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Review: [untitled]

Author(s): Peter Cryle

Reviewed work(s):

Sade: *The Libertine Novels* by John Phillips

Sade, ou la tentation totalitaire: étude sur l'anthropologie littéraire dans 'La Nouvelle Justine' et 'L'Histoire de Juliette' by Svein-Eirik Fauskevåg

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at times unnecessarily tendentious. The final part of the book addresses the difficulty of closure that nineteenth-century erotic novels share with many more modern narratives, although in the case of the former, the problem is sexual as well as narratorial. In insisting that 'people and their desires are not everywhere the same' (p. 48), Cryle is probably preaching to the converted if his intended readership is his fellow scholars, and indeed, this study does appear to be aimed less at the uninitiated than at a critical community that can be assumed to have read Foucault and broadly accepted his theories of discourse. Yet, accusations of loose interpretation and anachronistic readings levelled at other critics give the book a polemical and combative character. Crébillon's novels, for instance, are not, as some would have it, 'about sex' in the modern sense, but the closest equivalent to what, since the end of the nineteenth century, we have called 'erotic literature', with its emphasis on 'the sexual act' leading inevitably to 'orgasm'. The very term 'orgasm', we are told, had an entirely different meaning for the Encyclopédistes, who defined it as a form of illness. Cryle is undoubtedly right to draw attention to the dangers of anachronism, but such chidings are undermined by his own use of modern American vulgarisms ('dick', 'screw', etc.) in the English translations of quotations. More regrettably, Cryle hardly ever ventures directly into the tricky area of literary value, despite his preoccupations with gradation, perhaps because he is reluctant, as he himself declares, to 'confuse analysis with apologetics' (p. 365). He rebukes Dworkin and other anti-porn feminists for condemning this literature out of hand, but himself eschews all issues of reader response, feminist or otherwise. Now and again, though, objective analysis gives way to contemptuous irony, and at such moments one cannot help feeling that, for all his claims to neutrality, Cryle is a literary purist, on a covert mission in enemy territory to flush out the artifices and clichés of erotic narrative.

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JOHN PHILLIPS

*Sade: The Libertine Novels.* By JOHN PHILLIPS. London and Sterling, VA: Pluto Press. 2001. x + 204 pp. ISBN 0-7453-1598-4.

*Sade, ou la tentation totalitaire: étude sur l'anthropologie littéraire dans 'La Nouvelle Justine' et 'L'Histoire de Juliette'.* By SVEIN-ERIK FAUSKEVÅG. (Les Dix-huitièmes siècles, 49) Paris: Champion. 2001. 199 pp. ISBN 2-7453-0329-5.

Taken together, these books indicate the considerable range, indeed the professional division, of Sade studies. Each is of great interest, but they have no problematic in common. John Phillips's work, firstly, can be read as a kind of antidote to the tendentious, polemical uses of Sade's name and work that have abounded in the French-speaking world since the time of the Romantics, some of which now circulate widely in anglophone daily culture. It might well be claimed in fact that Sade, while one of the French authors most talked about, is still one of the least read. Phillips rightly declares his suspicion of the many 'ideologically motivated' biographies of Sade, and refers to a long history of stereotypical readings (e.g. p. 23), but does not engage in lengthy refutations. Instead, he defines a relatively narrow corpus, Sade's 'four libertine novels', and concentrates on reading them. This strategy is both economical and elegant: it produces a book that has introductory qualities while remaining thoroughly erudite. Phillips's primary focus is not on the cocktail of *l'homme et l'œuvre* which, in Sade's case, has often proved a rather captious potion. 'It is always the text', he says, 'rather than the life which I take as the starting point of my analysis' (p. 24).

The point of an introductory study is, by generic definition, to gain new readers for Sade, and to justify the fact of reading his work. Where most authors are concerned, this is a matter of rhetorical routine: with a little ingenuity, any author can be shown to be valuable from some point of view or other. But in Sade's case the difficulty is a

genuinely ethical one, as Phillips knows well. 'Sade's libertine novels are ultimately worth reading', he argues, 'because of the light they cast into the darkest corners of human desire and because, at the very edge of sanity beyond the real and its moral dimensions, they offer us safe, imaginary spaces of cathartic play' (p. 31).

Sade's work has served on occasion as a locus for psychoanalytical reflection, as in Lacan's reading of Sade in conjunction with Kant ('Kant avec Sade', in *Écrits II* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), pp. 119–48), or in some of Annie Le Brun's work (see e.g. *Soudain un bloc d'abîme, Sade: introduction aux œuvres complètes* (Paris: Pauvert, 1986)). It can also be a site in the stringent critique of psychoanalysis which has been conducted by Foucault, Deleuze, and others in recent decades. But Phillips does not launch into the complexities of debate within and around psychoanalysis. He talks unaffectedly of Sade's 'unconscious motivations', and draws on such notions as anal retentiveness in order to account for certain aspects of the literary work (p. 49). In addition, or in parallel, the notion of Sadian 'humour' is widely used throughout, with an apologetic function which may pose difficulties for some. Phillips reassures us that Sade is being playful, even at those moments where the violence described is most extreme (e.g. p. 105; see also p. 145). But if Sade's humour is conscious, as it presumably must be if it is to serve its mitigating purpose, how does such consciousness stand in relation to the impressively direct communication of unconscious desire with which Sade is credited by Phillips and other psychoanalytically minded critics? In this regard, Phillips is simply content to align himself with such noted Sadian apologists as Breton and Sollers. In the chapter on *Justine*, however, Phillips produces a quite divergent reading which he defends energetically, arguing that Justine represents certain qualities of Sade himself: both suffered reversals of fortune and abuses of justice. There is something counter-intuitive about this rapprochement, but Phillips uses it to make an interesting point about Justine's survival tactics (p. 113). Overall, *Sade: The Libertine Novels* is sustained in purpose, and productively rich in detail. This is a readable, well-informed study which not only fills a gap for a cultivated English-speaking public, but has much to offer specialists.

Svein-Eirik Fauskevåg's work is no less worthy or less interesting than that of Phillips, but it is addressed to a quite different audience. It should be understood that Fauskevåg understands 'anthropology' in its eighteenth-century philosophical sense. His concern, unlike that of Phillips, is not primarily with the relevance of Sade for our time, but with his place in a late eighteenth-century context of debate. In order to make room for this analytical project, he suggests, for example, that libertarian readings of Sade are misleading (p. 8), but even here his primary object is definition, rather than polemics. At the outset, he shows that Christian notions of personhood are rejected by Sade in favour of a 'privatized' notion of human existence (e.g. p. 12), and that Sade's notion of 'total domination' corresponds to political totalitarianism, as theorized by Arendt. Such references are uncongenial to Sadian apologetics, but Fauskevåg is not concerned with the defence and illustration of the divine Marquis. He takes it for granted (a) that Sade is a thinker of great significance, and (b) that his thought is sufficiently coherent to be expounded and analysed. Sade might appear to many of us, following Barthes, to be an author whose work is laced with contradiction, and who is entirely fascinating for that reason alone. But Fauskevåg's erudition shows up underlying assumptions and principles which recur throughout Sade's 'obscene' work in ways that are not merely iterative, but constitutive. This essay has quite a lot in common, for its intellectual style if not for the stuff of its analyses, with a little-known book by Philippe Mengue entitled *L'Ordre sadien: loi et narration dans la philosophie de Sade* (Paris: Kimé, 1996). Both are anything but deconstructive: they assert, in different ways, the coherence of Sade's philosophical position, and they assert it against the mass of informed critical opinion.

Fauskevåg's focus is on Sadian subjectivism. Sade's heroes, he says, are engaged in 'self-idolatry', with no obligation to others, to the extent that the other is reduced to nothingness (p. 17). Subjective freedom, however, is not absolute, because the Sadian hero is aware of, and submissive to, nature as material process. The Sadian notion of freedom, he argues, is that of a threshold state in which a finite being seeks infinite satisfaction in specific pleasures (p. 54). Quasi-psychological notions such as 'apathy' and 'imagination', both terms that pose difficulties for modern critics, are helpfully relocated as terms in eighteenth-century philosophical debate (pp. 77–90). And quasi-sociological notions are also revisited: Fauskevåg describes the notorious Société des Amis du Crime, in *Histoire de Juliette*, as a 'rebarbarization' of relationships between individuals which produces a 'non-civilized' community (p. 143). The final chapter of the book (pp. 145–79) will be of interest to literary scholars for the way in which it relates questions of style, with a host of examples provided, to thematic issues raised earlier. Fauskevåg concludes by emphasizing what he calls Sade's 'non-anthropocentric' anthropology. Overall, this essay is likely to be quite demanding for scholars whose primary interest is in literature, but particularly rewarding for those with an interest in the history of philosophy.

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PETER CRYLE

*Sade: From Materialism to Pornography.* By CAROLINE WARMAN. (SVEC 2002:01)  
Oxford: Voltaire Foundation. 2002. x + 178 pp. ISBN 0-7294-0773-X.

Throughout the nineteenth century, and for most of the twentieth, Sade was a focus for Romantic and post-Romantic hagiography. It was long customary not to analyse the recurring features of his texts but to glory in the very fact of their existence, as unprecedented manifestations of genius. Recent decades have seen the waning of this cult, and more attention is now being paid to textual analysis of the Sadian oeuvre. But even the most textually minded critics have been inclined to read Sade's work for what they see as its fascinating mix of themes and discourses. Almost no one expects of him, it seems, that he be a coherent thinker: he must be one of the few canonical authors read primarily for their self-contradiction. Against this background, it is interesting to note that there have recently appeared a few studies which claim to show the overall philosophical coherence of Sade's work. I am aware of three: Philippe Mengue's *L'Ordre sadien: loi et narration dans la philosophie de Sade* (Paris: Kimé, 1996), Svein-Eirik Fauskevåg's *Sade, ou la tentation totalitaire: étude sur l'anthropologie littéraire dans 'La Nouvelle Justine' et l' 'Histoire de Juliette'* (Paris: Champion, 2001), and Caroline Warman's book, the latest and best of them. Rather than resorting to the notion of Sadian humour, which has been vastly over-used as a rationale for incoherence, all three take Sade seriously as a thinker. As Warman says, 'Sade takes his work and position very seriously, also wishing to be taken seriously himself' (pp. 85–86).

Studies like those of Mengue and Fauskevåg are likely to arouse a degree of suspicion. While they reject out of hand the hermeneutic recklessness displayed by hagiographers, might they not themselves be prone, one wonders, to gather every detail under the umbrella of a single explicative principle? Warman herself is quite reserved when discussing Mengue's thesis. She is sceptical about his claim to find throughout what he calls 'la logique souterraine des fantasmes' (p. 2) and to 'locate the kernel of Sadean philosophy round an absence of meaning' (p. 117). Her conclusion carries 'a reminder that Sade cannot be "explained" completely, and moreover that an explanation such as [her own] may not even be able to help much with the difficulties that this text still presents' (p. 170). Mengue's ambition, she suggests, may have been misplaced, and that is perhaps why almost no Sade scholars have taken up