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Kant, Sade and the Libertine Enlightenment

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One might be excused for dismissing a comparison of Immanuel Kant and the Marquis de Sade as far-fetched, were it not for Jacques Lacan's provocative essay *Kant avec Sade* (1966), in which the author hypothesized that Sade's *Philosophy in the Boudoir* (1795) 'completed' and exposed the 'truth' of the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) (1966, p. 765). Lacan's main concern here was to interconnect Sade's and Kant's thinking on the concept of (radical) evil. Arguably, one of the metaphysical propositions the Königsberg professor had not pursued to its logical conclusion is the notion of evil performed for no pathological reasons, but out of principle, that is, merely for the sake of it. While Kant proffered the disclaimer that no human was wanton enough to be capable of such wholesale perversity, Sade, in Lacan's reasoning, elevated wickedness to a noumenon of universal law, effectively turning it by default into a Kantian categorical imperative. This justification of cruelty for cruelty's sake, of pleasurable violence born of ethical and aesthetic disinterestedness, was to furnish the rationale for the ultimate killing machine of Auschwitz, so Horkheimer and Adorno had already postulated in their critique of technical reason, *The Dialectics of Enlightenment* (1944).

If there are indeed commonalities between the East Prussian ascetic and the French pornographer, then for Lacan at least it is because 'each thinker reveal[ed] hidden truths and limitations in the other, precisely in the non-reciprocity of their relationship' (Reinhard 1999, p. 786). But even if Lacan was right about the seemingly tenuous, if not bizarre, links between *Philosophy in the Boudoir* and the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), a far less tentative set of convergences in the thinking of Sade and Kant suggests itself simply by considering their indebtedness to the intellectual discourses of the European Enlightenment in which

their ideas were firmly anchored, yet at the same time bearing in mind that both participated in a dissenting culture of counter-ethics that stretched the tenets of moral rationalism to their very limits. Airaksinen, while advancing the tantalizing thesis that Sade was a pro-Kantian in his counter-ethics (1995, p. 31), nevertheless fails to enlarge upon the proposition.

Arguably, Kant's philosophical radicalism lies not in his refinement of Enlightenment rationalism and utilitarianism, but rather in the bold steps he undertook to build the foundations of transcendental idealism. And yet his strong commitment to the Enlightenment's libertarian principles, summed up in his much-cited dictum 'Enlightenment is the human being's emergence from self-incurred minority' (Kant 1996a, p. 17), emerges from the whole spectrum of his critical writings after the 1770s. Indeed, Kant may be considered a libertine in the other (older) sense of the term: a freethinker (*Freigeist*). His defence of free will and the dignity of individuals as ends in themselves, his public critique of political absolutism and ecclesiasticism, his advocacy of a liberal legal system, the rule of law as well as the sanctity of private property – all were attuned to Enlightenment tenets. Similarly, Sade resided within the range of Enlightenment practice and was decidedly not its darkest enemy. Indeed, his condemnation of political oppression, his anti-clericalism and uncompromising atheism equally accord with mainstream Enlightenment thought. However, the tolerant spirit of free enquiry and freedom of personal thought intrinsic to Enlightenment logic could quite easily assume, as it did with Sade, a counter-direction to the utilitarian ethics of the Age of Reason. Understandably, then, the Marquis's permissive, libertine counter-ethics set him apart from Kant's ethical rigorism, especially his subversion of the Kantian/Schillerian binary opposites of duty (*Pflicht*) and inclination (*Neigung*). For Sade, following one's natural impulses and drives (*Neigung*) was a duty in itself, no matter how depraved the action or diabolical the consequences.

Kant and Sade also parted company in their approach to the phenomenon of sensationism. One way of explaining their ostensible lack of common ground on this point is to consider briefly their reception of and receptivity to the sensualist philosophy of the British and Scottish empiricists (Hume, Locke) and French materialists (Helvétius, Holbach, La Mettrie). La Mettrie and Holbach were unquestionably Sade's favourite Enlightenment *philosophes*. During his imprisonment he had trouble obtaining a copy of Holbach's controversial *Systeme de la Nature* (1770), but once in possession of the work, he 'plagiarize[d]

from it extensively inserting large hunks of [the] text into his fictional protagonists' polemics against the notions of Soul and Deity' (Du Plessix Gray 2000, p. 273). Significantly, though, such borrowings were reconceptualized, inasmuch as Sade used materialist precepts to construct and narrativize his own theory of 'sensationalist materialism', a term coined by Caroline Warman in her recent book *Sade: From Materialism to Pornography* (2002). Warman focuses on the relation between cognition and experiential sense perception, affording considerably more systematic attention to the Marquis's debt to the French materialists than has been the case in Sade scholarship hitherto.

Warman uses physicality as the starting-point for her recapitulation of the ways in which French materialists, under the influence of Locke's denial of innate or received ideas (*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1690), represented the mechanistic determinism of sensationism, whereby the material body is reduced to 'the site of sensation, perception, idea, imagination, organised thought and knowledge' (Warman 2002, p. 21). Consequently, 'Ideas are true only if they derive from real sensation' (Warman 2002, p. 21). In terms of the ethical ramifications of materialist epistemology, natural moral determinism required individuals to think and act in obedience to their natures. Sade, in a perverse twist of logic, seized on this imperative, but placed it in the service of his libertine ethics by positing, in crass opposition to the Rousseauian trust in the benevolence of Mother Nature, the omnipresence of a cruel, random and destructive force that set clear precedents for humans to commit wanton acts, including murder, with a clear conscience. According to Sade's observations, it was savage beasts whom nature created and extinguished, albeit with amoral indifference, and not prototypal 'noble savages' full of natural goodness and virtue. Kant rejected both Rousseau's sentimental and Sade's nihilistic view of nature. In contrast to the latter, Kant subscribed to a teleological nature, one in which humans rethought nature's significance and worth and evaluated their place within it.

Whereas Sade's epistemological and teleological scepticism was related to the question of whether 'all knowledge is geared to the production of sensation' (Warman 2002, p. 71), Kant's response, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, to the quandary of reconciling Wolff's rational dogmatism, which had overemphasized a priori elements of knowledge, with Hume's empiricism, which had gone too far in reducing all truth to a posteriori experience, was to legitimize intuition as the means of fathoming the Thing in Itself, of enabling the free-willed individual to transcend the prison of phenomenal sense data.

Underpinning Kant's second monumental critique (*of Practical Reason*) is the proposition that the only absolute (*Ding an sich*) human beings are able to access with certainty is the universal moral law. In Kant's legalistic ethics 'respect for the moral law is ... the sole and also the undoubted moral incentive' (1996b, p. 203). Plainly, there was no place for a subversive natural morality that aided and abetted the transgressive rationale of libertinage.

The precise impact of French materialist thinking on the Königsberg professor is unknown, but in any case Kant's dialectic posits that individuals as phenomenal beings may well be causally determined; as noumenal beings, however, they are morally free. For Sade, morality was simply an instrument of subjugation. Indeed, as a classic devotee of the logic of inversion, Sade regarded the notion of moral autonomy as philosophically open to abuse, since it equally presupposes the freedom to turn vice into virtue, or Kant's precept of the good will into a wicked will. In practice, the titular heroine of Sade's novel *Justine, or Good Conduct Well Chastised* (1791) constitutes a prime exemplar of how virtue – largely female chastity in this instance – simply does not pay off in terms of common sense and the pragmatics of survival in an exploitative world. The less morally scrupulous Eugénie (*Philosophy in the Boudoir*) requires little convincing when Dolmancé unleashes his libertine rhetoric on her:

Virtue is but a chimera whose worship consists exclusively in perpetual immolations, in unnumbered rebellions against the temperament's inspirations. Can such impulses be natural? Does Nature recommend what offends her? Eugénie, be not the dupe of those whom you hear called virtuous. (Sade 1965, p. 208)¹

Arguably, Kant engaged in a form of counter-ethics in his decoupling of the age-old nexus between virtue and morality. Not only did he attack the hypocrisy of social mores by decrying the appearance or mere pretence of virtue on the part of self-interested do-gooders. More importantly, in keeping with his consistent privileging of the 'end-in-itself' over the 'means-to-the-end', he subverted philosophically the notion of virtue as the path to achieving happiness, or as the guarantee of reward (whether in this life or the next). Thus he postulates in *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797–98), 'The highest, unconditional end of pure practical reason ... consists in this: that virtue be its own end' (Kant 1996c, p. 526). Unlike Sade, Kant, while radicalizing aspects of the Enlightenment's normative, culturally mediated thinking on

virtue, advanced no sophistry for the natural precedence of vice over virtue in the general scheme of things.²

It is not my intention here to add to the rigorous scholarly debate generated by Lacan's psychoanalytical reading of the Kant/Sade connection in his 1963 *Écrits*. By this I mean primarily the Lacanian hypothesis of an evolutionary link between Kant's categorical imperative, Sade's law of desire and Freud's superego. Rather, I shall return to the issue of sensationism by contrasting, within the historical context of Enlightenment discourse concerning the sacrosanctity (or otherwise) of the body, Kant's ethical and legalistic reading of the sexual(ized) body with Sade's celebration of the instrumentalized, departicularized body as the *jouissance* of transgression, albeit an ultimately joyless 'will-to-*jouissance*' (Lacan). Peter Brooks has a credible explanation for this inevitable joylessness when he posits that Sade's fictional libertines finally 'detest' the initially venerated body 'for its limitations, for its incapacity to go beyond nature' (1993, p. 262).

Kant, for his part, had conceptual difficulties with La Mettrie's interpretation of the human body as a machine, namely with the mechanistic view of the dependency of mental acts on physiological functions. For Kant *homo sapiens* constituted more than a physical machine made up of atomic components, and he moved towards a resolution of the Cartesian mind/body dichotomy by positing the necessity of bodily activity for cognition in general, rather than simply for the reception of external impressions. Kant's insistence on mind regulating and disciplining the body, on reason controlling desire, has important implications for his sexual ethics, a sub-field of moral philosophy thoroughly documented in the *Lectures on Ethics* (1780) and reiterated or reworked in *Metaphysics of Morals*.

Needless to say, Kant was no lexicographer of carnal pleasures. Predictably, then, he preferred to couch his philosophy of male and female sexuality in the clinical language of philosophical and semi-legalistic antinomies such as self-regarding duties and obligations vis-à-vis the moral law. Nor is it unreasonable to suppose that Kant, like Descartes, considered the carnal aspects of human existence harder to fathom than the mental. His own pietistic background and celibate lifestyle rendered him far too coy to taxonomize the sensations associated with human sexuality itself. According to Martin Beutelspacher (1986, p. 103), middle-class sexual morality in Enlightenment Germany, which was decidedly more austere than that practised by the aristocracy and nobility, was such that the demure members of the educated middle class tended to eschew the linguistic register of corporeality. The

same holds true for the trickle of licentious fiction published in Germany during the first half of the eighteenth century. (The libertine convent and boudoir novel of the time is a French literary phenomenon.) Although erotic liaisons may command the storyline, anatomical descriptors (especially of erogenous zones pertaining to both sexes) are avoided, whereas even Rousseau resorts in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) to 'metonymical naming' as a means of designating 'bodily parts in a language [that] remains elegant and proper, while allowing for easy decoding' (Brooks 1993, p. 44).

For Sade the narrativization of sexual fantasies knew no bounds. His voluminous fiction is at once an instruction manual for the sexually uninitiated or inexperienced *and* pornography aimed at sexual arousal. (In the case of *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, the additional *cerebral* stimulation of philosophical discourse punctuates the silences between successive orgies.) Sade's potent phallus is synonymous with the fertility of imagination. As Dolmancé, 'the sodomite out of principle' (Sade 1965, p. 187), who is both subject and object of the Lacanian will-to-*jouissance*, reminds us in *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, 'The imagination is the spur of delights ... is it not by means of the imagination one knows joy?' (Sade 1965, p. 232). By comparison, Kant's fear of *Phantasie* running riot if not kept in check by reason (*Vernunft*) is well documented in his critical writings. For instance, on the subject of human sexuality, Kant declared lust 'unnatural' if a person was 'aroused to it not by a real object but by ... imagining it' (1996c, p. 546).

To a large extent the aggressively phallogocentric libertines populating Sade's clandestine narratives – drawn as they are from across the social ranks – are lonely nihilists who engage in games of exhibitionism and voyeurism in semi-public arenas, thereby flouting the Enlightenment principle of the right to privacy and personal intimacy. Their existential angst is encapsulated by the precept 'I fuck, therefore I am' (Sade 1965, p. 209), a refutation of the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*, yet significantly a clear endorsement of Kantian epistemology, which limits cognition to the experiential realm of sensory perception. In this context there is a sobering logic to the phenomenological argument invoked by the libertine brigand Dubois in *Justine* that 'moral feelings are made to deceive; none but physical sensations are authentic' (Sade 1965, p. 491).

If Sadean sexual morality is defined by the counter-ethics of narcissism and atheism, Kant's is premised on the Leibniz–Wolffian *jouissance* of mutual respect and the ethics of care. Though rooted in misogyny and asceticism, it springs from a paradoxically *humanistic*

concern lest one person exploit another for the sake of pleasure and treat the other as an agent, rather than as an end: '[As] object of the other's appetite, that person is in fact a thing ... and can be misused as such a thing by anybody' (Kant 1997, p. 156). Kant argues further that once the sexual appetite has been satisfied, the object of desire is often cast aside as one would a lemon once it had been sucked dry (1997, p. 156). However, this hypothesis is applied only to casual and extra-marital sex, and not to the union of two persons in matrimony. Indeed, consummated wedlock, according to Kant, not only ensures that both parties do not forfeit their personality or their humanity in the sexual act, but also removes the possibility of the body serving as an instrumentality of self-interested desire. But the logic is surely flawed if coitus within the institution of heterosexual marriage is also conceived of as a means to an end, namely as the biological instrumentality for reproduction. Kant is similarly on shaky ground in his supposition that 'perfect reciprocity' is a 'condition only possible in marriage' (Korsgaard, p. 195), given the aporia of a wife's unequal social, legal and economic station within wedlock, not to mention her subservient role as defined by her ecclesiastic marriage vow.

If Kant believed that a marriage contract (*matrimonium*) could normalize sexual activity, the libertine Duc de Blangis in Sade's novel *The 120 Days of Sodom* (1782–85), a never-ending conveyor-belt of sexual acrobatics, points up a serious loophole in this line of reasoning by privileging the flexibility of marital prostitution: 'I want a wife that my whims may be served, I want her to veil, to cover an infinite number of little secret debauches the cloak of marriage conceals' (1966, p. 192). Even though patriarchy gains the upper hand in Sade's fictions, there are female libertines who openly challenge the conspiratorial domestication of sexuality, not the least being the redoubtable educator Mme de Saint-Ange in *Philosophy in the Boudoir* who instils in her adolescent novice Eugénie de Mistival the notion not of a sexual body per se, but of a sexualized body synonymous with female empowerment: 'Your body is your own, yours alone; in all the world there is but yourself who has the right to enjoy it as you see fit' (1965, p. 221).³ Thus in a manner not unlike the ancient initiation rites administered to Sappho's young aristocratic charges on Lesbos, Eugénie's libertine initiation will allow her to enter marriage as a sexually emancipated partner, not as a doormat. In the novel's interpolated treatise *Yet Another Effort, Frenchmen, if You Would Become Republicans* Sade rejects any notion of women as chattels or as the common property of men, either within or outside of wedlock. The act of possession of a woman,

he maintains in the libertarian spirit of the Revolution, is no less unjust than the possession of slaves (Sade 1965, p. 318). Here Kant remains in essential agreement. While denying the fairer sex equal status (*Mündigkeit*) in the eyes of the civic law, he is loath to reduce women to expendable, interchangeable and indeed marketable objects of promiscuous transactions. Thus prostitution and concubinage are judged anti-social practices detrimental to human welfare, since they entail the exploitation of one or more partners in vice as agents or catalysts of another's self-interest. Kant advocates instead a legally sanctioned lifelong possession of each other's sexual organs within the confines of monogamy (1997, pp. 158ff). On this point the two Enlighteners part company, in so far as Sade held that under natural law no man should presume to 'lay claim to a unique and personal right over a woman' (1965, p. 319).

The vexed issue of what is morally permissible under natural law assumes a sharp focus in Kant's systematic inventorization of sexual vices, contrasting markedly as it does with Sade's blanket approval of such perceived transgressions. Above all in *The 120 Days*, the narrator aims to create an 'encyclopedia of libertinage' (Warman 2002, p. 72) by seeking subjects willing to detail their sexual excesses. Compared to Sade's fanciful wish list of 600 perversions, Kant's critique restricts itself to the unnaturalness of certain types of sexual behaviour, and bypasses the harmfulness of sexual acts if and when such acts are linked to violent intentions and/or physical force, as is the case of rape. Now, Sade's stance represents a departure from normative ethics. He knew that failing to indulge *goûts* and *passions* was likely to be more injurious than living out violent fantasies, but obviously could not explain the perils of repression in the language of modern psychoanalysis. He could, however, speak with some authority on the subject of the material forces at work in the body and the physiological build-up leading to 'discharge' (in both men and women). Even though Sade celebrated the elasticity and resilience of the libertine body (Warman 2002, p. 159), as the 'material hell' (Carter 1979, p. 25) of multitudinous, sex-related aberrations and atrocities catalogued in the final book of *The 120 Days* clearly attests, the enacting of sadomasochistic fantasies (to apply retrospective sexological terminology) has its own sobering moral problematic. In other words, there is a sense in which *The 120 Days* undoes itself in its own terms, if it is read as a self-corrective to the excessive transgression of common decency, as a realization of the terrible consequences of what Sade likes to call his 'logic'. No doubt Kant would have interpreted the message of the book

as such. To the post-Holocaust age it vindicates the dangers inherent in turning the will-to-*jouissance* into a universal (moral) law.

The sexual practices Kant equates with *crimina carnis contra naturam* – and they include masturbation, homosexuality, sodomy, pederasty, bestiality and even intercourse during pregnancy – are deemed unnatural, not because they are in contravention of scriptural teaching (Thomas Aquinas alludes repeatedly to the *sins* of self-abuse), but because they are not seen to benefit the human species. A case in point is onanism, which, in Kant's own words, is contrary 'to the ends of humanity, and conflicts, even with animal nature' (1997, p. 161). Kant is enunciating here a postulate of practical reason – the 'reasonableness', if you like, of mankind's procreative survival. It follows that his objections to homosexuality and lesbianism derive from the same set of presuppositions. 'Intercourse *sexus homogeneii* ... also runs counter to the ends of humanity, for the end of humanity in regard to this impulse is to preserve the species without forfeiture of the person' (1997, p. 161). One wonders how Kant might have responded philosophically and ethically to our Brave New World of surrogacy within same-sex marriage. Sade would undoubtedly have approached the latter-day phenomenon from a different angle, given his tendency to equate vaginal intercourse with a form of self-castration.

Kant had a good deal to say about the responsible conservation of fluids from the orifices of the human anatomy. Yet much of the discussion pertaining directly to sexual conduct borders on the idiosyncratic. Not that Kant made any emphatic reference to the body as a sacred vessel. Rather, every lost drop of bodily juice, he maintained, was detrimental to health because such juices were valuable components of the life force itself. Kissing, for example, should be avoided at all costs, to obviate the unnecessary discharge of saliva. Moreover, walking at a slow pace during the heat of summer is recommended as a way of minimizing the excretions from sweat pores. Ejaculate shortened a male's life-span, so the inveterate Königsberg bachelor insisted unscientifically at the age of 74 in a lengthy polemical tract entitled *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798): 'Unmarried or (recently widowed) elderly men retain a youthful appearance for considerably longer than married ones' (1979, p. 36). Similarly, in *On Pedagogics* (1803), published in the year prior to his death, he counselled adolescents on the dangers of masturbation as a contributor to premature ageing and the impairment of the mental faculty (1803, p. 140). Not unlike the ancient sage Diogenes Laertius, he conflated the continuous release of sperm with eventual physiological and neurological impairment, but stopped short of prognosticating

masturbatory derangement. (On the subject of wasted sperm through fellatio and coitus interruptus, Kant remained silent.) Clearly though, Kant was not in the business of prescribing a range of physical, psychological, pseudo-medical and hygiene-motivated deterrents to male self-gratification, such as the panaceas suggested by the formidable German enlightener S.G. Vogel under the influence of Tissot's contentious work *L'Onanisme ou dissertation physique sur les maladies produites par la masturbation* (*Onanism, or a Physical Dissertation on the Illnesses Produced by Masturbation*) (1760). To the libertine debauchees of Sadean fiction nothing could have appeared more absurd than the public hysteria surrounding the non-reproductive spillage of semen. As Dubois explains to Thérèse in order to counter her objections to sodomy: 'Once it is demonstrated that ... situating this semen in our loins is by no means enough to warrant supposing that Nature's purpose is to have all of it employed for reproduction, what then does it matter ...?' (Sade 1965, p. 489). Sade makes an identical claim in *Yet another Effort*, pleading in the same context for the decriminalization of sodomy (1965, p. 326). And Dolmancé even impresses on his vulnerable apprentice-in-vice the sacrosanctity of his emissions: 'One single drop of fuck shed from this member, Eugenie, is more precious to me than the most sublime deeds of a virtue I scorn' (1965, p. 209). In short, the Sadean stance identifies in the biological argument for procreation only one aspect of nature. The other is the imponderable of sexual passion, whose direction is not predetermined by the reproductive organs themselves (Glaser, 2000b, p. 121).

When it comes to sexual relations between parents and their children, Kant desists from moral judgementalism. He simply raises legalistic and ethico-social objections to the practice, not the least being its violation of parental guardianship (*Vormundschaft*), the duty of trust and the very fabric of family life. Furthermore, the equality of respect required for 'reciprocity' is deemed unattainable in this form of sexual engagement. On the other hand, Kant remains equivocal about incestuous sexual relations between siblings, which he considers not to be categorically forbidden by nature (1997, p. 159). Dolmancé, in dialogue with Eugenie, puts up a compelling historical case for the condoning of incest: 'How, after the vast afflictions our planet sometime knew ... was the human species otherwise able to perpetuate itself, if not through incest?' (Sade 1965, p. 236). His further contention, 'Everywhere you will detect incest authorized, considered a wise law and proper to cement familial ties' (1965, p. 236), concurs with the relativistic theories of ethno-cultural difference espoused by

Enlightenment thinkers such as Montesquieu and Herder, who extrapolated the cultural specificity of sexual mores from their observations of other races and climates.⁴

To sum up: Kant's 'respect' principle, the deference due to Others by virtue of their moral freedom and worth as ends-in-themselves, is far removed from the egocentricity of Sadean desire, which reduces Others to 'dispensable instruments to be ruthlessly exploited' (Žižek 1998, p. 15). For Sade the libertine body, reconceptualized by Enlightenment science and philosophy as a machine, precluded *per definitionem* the application of moral parameters to its very functionality. The orgiastic thrill of disposing over and/or of an assembly-line of well-oiled machines in *The 120 Days* perverts even the radicalism of La Mettrie, who never disputed the capacity of *l'homme machine* to recognize right and wrong (Glaser 2000a, p. 135).⁵ Moreover, not the preservation of the species is uppermost in the minds of Sade's libertine fornicators; rather, the spermal lava flow is channelled towards existential self-preservation as a counterpoint to nature's negation of being. Kant could still speak of sexual love, as long as it was conducive to mutual wellbeing. Sadean practitioners of sodomy and straight sex do not copulate and 'discharge' within love relationships, but emulate the cold aloofness of nature. Orgasm fails to bond. No psychic energies are released, only seminal fluid.

Historically, Kantian sexual ethics, it seems to me, occupies the middle ground between a Judaic-Christian genital-centred sexuality linked almost exclusively to biological reproduction and a contemporary psychosocial view of sexuality concerned more with the quality of partnership relations. The bridge to a more modern evaluation of human sexuality is to be found in Kant's admission that 'human sexual desire is as much a function of reason and human society as of our biological nature' (Wood 1999, p. 391). Yet this insight is sadly compromised by his antediluvian belief that our sexuality embarrasses us because it reminds us of our similarity to irrational animals (Wood 1999, p. 391), a belief commensurate with the Enlightenment's positioning of the human race at the pinnacle of creation by virtue of its capacity to reason. Sade, of course, is no less ardent a champion of *ratio* as the control mechanism of human behaviour. The choreographed sexual ballets of *The 120 Days*, elucidated so ingeniously by Cryle (1994, pp. 120–46), bear witness to the handiwork of ordered, if you like, totalitarian minds, even though the enactment of these orgies of sex and crime unleashes irrationalism and chaos.

Kantian theories of sexual relations are snugly embedded in moral and legal philosophy. They do not venture beyond heterosexual marriage 'as the only institution capable of supporting the principle of respect for the other' (Caygill 1995, p. 367). Whereas the categorical imperative demands that in a civilized society the freedom of the individual be circumscribed by the freedoms others have a right to enjoy, Sadean libertine sexuality is decidedly Fichtean in its defence of the absolute sovereignty of the individual, as well as anarchistic in its subversion of the social contract, Rousseauian or otherwise. At the same time, it demonstrates a heavy orientation towards what we would now call the psychopathological, insofar as it is not predicated on, to quote Kant, objective laws of what we ought to do, but on that which we 'want to do' (1997, p. 66). In identifying eroticism as the prime mover of human behaviour, Sade came close to Freud's libidinal pan-sexuality. But that is another story.

In the light of the above, it would seem that Lacan misread the progression from Kant to Sade. Arguably, the divine Marquis's *loi du désir* or will-to-*jouissance* may correlate with Freud's superego, but it is equally the counterweight to Kantian universal moral law (*sollen*).

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Notes

- 1 Francine Du Plessix Gray argues with reference to the notion of nature's cruelty reiterated in *Justine* that, as in all Sade's fictions, 'the author is overly eager to ... expose the vacuity of Enlightenment optimism' (2000, p. 322).
- 2 As early as 1750 La Mettrie had noted that, in the absence of a consensus on moral standards, criminals might be justified in deeming themselves just as happy as the virtuous. Nature could not justify virtue. On this point, see Jenkins (1989, p. 122).
- 3 The physicality of the eighteenth-century desacralized body, which allows one to do with it whatever one chooses, contrasts markedly with the mysticism of the medieval body.
- 4 Michel Delon reminds us of how Sade's libertines explore the four corners of the earth for sexual practices that justify their own 'perversen Praktiken' (2000, p. 187).
- 5 Horst-Albert Glaser (2000a, p. 136) equates La Mettrie's 'loi naturelle' with Kant's 'Sittengesetz' inasmuch as the former preempts the wording of the Kantian definition of the categorical imperative.

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