



Re-assessing the Marquis de Sade

Horror and imprisonment

Alex Barber

Sade spent half his adult years confined. Napoleon re-incarcerated him after the revolution and he died in a mental asylum in 1814. I asked Angelica and Timo what effect incarceration may have had on his writing.

Angelica

Well Georges Bataille in a famous essay on Sade says that nothing approaches the cruelty that Sade extracted from prison, it coloured everything he wrote. I don't think we can possibly know precisely what refined the already existing sense of cruelty that Sade took to prison when he was there, but undoubtedly things became more extreme.

Timo

He spent 20, something like 25 years in prisons and in mental asylum later. He couldn't go out, he couldn't do this and that, he was confined in a room where he was imprisoned. And his novels, it's very important that there is a barrier, moral barrier, like, like virtue and love and beauty and all the values, and he thinks that these are barriers, these are limits that one should cross and his libertinism is really pushing pleasure to the limits and going beyond. And beyond it is what he calls 'discharge' or 'discharge of energy' which means the ultimate pleasure or orgasm, we would say orgasm nowadays, but his word is discharge. Discharging your libidinal energies through a barrier, through a limit into the void, into the abyss and in the nothingness where you vanish and disappear, in order to come back later and start philosophising. That's the cycle, the deadly cycle of libertine pleasure.

Alex Barber

So perhaps it was his incarceration that led him to the view that breaking through barriers was the highest form of pleasure. This doesn't explain why he would have thought of virtue as the barrier to break down or transgress. It would be implausibly reductionist to see his life experiences as explaining every aspect of his work. Sade did not invent sexual licence. I asked Angelica and Timo whether they were in sympathy with Anthony Arblaster's assessment of Sade's place in the libertine tradition. Arblaster writes that the figure of Don Juan or Don Giovanni is of a person who is fatally attractive to women and that this is a very potent image not only for men. He adds that the final outcome of following Giovanni's course of self-indulgence is to be found in the exact contemporary lurid sexual fantasies of the Marquis de Sade, which Sade explicitly justifies in terms of following the dictates of nature and disregarding the restraints imposed by conventional society. That Sade's sexual tastes were less orthodox than Giovanni's is irrelevant.

Timo

That's a little bit misleading because Don Giovanni, just like Casanova, they seduce. De Sade's heroes never seduce anyone. They act, they take the person, they attack the person, they rape the person, and if they must seduce someone, that means that they are weak, the said user is weak, dependent on the, on the person to be seduced.

Angelica

Donna Elvira pursues Don Giovanni the whole length and breadth of Spain. She's an ambiguous character. Donna Anna keeps postponing her marriage to Don Ortavio. Is it because she's secretly or not so secretly attracted to Giovanni? You don't get this kind of scenario anywhere in de Sade and the other exception I would take to Arblaster's summary is that he doesn't take account of the essential difference between Sadian womanising and Mozartian D'Arponton womanising and womanising in the whole legend of Don Juan, which is that in the former case evil and destruction and blazing egocentricity are central. In the

latter, one can't say that with any kind of confidence and indeed to claim that evil lies behind the seduction project, in the case of any of the versions of Don Juan is simply misleading.

Alex Barber

Referring back to the abyss that Timo talked about as lying beyond the prison boundaries, or as beyond the walls of virtue that Sade seeks to knock down, Angelica draws another contrast between Sade's characters and that of Don Giovanni.

Angelica

I wonder if you could compare that abyss with the kind of abyss that Don Giovanni faces at the end of Mozart's opera. I think there is a crucial difference, actually. In the first place it seems to me that there is no religious tinge, whether negative or positive, to Sade's fables. Don Giovanni, though he rejects the spiritual as embodied by the commander, none the less has to submit to its power. What he does not submit to is the power of society. Society in the Don Juan legend can never do anything against that kind of libertinism, but it's a much less horrific libertinism than Sade's.

Alex Barber

I asked Angelica to outline the development of the libertine tradition and to indicate Sade's place in that development, if indeed he had one. She describes how libertine is then developed from being concerned mainly with political liberty in the 17th Century, to becoming associated first with sensual delight and increasingly with sexual licence. She then compares Sade's characters to those in the 1782 novel *Dangerous Liaisons* by the French writer Laclos.

Angelica

Libertinism in the 17th Century was an intellectual attitude of free thought. It had nothing to do with sensual self indulgence. A lot of words that had become associated with sexual licence or licence of a more general kind, originally had much paler meanings. From the 17th to the 18th Centuries you have a transition in what the sense of 'orgy' meant, from being simply a, usually gastronomic and vinous indulgence into sexual no holds barred conduct. With the death of Louis XIV early in the century a climate of repression came to an end, Louis XIV had become very religious and moralising in his old age. After his death the Regency began, and the Regency is associated with a kind of foppish, pleasure seeking, but still a rather decorous kind of search for delight. I'm talking about the aristocracy here, I don't think libertinism was officially associated with a class below that, of the aristocracy and the nobility, though no doubt loose behaviour pervaded every social class at that time as at all times.

In the near contemporary novel by Laclos '*Dangerous Liaisons*', written in 1782, libertinism becomes less a sort of salon drawing room activity and more the kind of thing that happens absolutely behind curtains, not even in the boudoir. But actually something virtually unmentionable, and which Sade alone I think described in its fully fledged horror, a complete giving in to self-indulgence and sexual licence, a hatred of emotion. Anyway Laclos doesn't cultivate the joy in evil and desecration that we associate with Sade. There is what we now call sadism in Laclos but it's of a much milder kind. So I think to answer your question, the progression in the meaning of libertinism reaches a horrific culmination in Sade, it's not really matched by what we see in any contemporaries of his.

Alex Barber

Calling Sade a sexual libertarian may give rise to misleading expectations about his work. In one quite typical scene an Austrian duke blindfolds four pregnant woman, then uses branding irons to write descriptions on each of their bellies of how they will be forcibly made to miscarry. Whether we read him as trying to liberate us from social norms by shocking us with their inversion, or simply as someone giving voice to a pathological misogyny, Sade's novels deserve their reputation for containing scenes of extreme abuse.

Timo

We must understand that Sade wants to produce a total description of all possible manners of torture and all possible evil, all possible evil passions. So you find everything there. He describes an impossible possible world. The possible world that is somehow there but, but we have no access from here to there.

Angelica

I think this naturalising of the unimaginable or unspeakable is also promoted by something that is often associated with his theatricality and that is his use of dialogue. When we see people as individuals who speak to each other, we think that they're in a normal kind of situation that we recognise, that we perhaps don't identify ourselves with, but which we regard as a potential situation. But then the conversation takes off in extraordinary ways and we follow Sade along the imaginative, fictional route that he constructs, and I think we either suspend our disbelief or we give up in disgust.