

*Sade for the Brave and Open-Minded*  
Review of *Alyce Mahon, The Marquis de Sade and the Avant-Garde*  
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The eighteenth-century nobleman and libertine writer Marquis de Sade “has become for some of us a kind of precious patrimony,” remarks Roland Barthes in 1976.<sup>1</sup> This fact is recently re-affirmed by several events celebrating the once criminalized and censored author of *The 120 Days of Sodom* (1785), *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1795) and *The New Justine* (1797). On the bicentennial of Sade’s death in 2014, the Musée d’Orsay organized an exhibition of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European art with erotic themes, “Sade: Attaquer le soleil,” curated by scholar Annie le Brun; three years later, the French state declared the 12-meter long handwritten manuscript of *The 120 Days of Sodom* a national treasure, to be acquired eventually for the Bibliothèque de France with the help of corporate sponsors.<sup>2</sup> How the figure to whom we owe the term sadism should become an icon of western culture, as Alyce Mahon shows in a new and informative study, is largely thanks to the reception of the twentieth-century intelligentsia and artistic avant-garde, who over the century taught a broad-minded public to appreciate “the Sadean imagination’s liberating potential” (Mahon, 23).

Gathering a variety of fascinating work by writers, visual and performance artists, filmmakers, and playwrights that commonly feature “abject sex and terror” (25), *The Marquis de Sade and the Avant-Garde* shows how the twentieth-century avant-garde appealed to Sade’s legacy in order to “criticize religious and political authorities and to force debate on freedom of expression” (24). Not wishing to be seen as seeking to “glorify or absolve Sade’s writings of their terror, or to celebrate transgression for its own sake,” Mahon argues instead that this controversial figure enabled the avant-garde to undertake social critique, “an operation which demands

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that the boundaries of both society and nature, the self and sexuality, are continually challenged” (5). Specifically, Mahon finds that Sade and his legacy contributed to “female emancipation and equality” (21) by raising critical issues of how “females might experience and invite danger and the death drive, both internally in terms of the psyche and externally in terms of society’s expectations” (22).

In the first and longest chapter, “The Marquis de Sade and the Fairer Sex,” Mahon argues that Sade’s “monstrous portrayal of the fairer sex as naturally wicked” (31) is progressive insofar as contradicting the Enlightenment ideal of femininity. No matter if debauched by force (Justine) or by choice (Juliette), Sade’s hypersexualized heroines in *The New Justine* (1797) counteract the virtuous and boring female protagonists of eighteenth-century novels like Rousseau’s Julie and Diderot’s Suzanne, who have “none of the burning curiosity or questioning nature of Sade’s *jeunes filles*” (34). Mahon then reads *The 120 Days of Sodom* (1785) and *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1795) as prescribing an emancipatory politics: for instance, the savage brutality inflicted on infants and mothers (including pregnant women) in Sade’s texts amounts to an “attack on the family romance and women’s role within it” and a celebration of “non-procreative sex” (49). Finally, if Sade excoriated the female assassin Charlotte Corday in his eulogy for Jean-Paul Marat, it was a covert way to “give a voice to Corday” (87), whom Jacques-Louis David had neglected to portray in his monumental painting of the Jacobin revolutionary, *Death of Marat* (1793).

Mahon really delves into her main task of charting Sade’s impact on nonconformist twentieth-century writers and artists in the remaining three chapters. In chapter two, “Surrealist Sade,” Mahon credits Guillaume Apollinaire for disseminating Sade’s work among the Surrealists and rightly sees his *The Eleven Thousand Rods* (1907) as a prequel to Robert Desnos’s surrealist libertine novel, *Liberty or Love!* (1927). She also acknowledges the productive collaboration between Surrealism’s leading figure André Breton and Maurice Heine, the pioneering Sade biographer who published in reviews like *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* and *Minotaure*; finally, she takes the work of Man Ray and André Masson as examples of surrealist art with Sadean themes. While these materials speak indisputably to the surrealists’ Sadean imagination, the fact that the latter manifests differently in writing, painting, sculpture and photography seems to elude Mahon’s predominantly thematic approach. If she makes little of the tension between blasphemy (Man Ray) and the covert reintroduction of the sacred vis-à-vis sacrificial violence (Masson informed by Georges Bataille), it is also unclear how she sees the status of women in this art, figured at times as “active sexual agent” (106) (Man Ray’s model/lover Kiki in *Four Seasons*) and at others as “sacrificial victim” (111) dangling from a noose (Masson’s Justine).

In the third, what I find to be the richest chapter, Mahon brings the question of women and the Sadean imagination back into focus by examining the genesis and reception of Dominique Aury’s *The Story of O* (1954), the first Sadean work by a

woman author considered in this book. Mahon shows that the publication of Aury's *récit* nearly coincided with the so-called *L'affaire Sade* (1956-58), which began with the police seizure of Sade's work published by Jean-Jacques Pauvert (also publisher of *The Story of O*) and ended with the Court of Appeals' ruling to not destroy but rather to limit the distribution of morally reprehensible writings. Focusing on the defense of Sade and Pauvert in court by eminent French intellectuals, Mahon argues that "the various depositions of Breton, Bataille, [Jean] Cocteau, and [Jean] Paulhan during Pauvert's trial indicated the high esteem in which Sade was held" but also "indicated the tempered manner in which Sade's literary universe of terror and sexual violence was reasoned into a morality tale" (132-133). Mahon arguably does likewise when interpreting *The Story of O* as compatible with the aims of feminist humanism and existentialism in the postwar period. In light of this, one is grateful for Mahon's thorough presentation of the plot, pertinent biographical information and intellectual context, but surprised by her gloss over the question of (feminine) subjectivity. After all, at question is a love story, written by Aury to secure the affections of her lover and supporter Paulhan, and in the third-person limited point of view to privilege the protagonist's subjective experience. This oversight might be related to the difficulty of making the female lover's abject self-abnegation square with an optimistic reading of *Story of O* in terms of gender equality as advocated by Simone de Beauvoir, whereby "Aury's exploration of woman as a happy Sadean slave might be read as promoting 'equality in inequality,' offering a diversity and multiplicity of sexed subjects" (149). Another reader might see O's humiliation, which "reduces the individual to a body, to a mass, a shape, and eventually a nothing" (155), as challenging rather than simply extending the radical freedom as presumed by classical libertinage; alternatively, one might consider her willing submission as anticipating and critiquing the transformation of libertinage into the current culture of sexual consent. Ultimately, Mahon seems more invested in the reception of *The Story of O* from the perspective of the sexual revolution of the 60s and 70s: She effectively shows that Just Jaeckin's kitschy 1975 filmic adaptation spoke to the "liberation of sexuality of France" (176) and that second-wave feminists like the bookseller Odile Hellier "read [*The Story of O*.] in the 1960s between the sexual (Pill) and the feminist revolutions" (178). It is in this regard that one can make sense of Mahon's consideration of Aury's text as being about "the potentially liberating power of 'sadism' for a woman – O is freed from the roles of wife and mother, and confronts the abyss unflinchingly as a lover, liberated from every taboo, every social and moral code" (150-51).

In the final chapter, Mahon focuses on Sade's impact on the avant-garde of the 1950s and 1960s, as exemplified by Guy Debord's film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (1952); Jean Benoît's performance *Exécution du testament du Marquis de Sade* (1959); J-J Lebel's happening, *120 Minutes dédiées au divin Marquis* (1966); and Peter Weiss's play *Marat/Sade* (1964). For Mahon, these works have in common their

status “outside of mainstream culture, transgressing conventional ideas and values by assaulting the traditional art object, museum space, and relationship between artist and spectator” (181). If this broad description risks reducing the singularity of the selected works to a stereotype of the avant-garde (the aniconic austerity of Debord’s film seems to me incommensurable with Benoît’s and Lebel’s visually and gesturally excessive performances), more interesting is Mahon’s claim that the Sadean “libertine drive,” expressed by “the blank screen, the stripping and painting of the body, the scream, and the sexual gesture” in these works, is “always aligned with particular sociopolitical agendas” (181). For instance, Simone de Beauvoir, who had defended Sade in her 1951 essay “Must We Burn Sade?,” later criticized the Algerian War and the French police’s torture of Algerian female militant Djamilia Boupacha; the anti-capitalist situationists headed by Debord often cited Sade in their journal, *Internationale Situationniste* (1958-69); Lebel who paid homage to Sade in his 1966 happening had also featured a grotesque nude representing Boupacha being raped in his 1960 painting, *Grand tableau antifasciste*; Weiss’s visits to GDR East Berlin and the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt somehow “impacted [his] ideas on Sade” (214).

Toward the end of this chapter, Mahon makes a strong case for the centrality of Sade for 1960s radicalism, which, in the words of Lebel, sought to make obscenity itself “no longer sexual [but] political” (210). Mahon gives the excellent example of a forum at St. Mark’s Playhouse in New York City, held at the height of the anti-Vietnam war protest in 1965 and featuring the director Peter Brook and other theater luminaries. One of them saw Weiss’s *Sade/Marat* (recently staged by Brook with the Royal Shakespeare Company in London) as commenting on “consciousness expansion, the resurgence of the irrational, national loyalties, the revolutions in education, sex, and technology, religious disenchantment and contrasting ecumenical movements. Also political revolutions and the Negro Freedom Movement. The play touched on all of these” (217-18). This reinvention of Sade as the rebel of all causes, Mahon shows, has its continental equivalent in the reception of the popular unrest of May ’68, which the writer Alain Jouffroy saw as inspired by Marat and Sade. But while the events of the 60s uncovered the “great political potential of Sade’s name” (216), Mahon’s evidence suggests that they also made possible the supersession of politics by *affect*. If the artist Masson had “replaced Communist politics and insignia with Sadean ones” (117), Lebel would subsequently celebrate May ’68 as “a gigantic fiesta...outside the ‘normal’ pattern of politics” (221), followed by celebrity activist Daniel Cohn-Bendit’s retrospective insight that the event had replaced “the traditional idea of revolution” with “a new way of making things move...a way that affected how you should be, freedom” (221).

Although Mahon’s is not the first in-depth study of the European avant-garde’s reception of Sade, her instructive framing of the topic in light of the relationship between sexuality and politics (also the theme of her 2005 book,

*Surrealism and the Politics of Eros, 1938-68*) is a welcome contribution to modernism and avant-garde studies insofar as addressing the longstanding problematic regarding aesthetics and *engagement*.<sup>3</sup> That these two overlap precisely in the domain of sexuality is undoubtedly the reason for Sade's importance in the eyes of the avant-garde. Presumably, it is also why Mahon consistently follows Peter Bürger's notion of the avant-garde as antithetical to aesthetic autonomy, taking for granted that her chosen "writers, artists, dramatists, and filmmakers...adhere to a particular sense of art as praxis" (1) and "refused any suggestion that there was a division between art and society" (184). But aesthetic autonomy is not so easy a concept to dismiss (Bürger takes it quite seriously), since Mahon herself evokes it unwittingly in her postscript, in a discussion of contemporary artist Paul Chan's 2009 mixed media project, *Sade for Sade's Sake* (2009). In response to Chan's juxtaposition of an original etching from Sade's *Juliette* with a 2003 journalistic photograph of an Abu Ghraib prisoner being tortured by a gleeful female U.S. soldier, Mahon makes an unexpectedly strong distinction—the first time she does so in the book—between "imagined and real systems of terror" (234). Resisting the artist's own statement that "Sade illuminated Abu Ghraib for me," which another interpreter might read as an avant-garde *critique* of Sade, she argues instead for the "critical disparity" (234) between the two, "the former [being] a libertine work of fiction, the latter a photograph of the aftermath of an actual torture and homicide" (235). Here, Mahon seems to touch again on the question of medium (writing versus photography) but also another crucial issue that could have been developed more in the book, namely the necessity of distinguishing between representation and reality – the very distinction that makes it possible for the "brave and open-minded" (87) to defend the publication, depiction and dramatic reenactment of Sade's obscene imaginary without condoning its practical realization.

A final remark in respectful dialogue with Mahon's book concerns the meaning of the political. Throughout *The Marquis de Sade and the Avant-Garde*, there is a constant tension between a notion of the political as "the total freedom of the imagination" (5) and the politics of sex-positive feminism, both of which Mahon wishes to derive from the Sadean heritage. Ultimately Mahon's *parti pris* lies with the English feminist Angela Carter, who in her 1978 book *The Sadeian Woman* had characterized Sade as "our [women's] unconscious ally" due to his "claiming rights of free sexuality for women, and...installing women as beings of power."<sup>4</sup> But Carter's position is by no means a universal one among feminists: Andrea Dworkin's fierce anti-pornography polemic aside, it seems legitimate to ask (in paraphrase of the art historian Linda Nochlin), Why have there been so few Sadean women artists?<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, this alignment of the Sadean imagination with a particular political agenda, however salutary it might be, risks obscuring what Susan Sontag had described as the general challenge of "the French tradition" represented by Sade, Bataille and Aury: the recognition that "human sexuality is, quite apart from Christian repressions, a highly questionable phenomenon, and belongs ... among the

extreme rather than the ordinary experiences of humanity.”<sup>6</sup> Sade’s most rigorous commentators (Barthes, Paulhan, Beauvoir, Sontag, Pierre Klossowski, Maurice Blanchot, Albert Camus, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Jacques Lacan, to name the most eminent) have grappled with the social, political and ethical implications of this disturbing fact, which Sade had made inescapable. Mahon mentions and summarizes many of these authors in her book, yet a more robust engagement therewith might have made for a more nuanced account of what is political in Sade and the artistic avant-garde: their relentless will to think, desire if not fuck beyond all ideologies.

- 1 Roland Barthes, "Sade-Pasolini," in *Piero Paolo Pasolini: The Poetics of Heresy*, ed. Beverly Allen (Saratoga, California: ANMA Libri & Co., 1982), 100. Originally published in *Le Monde*, June 16, 1976.
- 2 See the exhibition catalog, Annie Le Brun, ed. *Attaquer le soleil* (Paris: Musée d'Orsay and Gallimard, 2014).
- 3 Svein Eirik Fauskevåg's 1977 doctoral dissertation (translated into French in 1982) covers much of Mahon's material; subsequently, a 2001 exhibition at the Kunsthau Zürich produced an informative catalog on the same topic in German. See Svein Eirik Fauskevåg, *Sade dans le surréalisme* (Paris: Editions Privat, 1982); Tobia Bezzola, Michael Pfister, and Stefan Zweifel, eds., *Sade Surreal: Der Marquis de Sade und die erotische Fantasie des Surrealismus in Text und Bild* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Kunsthau Zürich and Hatje Cantz, 2001).
- 4 Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 22, 36.
- 5 Mahon predictably disagrees with Dworkin, who read Sade as celebrating the rape and battery of women while vigorously criticizing "the notion that Sade presages feminist demands for women's sexual rights." Andrea Dworkin, "The Marquis de Sade (1740-1814)," in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1989), 99. I thank Ben Gillespie for conversations about Dworkin and Carter's texts.
- 6 Susan Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1966), 56-57.