



Re-assessing the Marquis de Sade

De sade and the french revolution

Alex Barber

One of the most striking real-life inversions is the French Revolution, in which the ruled became rulers. The revolution wedded together two apparently inconsistent ideals, liberty and violence. Since liberty and violence were close to Sade's own heart well before the revolution, I asked Angelica whether Sade could be viewed as a man of his times in this respect.

Angelica

I think that Sade's proneness to promote and relish evil, though it seemed to chime with the climate of the terror, was something embedded in him. He gave his own spin, if you like, to the 18th Century's attempt to rehabilitate human passion, which was itself a reaction to the 17th Century's mistrustful view of passion as something destructive, which you find developed in the tragic drama of the period. In the 18th Century the passions were seen as, as a potential source for good as well as a potential source of evil. And Sade latched on to this change in the spirit of the times.

Alex Barber

We might also wonder what affect the revolution had on Sade. The details of what happened to him personally are sketchy, but it is clear that he was heavily involved. The revolution was triggered by the storming of the Bastille prison, and in a famous incident a few days before this happened, Sade used a roll of paper to call out from his cell window that the guards were torturing the prisoners. When he was freed, he wisely changed his name from the Marquis de Sade to Citizen Sade. Even so, only a series of unlikely events saved him from the guillotine. He spent some time as a judge in one of the most radical and dangerous sections of Paris, and wrote a number of pamphlets in which he lent his voice to the spirit of liberty and radical change. Here is a passage from *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, published in 1795 shortly after he had escaped execution. Its title is *Yet another effort Frenchmen, if you would become Republicans*.

Nigel Carrington

I am about to put forward some major ideas. They will be heard and pondered, if not all of them please, surely a few will. In some sort then, I shall have contributed to the progress of our age and shall be content. We near our goal, but haltingly. I confess that I am disturbed by the presentiment that we are on the eve of failing once again to arrive there. Is it thought that goal will be attained when at last we have been given laws? Abandon the notion, for what should we who have no religion, do with laws? We must have a creed, a creed befitting the Republican character, something far removed from ever being able to resume the worship of Rome.

In this age, when we are convinced that morals must be the basis of religion, and not religion of morals, we need a body of beliefs in keeping with our customs and habits, something that would be their necessary consequence, and that could, by lifting up the spirit, maintain it perpetually at the high level of this precious liberty which today the spirit has made its unique idol.

Alex Barber

I asked Timo what affect the revolution may have had on Sade's writing.

Timo

Nothing changed, that's my view really. He started his libertine career and authors career well before the revolution. He was imprisoned before the revolution, then he got out, he was impoverished or starving to death, almost. Then he got arrested again because of these sort

of, novels of his, pornographic novels and he was sent to Charenton Mental Asylum. But I don't think anything changed. He says that he doesn't accept violence by the state or legal violence or even war-like violence, because nobody enjoys it. Violence without enjoyment is bad, so when the executioner executes a person however violently he does it, with torture for instance, nobody's enjoying it, it's a great waste. And he says that that's worthless, you shouldn't do that. That's why he was against all official violence.

Alex Barber

Sade thought of himself primarily as a dramatist, and this was perhaps what gave an almost cinematic quality to his novels. There was a mania for theatre in the period, and I asked Angelica if the revolution could be viewed as itself a kind of theatrical event and whether Sade, of all people, may have enjoyed it on those terms.

Angelica

I think in retrospect it's easy to regard the revolution in that way. I don't know if at the time these events were unfolding that would have been the perception common to most onlookers. I think you would have to be unusually detached, almost in a Sadian fashion to perceive the theatricality of what was horrific torture, frighteningly close danger, and to perceive all of this as a kind of performing art I think would require an unusual kind of distance – in fact, an inhuman kind of distance. So I think it's, it's too facile to see the revolution as a kind of theatricality, it's too reductive, but at the same time theatricality so imbued late 18th Century culture that it must also have penetrated the consciousness of people who were involved in these horrific but also world changing events.

Alex Barber

In the final scenes of his book, 120 Days of Sodom, Sade envisages a series of killing machines. Though written in 1785 these descriptions of industrial scale instruments of death call to mind the guillotine, which was soon to become the symbol of the revolution.

Timo

It was enlightened construction too, in that it was a machine. It's very important it was a machine and that is a bourgeois instrument, it was a factory, a factory tool. Executions were no longer horrific public spectacles but efficient and effective acts of industrial production really. You could mass murder a people as if in a factory, producing corpses. In 120 Days the last passage is the hell, hell passion, where the complete libertine, the totally apathetic master hero is torturing his victims and that happens by means of machines in a factory.

Angelica

There's a countervailing example of this kind of brutality though in the novel Juliette in which the incestuous uncle says to the executioner, 'Be slow, be very slow, I want her torment to last for ever'. That's not clinical at all, that's sadistic, isn't it?

Timo

Sure, sure .

Angelica

In conception the guillotine was an Enlightenment invention and enlightened construction. Sade's machines for killing make death into the most tortured and gory spectacle imaginable, very far from what the men of the Enlightenment would have wished to see a kind of judicial killing as being.