

Lars-Henrik Schmidt

The Libertine's Nature



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Motto:

Nothing common is foreign to me

Foreword

THE LIBERTINE'S NATURE is a book about the infamous *Marquis de Sade*.

His works teem with uninhibited libertines who ruthlessly take advantage of others. The will to excess is also in evidence when the libertines raise the torch of philosophy as part of their debauchery. They talk a lot, but how do they think? This is a book about Sade's *philosophical* thoughts. In the context of the *history of ideas*, Sade is interpreted as a philosopher along the lines of other writers of the Enlightenment. His conception of nature claims special attention in this respect. His reflections concerning comparative anthropology and the aesthetics of the sublime are also emphasized and discussed in connection with Rousseau, Kant, and Nietzsche, among others.

In the perspective of what is termed *Social Analytics* and with Sade as the point of departure, elements of a theory of pleasure are constructed. With lust as the fundamental category the aim is to complete a revaluation of the priority traditionally given to 'the other' in moral philosophy. The goal is to formulate a different ethics beyond the opposition between desire and decency.¹

1. The references in the text are to *Oeuvres complètes du Marquis de Sade* (Société Nouvelle des Éditions Pauvert; Paris 1986ff). Each reference consists of an abbreviation of the manuscript followed by the number of the volume and the place of publication. In so far as it has been possible to trace an American translation this has been added. The American references are to *The Marquis de Sade: The Complete Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom and Other Writings* (translated by Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse (Grove Press, Inc., New York 1965)), *The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings* (compiled and translated by Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Deaver (Grove Press, Inc., New York 1966)), and *Juliette* (translated by Austryn Wainhouse (Grove Press, Inc., New York 1968)).

The references follow the code: (abbreviation, volume, French, English).

Prelude: Sade and I

Sade Once Again

On the thirteenth of February 1777 the police showed up in the person of assistant commissioner Marais at the Hôtel de Danemark, rue Jacob in Paris. Referring to a royal *lettre de cachet*, the police arrested a young nobleman and led him to the Vincennes Fortress. The prisoner also had a death sentence hanging over his head. In 1772 a court of justice in Provence had found him guilty of poisoning and sodomy. Though the judgement was later reversed, the prison sentence was not revoked. He was released periodically but then reimprisoned for the libertine writings which were occasioned by the incarceration.

His imprisonment can be seen to mark the commencement of a new element in a body of work that among other things has enriched the world with one of the most remarkable Enlightenment texts by far. Symbolically opening the Terror of the revolutionary Jacobins, “the dictatorship of freedom,” *Justine ou les malheurs de la vertu* was published in 1791. The book turned out to be published under a pseudonym, and behind the author’s pseudonym was hidden the above-mentioned nobleman: Donatien Alphonse François Marquis de Sade (1740-1814).

From the point of view of literary history this “novel” represents the genre transition from the philosophical fairy tale to the romantic novel. And in Sade’s work it constitutes the center of rotation between *Les Cent Vingt Journées* from 1785, a system of passions in novelistic drapery, and *Juliette ou les prospérités du vice* from 1797, a novel with philosophical ambitions.

On the occasion of the 200th anniversary of this epoch-making effort, why not make a bow to Sade and show consideration for him; that is, refrain from turning him over. This time, however, not

to the uniformed police but to the mundane literary knowledge police. Today Sade's concrete libertine behavior does not differentiate him much from many a school boy, but his libertine speculation and knowledge are still *inadmissible*. Today we lock Sade up inside literature – in the *shape* his thought had to take according to the circumstances. Sade's *thinking* is not present as anything other than epochal literature, as odd literature.

The magic of numbers falls completely within the spirit of Sade. It is noteworthy that he became obsessed with numbers and numerical constructions during the terms of imprisonment that form the sombre background of his work. However, the magic of numbers alone can never be sufficient grounds for giving attention to a body of work. His work deserves attention as a lesson, either because the grasp on it seems fatal or appears to be a tonic for the person who achieves *his* great health through the contact. For this reason Sade can function as an *occasion*.

Sade *wants* transgression; precisely this will to transgression makes him French philosophy's answer to Nietzsche. Sade has a tendency to transgress *the social condition*, for only by transgressing it does this condition become apparent. He does not consider himself reduced to Nietzsche's coping or tragic *überwindung* – and not at all to Heidegger's bypassing, *verwindung*, or reconsideration (*Besinnung*). Transgression is at the same time a more naive and a more radical version of the matter. Sade is and remains, even in the light of the current achievements within the genre, the ultimate challenge to the social condition.

At the same time, precisely because of his extreme naturalism, Sade is also the most discerning critic of Rousseau's nature romanticism that (in the shape of ecological awareness) has now become the predominant ideology towards the end of our century. Another boastful ideology that takes the shape of a new individualism and humanism – and the problems this form has with the social – also has much to learn from Sade's overt and problematic egoism: the Kantian idea that one cannot take advantage of others receives in Sade its qualified opponent.

In a world where torture and cruelty are witnessed every single day, it is worth listening to a clever man who knows something about the reality of evil. The root of all evil is hardly idleness but rather an unwilling limitation of sensuality – as, for example, in the imprisoned imagination: what we normally understand as evil is a *passion* to this anti-Christ.

Finally, it should be mentioned that promiscuity as a social convention is on its way to becoming a forbidden fruit in *the new era of sober-mindedness*, and thus there can be grounds for listening attentively to the way in which Sade problematizes the prohibitions and in connection with this to his glorification of sensory intoxication.

The Thesis

If Sade is currently becoming visible on the horizon, it is because as the philosopher of extremes and revolutionary consequences, as *the philosopher of excess*, he constitutes the actual challenge and thus also the occasion for a post-revolutionary thinking that must *tragically reconcile* itself to the impossibility of complete otherness as well as to the certainty that nothing, or only *Nothing*, remains as it is.

It is my *thesis* that a current social-philosophical reflection on morality and ethics, up against the now predominant health morality and the ethics of sober-mindedness, can cast anchor by constructing *the social* in the modern world's most *asocial* thinker. Quite simply, the point is that apparently – even in Sade – limits appear as to how asocially one can behave. At the point where even Sade must give up we find the *possibility* of the social.

Thus, this book is not intended for readers who may wish to find an introduction to Sade's universe, although I hope it can function in this way as well. This presentation is on the contrary an interpretation, i.e., *an interpretive construction* that *at the same time* is a *constructive interpretation*, the project of which is to construct a theory by interpreting the teachings of Sade.