I have applied this principle to the long political pamphlet entitled "Frenchmen, some more effort if you wish to become republican", which Sade included somewhat arbitrarily into the fifth dialogue of *Philosophy in the Boudoir*. See Marquis de Sade, *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, 104-149; Dany Nobus, "How To

- Grow A Nose: The Education of Desire in More's *Utopia* and Sade's Libertine Republic," *College Literature* 45, no. 2 (2018): 278-307.
- 54 Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. Mary Dalwood (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 179.
- 55 Lacan, "Kant with Sade," 657. See also Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book X: Anxiety*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A. R. Price (Cambridge-Malden MA: Polity, 2014), 100-113. In Bruce Fink's English translation of Lacan's "Kant with Sade" for the complete edition of *Écrits*, the confluence between Sade's libertine novels and the object of desire is no longer identifiable, because the letter (*a*) symbolizing the cause of desire has been omitted, probably because it was considered a typographical error in the original text.
- 56 Lacan, "Kant with Sade," 658.

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