

Reading the Lack of the Body: The Writing of the Marquis de Sade

Kathy Acker

I am using this essay to do two things. To read a short passage from *Philosophy in the Bedroom* by the Marquis de Sade. To read one of his tales.

The more that I write my own novels, the more it seems to me that to write is to read.

I. TO WRITE IN ORDER TO LEAD THE READER INTO A LABYRINTH FROM WHICH THE READER CANNOT EMERGE WITHOUT DESTROYING THE WORLD.

On January 12th 1794, the Marquis de Sade was taken from the Madelonnettes prison to his home so that he could be present at the examination of his papers. The next day, he was transferred to the Carmelite convent on the rue de Vaugirard. Here, he spent a week with six other prisoners, all of whom had fever which was malignant, two of whom died during that week. De Sade was then marched to Saint Lazare, a hostel which had once been a lepers' home and was now a prison.

On July 28 of the same year, Maximilien Robespierre was executed.

In October of the same year, de Sade was again liberated from his jail.

In 1795, a work in two slender volumes entitled *Philosophy In the Bedroom* (*La Philosophie Dans le Boudoir*),¹ a 'Posthumous work of the Author of *Justine*',² appeared in London.

The publication of these volumes boosted the sale of the novel.

The Purpose of Fiction

Philosophy In the Bedroom consists of seven dialogues. Two of the four speakers are typical Sadean monsters, a Madame de Saint-Ange who in twelve years of marriage has slept with 12,000 men³ and Dolmancé, 'the most corrupt and dangerous of men'. The third, the Chevalier de Mirvel, not quite as libertine as his sister, Madame de Saint-Ange, but then he is a man who has heterosexual leanings, nonetheless willingly assists the others in their seduction of the fourth speaker, a fifteen-year-old virgin, Eugénie de Mistival. *Seduction*, as in *corruption*. In the Sadean universe, these two acts are equivalent.

By the end of the seventh dialogue, Eugénie had been seduced. In fact it took no time at all, ten or twelve pages, for

the scoundrelly adults to rob the poor child of her virginity, Sade-style, in the ass. But true virginity, for the Marquis, is not physical. It takes the monsters of corruption more than 150 more pages to teach Eugénie that she can do whatever she pleases: fuck and get fucked in every possible way, blaspheme God, ...disobey, fuck and sew up her mother's cunt to ensure that her mother will no longer interfere in Eugénie's affairs.

The surface purpose, then, of the long and often tedious arguments that occupy most of *Philosophy* is the corruption of Eugénie. De Sade's deeper purpose in penning these dialogues could not have been the seduction of a fictional fifteen-year-old. Of a virgin who despises virginity and, even more, her mother - always a sign in the Sadean universe of a propensity for freedom.

Most probably Eugénie was a fictional representation of de Sade's sister-in-law, Lady Anne Prospère de Launay. Though married to the older sister, de Sade had fallen violently in love with Anne; she returned his passion. De Sade's mother-in-law, Lady Montreuil, angered at least by the sexual delights of these two, did all that she could and succeeded in procuring de Sade's legal confinement.

If the authorial purpose in the writing of *Philosophy* was revenge, if de Sade's purpose was to sew together, fictionally, his mother-in-law's lips, all of her lips, it was poor revenge at best. In 1781, Mademoiselle de Launay died unmarried. De Sade had not seen her since his imprisonment in Vincennes. The Marquis did experience a strange revenge against his mother-in-law. In August 1793, out of jail, he wrote, 'I am broken, done in, spitting blood. I told you I was président of my section; my tenure has been so stormy that I am exhausted. (...) During my presidency I had the Montreuil's put on the liste épuratoire (for pardon). If I said a word they were lost. I kept my peace. I have had my revenge'.⁴

For a man as furious as de Sade, writing must be more than fictional revenge. Writing must break through the representational or fictional mirror and be equal in force to the horror experienced in daily life. Certainly the dialogues of *Philosophy* are seductions. But seductions of whom? Why did de Sade, born into the upper classes and then pent up in prisons not directly of his own making, want to use writing only to seduce?

Women in the World of Men

Towards the end of the third dialogue in *Philosophy In the Bedroom*, Eugénie, no longer a virgin in a number of ways, admits to her female teacher that the most 'certain impulse' in her heart, note that she does not say 'deepest', is to kill her mother. Eugénie is admitting to nothing: almost as soon as she met Dolmancé and Madame de Saint-Ange, she stated, still virginal, that she loathed her mother. Dolmancé and Saint-Ange had no liking for theirs. Now, the girl and the woman talk about the position of women in society.

Dolmancé interrupts with the man's point-of-view. He informs his pupil that a woman in this society has but two choices: to whore or to wife.

Due to her class background, Eugénie is not destined for prostitution, Dolmancé continues, so she must consider her future position as a wife. If she is to survive, a wife must serve her husband. Husbands know three sexual positions: 'sodomy, sacrilegious fancies, and penchants to cruelty'. The wife's positions with regard to her husband's desires are gentleness, compliancy, and agreeableness.

Dolmancé's opinion is that, in this society, women must serve men in order to survive. No wonder that the women who want more than this, who want their freedom, hate their mothers. In de Sade's texts, mothers are prudes, haters of their own bodies, and religious fanatics, for they are obedient to the tenets of a patriarchal society. The daughter who does not reject her mother interiorizes prison.

The daughter who rejects her mother, such as Madame de Saint-Ange, such as Eugénie, finds herself in an unbearable position. In the patriarchal society, for women freedom is untenable. As regards Eugénie's freedom to kill her mother, Dolmancé argues, she is free to do this, she is free to do any act, as long as she employs guile and deceit.

A woman who lives in a patriarchal society can have power, control, and pleasure only when she is hypocritical and deceitful. With this statement of Dolmancé's, de Sade has erected, or laid down, once more, the foundations of the labyrinth of logic.

Now, the maze begins to be built. Dolmancé continues: Women are free to choose to act like men. Women can 'transform (...) themselves into men by choosing to engage in sodomy'. In sodomy, the most delicious position is the passive one. In other words, a woman can know freedom by choosing to counterfeit a man who selects the bottom power position. Here is one example of deceit.

'(...) 'Tis a good idea', Dolmancé continues to instruct his student in her search for power and pleasure, 'to have the breach open always (...)'. For her to remain an open hole.

Dolmancé may be seducing the seduced; that is not the purpose of this argument. Clearly de Sade is not. In this and other dialogues, de Sade is blindfolding his reader. The reader believes that she or he knows how to think, how to think logically, how to know; the reader believes that she or he can know. The cogito. De Sade is leading this naive reader into the loss of belief in the capability of such knowledge, into the loss of sense. And leaving the reader in her or his lost-ness.

It is here in this text that de Sade abandons the male gaze.

Abortion and Logic

A woman talks to a woman about the position of women in a male-determined society; Madame de Saint-Ange and Eugénie continue the discussion of women, freedom, and sodomy. A woman invariably gives up any hope of freedom, mentions the older woman, as soon as she has a child. A woman who wants to be free, above all, must avoid pregnancy.

The discussion about female identity in society narrows down to the problem of abortion. Women's freedom, Saint-Ange says, depends upon her ability to stop pregnancy.

De Sade argues in order to seduce.

These days, a typical pro-choice liberal will say that women must have the right and, therefore, the opportunity to control their own bodies and make their own moral choices. Eugénie sidesteps all liberalism; she asks whether it is morally permissible to abort a child who is just about to be born.

Madame de Saint-Ange picks up this ball and runs home. Home, for de Sade, is located in hell. She replies that abortion is equivalent to murder and that every woman has the right to murder her own child. 'Were it in the world, we should have the right to destroy it'.

Dolmancé bursts into the female gaze, but does not bust it up, by bringing up the subject of God: That 'right is natural (...) it is incontestable'. Only a belief in God, rather than in Nature, could lead a human to value an embryo more than herself.

Note Dolmancé's mention of or call to Nature. In the patriarchal society, there are no women; there are only victims and male substitutes. And men. Nature is female because, as is the case with women, she does not exist. She does not have existence apart from that gaze which is always male or male-defined. Luce Irigaray on the subject of the possible nature of Nature within the patriarchal structure: 'Of course what matters is not the existence of an object - *as such it is indifferent* - but the simple effect of a representation upon the subject, its reflection, that is, in the imagination of a man'.⁵

De Sade is not presenting nor has he any interest in presenting a pro-choice argument. He has as little interest in abortion as he has in Nature, in the nature of Nature. In the nature of women. De Sade is talking about abortion in order to seduce us, his readers, into the labyrinth where nothing matters because, there, nothing can matter. Nothing can mean anything, for all is confusion. De Sade is a patriarch who hates patriarchy and has nowhere else to go. And, jail-rat that he is, raging in his cage or maze, he uses text to overthrow our virginities, virginities not born from the body but from the logos; he seduces us through writing into overthrowing our very Cartesian selves. Neither male nor female seem to be left...

II. READING A TALE BY DE SADE: WRITING OR READING WHOSE ONLY PURPOSE IS TO DESTROY ITSELF.

'(...) The traces of my tomb will disappear from the surface of the earth as I hope my memory will vanish from the memory of men'.⁶

- The Marquis de Sade

The Body

In 1778, de Sade projected a collection of stories entitled *Contes et Fabliaux de Dixhuitième Siècle Par un Troubadour Provençal*. The book would consist of thirty stories; tragedy would alternate with comedy.

The collection never appeared. In 1800, eleven of the tragic and dramatic tales were published in four small volumes under the title of *Les Crimes de l'Amour*.

The Garden of Logos

One of these crimes, named *Florville and Courval, or the Works of Fate*, begins as a fairy tale: good exists; evil exists; good is the opposite of evil. A certain Monsieur de Courval is a good man because he is sexually strict or pure. His former wife was a bad woman because she liked to have sex and was libertine.

Within the fairy tale genre lie the assumptions that its readers, if not the characters within the fiction, are capable of making moral distinctions and that morality is dualistic.

This fairy tale world borders on being mechanical: M. de Courval is good; therefore he is seeking out the good; therefore he is searching for a good wife. (A new wife.) Through the help of a friend, he finds a wife-candidate who seems to qualify as good. Now the marriage or the end of the fairy tale should take place, but it doesn't.

The site of the fairy tale turns into that of the law court. The language of the fairy tale turns into that of the law court.

Behind every fairy tale lies the law. Since the wife-candidate is an orphan, her class is unknown. Therefore, her moral status and, so, her identity is unclear.

M. de Courval must decide whether or not the woman is good enough to marry. Since he is rich, male, and nineteen years older than her, he possesses all the attributes of a judge; he ought to be able to judge her moral worth. If she is judged good, the law court will turn into the place of marriage. If not, the characters and the reader will find themselves in the site of tragedy.

The Woman's Tale/Her Version of the Garden of Logos

The wife-candidate, a certain Mademoiselle Florville, announces that she will tell a tale, her tale, so that the older, rich man will be able to judge her properly. She adds that she is presenting Courval with this autobiography to convince him not to marry her. In this morally-defined society, her desire is irrational; here is a hole, the first in the mechanistic movement of the ex-fairy tale, of the morality-determined cause-and-effect. In de Sade's texts, every lapse of logic or hole announces the site of a labyrinth. Every labyrinth is a machine whose purpose is to unveil chaos.

Remember: in de Sade's texts, stories exist for the purpose of seduction.

De Sade constructs his labyrinths out of mirrors. Mademoiselle de Florville's story, in its beginnings, mirrors the narrative in which it is located. Just as there were two poles, good and evil, or the husband and his ex-wife, in the outside story, here the reader, through Mademoiselle de Florville, meets Madame de Lérince whose soul is beautiful (and, presumably, whose body does not exist) and Madame de Verquin in whom 'frivolity, the taste of pleasure, and independence' reign supreme. Both these women are kin to M. de Saint-Prât, Florville's substitute father. In the larger tale, since Florville was an orphan, she was situated between the poles of good and evil; in this story within a story, the two older women fight for control over the site of Florville's body.

This story within a story begins with Florville, the untouched body. So that no one will suspect him in all his goodness of harbouring secret incestuous intentions, her guardian, M. de Saint-Prât, sends her off to his sister, Madame de Verquin.

His act, whose intention seems good, leads to evil. In its beginnings, the female's garden of logos is morally muddy. Madame de Verquin introduces Florville to her 'handiwork', a youth named Senneval. Senneval proceeds to seduce the young girl, impregnate her, refuse to marry her, abandon her. Eugénie, now quite muddied, bears a son whom Senneval removes from her.

Has Eugénie become evil? Not yet, judges her substitute-father, as M. de Courval will judge, when Eugénie returns to him. He tries to show her that she can still return to the good or proper path of the garden: 'Happiness', declares M. de Saint-Prât, 'is to be found solely in the exercise of virtue (...). All the apostles of crime are but miserable, desperate creatures'. He adds that society is vitally interested in seeing good multiply and flourish.

Georges Bataille in his *Literature and Evil*, whose sixth essay is devoted to the work of de Sade, replies that society's only good is its own survival, that 'society is governed by its will to survive'.⁷

The fight between good and evil for the body of Florville is in full sway. In order to ensure that she becomes good, M. de Saint-Prât now sends her off to Madame de Lérince. At the same time, 'a secret feeling' which is drawing her 'ineluctably toward the site of so many past pleasures' keeps the young mother in touch with Madame de Verquin.

Once penetrated, the body or garden cannot forget the pleasure that stemmed from its penetration.

That garden whose paths are still clearly labeled *good* and *evil* though they touch and cross each other will now become a maze. Knowledge with regard to the ability to make moral distinctions, thus the capability for judgement, disappears. A catastrophe, 'a tale so cruel and bitter it breaks my heart' takes place. Madame de Lérince, this good woman, introduces

Florville who is now 34 years old, no longer innocent, to a boy half her age. The Chevalier de Saint-Ange. A dangerous situation for a woman. His origins, like Florville's, are unknown; unknown, the state of his morality.

The second narrative mirror: When Saint-Ange is in the act of raping Florville, she believes that her sexual past with Sennele is repeating itself. In order to shatter the mirror *whose name is abandonment and pain*, she kills this lover/rapist with a pair of scissors. As soon as Florville recognises that she has murdered the boy, she cries, 'Oh you! Whose only crime was to love me overmuch (...)'.
(...)

This second narrative mirror does not reiterate and aid sight or understanding: it only blurs and confuses. Florville's moral status is now not confused, but unfathomable. Was she right or wrong to kill? Was Saint-Ange driven by passion or by unjustifiable aggression and violence? Why did she murder Saint-Ange? Was she motivated by her memory of the past, by her fear of again yielding to sexual desire? Did she murder because she too blindly obeyed the moral dictates of her society, because she too deeply feared that she might not be good? In this case of rape and of murder, who is good and who is evil? In this case, what is the good and of what does evil consist?

What is certain is that with the end of the first half of Florville's autobiography, de Sade fully abandons the languages of the fairy tale and of the cold, precise narrative of the law court. The formal verbal garden of morality whose arrangement is that of the logos has decayed; all that is left is the wilderness, almost the chaos and violence, of passion. Florville began to speak this language, this language whose narrative irrationality guides, when she admitted that something in her, something 'secret', unfathomable or unspeakable, was attracting her to Madame de Verquin, to the home of Madame de Verquin. As soon as she has scissored Saint-Ange, she speaks nothing but this language: '(...) My feelings for you were perhaps far superior to those of the tender love which burned in your heart', Florville confesses to the corpse of her rapist who or which is also the corpse of her moral worth.

The first half of the woman's story ends in this: In confusion crossing over into chaos. In the overthrow of moral distinctions.

Such was Florville's purpose when she began to talk, to tell her tale, to her judge.

Interlude

Yet Courval has not been overthrown. Not yet overthrown to himself. He does not yet sit in horror: he still believes that he can judge another person. A woman. He informs Florville, with a return to the language of the law court, that because the murder was not premeditated, she is innocent of that murder, therefore he wants to marry her.

The Destruction, Through the Female Gaze, of the Male World

Florville may have caused the garden of logos to wither away, but since she has not destroyed Courval, her judge or husband-to-be, she continues her tale.

Remember: in de Sade's texts, stories exist for the purpose of seduction.

M. de Courval has just informed Florville that her rape by and murder of Saint-Ange does not matter; now, within this story-within-a-story, M. de Saint-Prât and Madame de Lérince who are also good tell Florville the same thing. They hide her murder from the world.

This third narrative mirror in which the good aid and abet a murderer announces the reality of dream.

The language of passion; now, narrative controlled by dream. Who needs Freud when de Sade's around? The world of logos is in the process of dying; now there is dream; soon death will reign through the garden of identic terror.

Then, there shall be no more judgement, no more the law courts of the world.

Florville dreams a dream in which Senneval shows her two corpses. One is the corpse of the past, male. It or he is Saint-Ange. The second is the corpse of the future, female. She is strange, as yet unnamed.

After the dream is over, the world of death begins. Death upon death will litter the remainder of Florville's autobiography, of her seduction of her listener, of her destruction of his male gaze.

The death of Madame de Verquin. Good and evil have reversed themselves. In this world. The evil woman dies beautifully. Since she lived through and for the body, since she accepted materiality and its laws, the swing and sway of change and of chance, Madame de Verquin accepts her imminent death and dies with 'courage and reason'. For she does not attempt to cling to possessing, to use possessions to rigidify identity: she wills all of her possessions to be flung, after her death, to whomever according to the dictates of the lottery.

Second, the death of a strange and older woman. Florville is responsible for sealing this 'woman's doom'. Seemingly by chance, for Florville does not recognise the stranger, for Florville understands none of what she sees nor what is happening. This is the realm, beyond good and evil, of chance.

Before she is executed thanks to the words but not the will of the narrator, the stranger tells Florville that she had dreamed a dream about Florville before she ever met Florville. Dreams are true in the realm beyond good and evil. The stranger dreamed that Florville was with her son and a scaffold. Now, we, the readers, understand none of what we are reading.

The third female death is of Madame de Lérince. Back in the world where evil is good, and good, evil, this most saintly of women dies miserably, stuffed like a potato with remorse and regret. 'Madame de Lérince's fears are virtue's anxiety and concern'. The universe of judgement and of the law is not only the one in which good is evil, evil, good, but is the place where virtue creates fear. Fear, the illusion that gives birth to all other illusions. Fear of the past returning and the fear of not being virtuous once drove Florville to murder Saint-Ange with a sewing tool.

Florville's autobiography ends here, in death.

Interlude

Yet Courval is still alive and still believes that he can judge Florville and thus marry her.

Destruction, By the Male Gaze, of the World of Men: Oedipus Inverted

As in *Oedipus Rex*, a stranger now enters and tells his tale:

He identifies himself as one of the two children born to Courval and his first wife, the son who was as debauched as his mother. Estranged from his father, he is now strange to his father.

He next identifies himself as the Senneval who seduced Florville, then spirited away the male fruit of that seduction.

That male fruit, when he grew up, raped and was murdered by his own mother, Florville. Senneval further explains that the older woman whom Florville had not recognised and whom Florville's testimony had condemned to execution was Courval's first wife. Senneval's younger sister did not die as Courval had believed; her name is Florville.

The stranger has not told his tale to seduce Florville, but rather to instruct her who she is. For the first time in her life, she is no longer an orphan. For the first time in her life, she knows that she did not will yet caused her mother's death, slept with her brother, murdered her brother's and her son, and might marry her father. For the first time in her life, Florville has been given an identity card into the world of human and the name on that identity card is *unbearable*.

The fourth narrative mirror: As the stranger was once strange to his listeners, Florville was strange to herself. No longer strange to herself, her knowledge, which is always self-knowledge, is not bearable. In the same way, de Sade was once strange to us, his readers. De Sade, the monster. Strangers and monsters: outsiders. As the stranger told Florville his tale and strangeness was disappeared into the chaos of self-knowledge, so de Sade was telling his tale and now is no longer strange. 'For I am de Sade; I am that monster.'

Whose name is human.

The Body, Disappeared

Oedipus was able to deal with his knowledge of the self whose logos is chaos by casting out his own eyes. *Casting* as in *castrating*. Florville cannot castrate herself: at the end of 'Courval and Florville' when there are no tales left to tell, Florville must commit suicide and does. This is de Sade's tale: the non-tale, the tale that does not exist. De Sade, also masochistic, bound up, pent and spent in prison, had no tale left and nowhere to go.

For Florville and for de Sade, there is only the world in which this tale began, the world dominated by men, the world of male language, prison.

Regard the Oedipal myth: The Law of the State forbids, above all, the murder of its King. At the same time, since no human can be immortal, the real survival of the state depends upon that very death and the replacement of the King. The Law protects, by repressing, and all repression is also the repression of knowing, the division between the symbol, the immortal Head, and the symbolised, the human who, though king, is himself subject to the laws of materiality, especially of sexuality and of death.

As soon as Oedipus answers the Sphinx's question correctly, he has access to the symbolised or the verboten: to the body and sexuality of his mother. The Law is not patriarchal because it denies the existence, even the power, of women: after all, every King has His Queen. The Law is patriarchal because it denies the bodies, the sexualities of women. In patriarchy, there is no menstrual blood.

De Sade has nowhere to go because, for him, there are no actual women. In his texts, women are either victims or substitute-men. Hating the society based on centralised power (the immortal King), de Sade most often chose to see through the female gaze, but this female gaze is still the gaze, that act of consciousness that must dominate, therefore define, all it sees. The gaze - which, though seemingly female, is always male - is that sight whose visual correspondent is the mirror. In the mirror, one only sees oneself. Since there are no women, women with bodies, for de Sade, he cannot escape the

labyrinth of mirrors and become all that the law has repressed.

When the mirrors break, *to see is to become*.

De Sade did not cast out his eyes (castrate himself). Rather, he shattered mirror after mirror; behind every mirror stood another mirror; behind all mirrors, nothingness sits. De Sade wrote in order to seduce us, by means of his labyrinths of mirrors, into nothingness.

De Sade wanted to show or to teach us who we are; he wanted for us to learn to want to not exist. This is nothingness. He wanted his fictional structures to be mirrors of the world or that horror from which, for him, there was no escape: '(...) The traces of my tomb will disappear from the surface of the earth as I hope my memory will vanish from the memory of men'.⁸

De Sade, born a patriarch, understood patriarchy and raged against the walls of that labyrinth.

NOTES

1. Since I am reading from the English translation, I shall refer to texts by their standard English titles.
2. Gilbert Lély, *The Marquis de Sade, A Biography*, trans. by Alec Brown (New York: Grove Press, 1962), p.391.
3. Note de Sade's realistic tendencies.
4. Letter from de Sade to Gaufridy, quoted in Geoffrey Gorer, *The Life and Ideas of the Marquis de Sade* (London: Panther Books, 1964), p.52.
5. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. by Gillian C. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p.207.
6. De Sade quoted by Apollinaire quoted by Georges Bataille in his *Literature and Evil*, trans. by Alastair Hamilton (New York: Urizen Books, 1973), p.89.
7. Bataille, p.6.
8. Bataille, p.89.

CONTRIBUTORS

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The Divine Sade



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The Divine Sade, the first compilation of essays on the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814) published in Great Britain, is a ground breaking and innovative volume.

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Seven Mirrors of Sade: Sex, Death, CAPITAL
and the Language of Monsters

Philippe Sollers

Sade Contra the Supreme Being