



Re-assessing the Marquis de Sade

Normalising the abnormal

Alex Barber

Sade's novels are filled with repetitious and seemingly endless, almost tedious, descriptions of violence, torture and penetration. One possible explanation of this repetitiveness is that Sade was trying to normalise the abnormal by making it familiar. Another is just that he was writing for his own day to day amusement. Timo and Angelica suggest other factors may have been at work. I asked them if it would be fair to describe Sade's characters as two dimensional or cardboard figures.

Timo

It's a good description and that's his strategy, later his strategy. Repetition, he repeats horrible things so that when the reader reads them again and again and again, the reader is torturing himself by reading the books! The books are like torture instruments, and you must be a kind of masochist to read these books. That's why most people never read them, they are unreadable books. And the characters are very, very cardboard as you said, they are not real human beings, they are some kind of stereotypes and the adventures are always, they are not believable at all. You don't really think that they could be doing that.

Angelica

I think what he's doing in that respect is rather similar to what Voltaire did in his short stories, where the characters are ciphers. They're two dimensional, and they're two dimensional because they're meant to be demonstrative rather than people in whom we can emotionally involve ourselves. Sade doesn't want that, I mean the whole notion of what we understand by sadism precludes that kind of emotional involvement.

Alex Barber

Emotional involvement needed to be avoided because it was fundamental to the spiritual and virtuous existence that Sade wanted to shatter. Here, you'll hear the aristocrat Noirceuil explaining to Juliette what constitutes genuine crime as opposed to what different societies regard as criminal. His conclusion is that nothing is a crime in the stronger sense, except perhaps failing to follow natural urges.

Noirceuil

'Crime.' The term is applied to any violation of what in the human community goes under the name of law; whence we have but one more arbitrary and meaningless work; for laws are relative, depending upon customs, upon considerations varying according to time and place; they are utterly different every few hundred miles, and so it is that were I to take ship or board the mail-coach I could, for having performed one and the same deed, find myself condemned to death on Sunday morning in Paris and a public hero on Saturday of the same week in some land on the frontiers of Asia or on the coasts of Africa.

To find out whether something be truly criminal or not one must first find out what harm it can do to Nature; for one can rationally describe as a crime only that which might conflict with her laws. Nature being constant, this crime must hence be uniform; the deed must prove to be of some sort or other that all the races and nations of the earth hold it in equal and tremendous horror, and the loathing it inspires must be as universal in man as his desire to satisfy his elementary needs; well, of this species of deed there is not one that exists, that which unto us has the most atrocious and execrable aspect has been a cornerstone to ethics elsewhere.

Crime, thus, in not in any sense real, there is thus, veritably, no crime, no thinkable way or means for outraging a Nature in ceaseless flux and action, eternally so superior to us as, from where aloft she superintends the general order, to be infinitely above worrying about us or what we do. There is no act, however awful, however atrocious, however infamous you like

or can imagine it, which we cannot perform every time we sense the urge, since Nature puts the idea in our heads. For our usages, our religions, our manners and customs may easily and indeed must perforce deceive us, whilst we shall certainly never be misled by the voice of Nature.

Alex Barber

For all that Sade says, cross cultural differences in values could simply be different manifestations of a common set of moral principles. Yet here, he seems willing to trust very questionable anthropological reports just because they favour his own position.

Man

To every prisoner in Brazil destined to be executed, a woman is given. He takes his pleasure with her, and the same woman whom he sometimes impregnates, assists in hacking him to pieces and participates at the meal that is made of his flesh. St Jerome reports that in the course of his travels, he saw the Scots with great relish consume the buttocks of young shepherds....

Alex Barber

Sade failed to rule out the possibility that emotions such as love or the desire to live a virtuous existence are wholly natural urges. He's also not very systematic in his materialism. In general he seems to be either unwilling or unable to defend his more idiosyncratic claims effectively – he's not much of a philosopher. His original views tend to be at best, interesting rather than plausible or well defended. The next extract from Juliette has the Pope defending a kind of materialist theology in which Nature makes moral demands on us.

Pope

Man thus has no relationship to Nature, nor Nature to man. Nature cannot bind man by any law, man is in no way dependent upon Nature, neither is answerable to the other, they cannot either harm or help each other. One has produced involuntarily - hence has no real relationship to her product, the other is involuntarily produced - hence has no real relationship to his producer. Once cast, man has nothing further to do with Nature; once Nature has cast him, her control over man ends. He is under the control of his own laws, laws that are inherent in him.

With his casting man receives a direct and specific system of laws by which he must abide, under which he must proceed ever after. These laws are those of his personal self-preservation, of his multiplication, laws which refer to him, which are of him, laws which are uniquely his own, vital to him but in no way necessary to Nature, for his is no longer of Nature, no longer in her grip, he is separate from her. He is an entity entirely distinct from her, of such little usefulness is he to her workings, of such little necessity to her combinations, that whether he were to quadruple his species or annihilate it totally, the universe would not be in the slightest the worse for it.

All the laws we humans have made, whether to encourage population or to prevent its destruction, necessarily conflict with all of hers. And every time we act in accordance with our laws, we directly thwart her desires, but reversibly, every time we either stubbornly refuse to undertake the propagation she abhors, or co-operate in the murders which delight her and which serve her, we are sure to please her, certain of acting in harmony with her wishes.

Alex Barber

A salient feature of Sade's writing is nicely illustrated in that passage. For the Pope of all people to propose that we submit to nature, is to invert and thereby overturn a social norm. Pope's just aren't supposed to espouse materialism. Since social norms are no more than obstacles to the realisation of our nature, the process of inverting and over-turning these norms, these obstacles, is in itself a pleasurable one. Inversion of conventional expectations is Sade's trademark. Pain is pleasurable, bondage is liberty, self denigration is a route to fulfilment, mere matter is to be venerated and ugliness is sexually alluring. Inversion is fundamental to the character Justine, the absurdly virtuous sister of Juliette. Justine's reward for being so good is a relentless onslaught of misfortune. She's incapable of learning from the disasters that keep occurring to her, that they keep occurring because she's so good.

Timo

She's never stained by these experiences, she just remains the same forever, is totally invulnerable to suffering, so a very strong character in a way.

Angelica

But she's also like a young girl in a fairy tale who wanders into a forest unaccompanied and is exposed to dangers whose extent she's not aware of. I would say she did suffer, she remains intact in that curious 18th century sense of intactness, you can fall as many times, in terms of your virginity or other, but provided you retain an abiding goodness it's as though you'd never fallen at all. You can become once more a virgin, in the moral sense if not in the physiological sense. It's also a parody I think of the popular 18th century notion that virtue somehow pays off in happiness, in a world where God is no longer at the centre and good moral behaviour can't be constrained by the threats of hellfire and damnation which after all are what are rather uselessly presented to Don Giovanni.

Alex Barber

Here's an extract from the final scene of Justine. Therese here is the alternative name for Justine herself.

Man

Monsieur de Corville was still residing on his country estate; 'twas toward summer's end, they had planned an outing when the approach of a dreadful storm obliged them to postpone their promenade. The excessive heat had constrained them to leave all the windows open. Lightning glitters, shakes, hail slashes down, winds blow wrathfully, heaven's fire convulses the clouds, in the most hideous manner makes them to seethe. It seems as if nature were wearied out of patience with what she has wrought, as if she were ready to confound all the elements that she might wrench new forms from them.

Terrified, Madame de Lorsange begs her sister to make all haste and close the shutters; anxious to calm her, Therese dashes to the windows which are already being broken. She would do battle with the wind, she gives a minute's fight, is driven back and at that instant a blazing thunderbolt reaches her where she stands in the middle of the room, transfixes her. Madame de Lorsange emits a terrible cry and falls in a faint. Monsieur de Corville calls for help, attentions are given each woman, Madame de Lorsange is revived, but the unhappy Therese has been stuck in such wise, hope itself can longer subsist for her. The lightning entered her right breast, found the heart and after having consumed her chest and face, burst out through her belly. The miserable thing was hideous to look upon.