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The Marquis de Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom*: Revelling in the Natural Law of Libertinage

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To have laws associated with libertinage seems ridiculous at first glance; for how can the unhinged spirit possibly be bound by conventional rules, even if people with libertine ideals create them? Similar to everyday life, where the carnival exists in its raw and purest form, certain liberties are taken when abiding by the laws of any given community. The same liberties, therefore, apply to the carnivalesque world present in The Marquis de Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom*. The difference between any given normal community and the community of the libertines present in the text is that the laws created by the latter group are made with the intention that they will not only expire in due course, but will undoubtedly be broken in the interim. Their Château of Silling only has a shelf-life of four months; therefore, the laws will eventually cease to be applicable. If they remain intact, the one hundred and twenty days would cease to end. Their very destruction is crucial to the disbanding of the libertines and their party, but their disobedience allows for the narrative to thrive. In order for the narrative to end, at some point there must be a return to convention. The laws, therefore, act as a means to give some kind of temporal structure to their private carnival. The desire to complete the period of purgation is directly reflected in the desire to abide by the laws of Nature and carnival so long as the desires of the four friends are fulfilled. In a truly Bakhtinian sense, release is sought through various pleasures pertaining to sexual transgression. Release through libertinage is the ideal carnival in de Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom*.

The laws which are fearfully compromised in the novel are the fundamental laws which govern human behaviour. They are the innate laws within the individual which prevent acts of severe moral decay. To the normal man, the very thought of breaking them causes visceral reactions, such as nausea. These natural laws are enforced on a societal scale, and are accompanied by punishments for the individual who breaks them. These laws of Nature are clearly not maintained in *The 120 Days of Sodom*; but unlike those created by the four friends, Nature's laws are much more severe in punishment, for

if broken, they cause moral corrosion. The taboo laws which protect against murder, ritual sacrifice, and incest – to name some major crimes against humanity – are inherent in every individual, but the desire to transgress these laws and move from the sacred to the profane is also a natural drive. This is only one of the paradoxes present in the work.

In *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, Georges Bataille identifies an even larger paradox present in the human being, which affirms that "the urge towards love, pushed to its limit, is an urge toward death" (42). The spectrum of reproduction pushed to its limits results in death. Eroticism is "assenting to life up to the point of death" (Bataille 10). Experiencing this eroticism, Bataille explains, is the closest way in which the individual may artificially achieve the continuity once lost at birth:

Beings which reproduce themselves are distinct from one another, and those reproduced are likewise distinct from each other, just as they are distinct from their parents. Each being is distinct from all others. His birth, his death, the events of his life may have an interest for others, but he alone is directly concerned in them. He is born alone. He dies alone. Between one being and another, there is a gulf, a discontinuity. (12)

As a discontinuous, solitary being, the desire to achieve continuity again is excruciating. Thus, the violence associated with eroticism is not as foreign as one might expect, especially if sexual intercourse – ideally accompanied by orgasm, aptly *le petite mort* – is the closest way to achieve continuity without actually having to die. The urges to placate Nature, to live as a discontinuous being, as well as those which work against Nature, to retrieve continuity, are fundamental from birth. What is unknown is whether or not in *The 120 Days of Sodom* de Sade is consciously addressing the desire for continuity. What is clear is his desire to accurately represent a group of libertines who are strictly out for the pleasure which Nature dictates they do not deny themselves. What is once again contradictory is that the desire for continuity requires that discontinuous individuals form community with others, even though they are ultimately alone.

In part two of *Erotism*, Bataille examines de Sade's life principle which adds another paradox to the growing list associated with carnival living: "Life, he maintained, was the pursuit of pleasure, and the degree of pleasure was in direct ratio to the destruction of life. In other words, life reached its highest intensity in a monstrous denial

of its own principle" (180). Immediately, the reader realizes that this credo for life cannot be generally accepted by society. It thrives upon vexation, although its intention is to seek the very opposite. It is in the failure of that search where de Sade's principle is truly put into practice. The anger connected with disappointment is the springboard for destruction which violence will unleash; the more destructive and monstrous, the more pleasurable. It is no wonder that de Sade's principle could not be appropriated by the masses. True, destruction may allow one to appreciate the pleasure given them in relation to what is denied them, but for de Sade, the destruction and the violent means to achieve one's desire is wherein pleasure lies.

This principle as motivating force is surely present in *Sodom*. The Duc de Blangis, the Bishop of X, Durcet, and the Président de Curval gather together to pursue pleasure. The scenario presented to the reader may resemble Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, but the particulars are rather different. Instead of escaping plagued Florence, the four friends escape Paris for Switzerland to revel in a plague they themselves create among a select group of forty-six individuals. The stories in *Sodom* are not only recited to pass the time, but are used to dictate how the time allotted for the experiment with passion will be passed. These discontinuous human beings gather together in a space far from society to create their own civilization. These four characters, all fundamentally solitary and ideally apathetic, are clearly out to fulfil their own desires. Their solipsism, both as a group physically in seclusion, and as individuals, is in accordance with the natural state which de Sade believed man to be in. The breaking point for their experiment is four months, but their lives as libertines are unrelenting. Bataille comments:

The kind of sexual satisfaction that suits everyone is not for de Sade's fantastic characters. The kind of sexuality he has in mind runs counter to the desires of other people; they are to be victims, not partners. De Sade makes his heroes uniquely self-centred; the partners are denied any rights at all: this is the key to his system. (167)

It is important to realize that the real masters of libertinage are the four friends. Even though Duclos, for example, is clearly a proponent for libertine behaviour, she is still only a partner and not an instigator. As a prostitute, her role is to exist for others, not for

herself or her own desires, although she does take full advantage of her position during her confinement.

The question of how to control these four individuals is to set up a list of statutes each must adhere to during their one hundred and twenty days together. As aforementioned, their prime concern is to dictate the course of the daily proceedings, which include inspections of living quarters and mealtime. These laws are in place to ensure that essentials, like sleeping for instance, are not overlooked during the debauch-fest. Such rules are also in place to prevent boredom from setting in. The statutes assure that things unfold according to the original design, which maintained the importance of variety in order to prevent boredom. The most important rule in this regard is that neither the group of eight girls or eight boys must be deflowered before the months of December and January, respectively. There are limits in place upon the friends, not because intercourse with children is against Nature, but because such a rash action too early on in the four-month period would result in relentless boredom. Curval is usually the friend who needs constant reminder to make sure that he is acting lawfully: "[The others have] equally powerful urges to breach the contract, but held themselves somehow in check all the same, he [Curval] should imitate them, at least out of a feeling of comradeship" (de Sade 497). There is a feeling that in due time the libertines will be able to taste every sexual transgression they desire, and this initial denial which they ideally should face together as a community of four, will only make the reward that much more appealing. There must be something yet undiscovered to work toward for the libertines, some avenue yet taken, or else they will be satisfied. Insatiability is the only way to progress such a narrative.

Bataille asserts that transgressive acts must cooperate with a set of rules; hence, the rules present in de Sade's carnival are ultimately there for reasons other than keeping time in the Château. Rules reinscribe the taboos which are broken. Bataille clarifies:

Often the transgression of a taboo is no less subject to rules than the taboo itself. No liberty here. "At such and such a time and up to a certain point this is permissible" - that is what the transgression concedes. But once a limited licence has been allowed, unlimited urges towards violence may break forth. The barriers are not merely raised, for it may even be necessary at the moment of transgression

to assert their solidity. Concern over a rule is sometimes at its most acute when the rule is being broken, for it is harder to limit a disturbance already begun. (65) The breaking of the rules perpetuates the narrative and the more unorthodox the behaviour the better. This is why a rule which states that a friend will be fined if he fails to comply with the laws of libertinage is crucial to *Sodom*:

Any friend who fails to comply with any one of these articles, or who may take it into his head to act in accordance with a single glimmer of common sense or moderation and above all to spend a single day without retiring dead drunk to bed, shall be fined ten thousand francs. (de Sade 248)

Once in motion, the transgressions must not cease, least of all due to any of the friends showing restraint. The carnival, the purgation, must continue until it is meant to expend.

The taboos Bataille is most concerned with are those which pertain to the sacred. Profanation against the sacred best incites eroticism: the darker the crime, the greater the desire to commit it. Nature, however, is as violent and dark as the need to perform such actions. This is yet another paradox. Rationality, according to Bataille, works against the very desires Nature itself evokes. The world of rationality – the world of work – has been set up in order to divert attention from the instincts of sexuality and violence which civilization forces into suppression. For the four friends in *Sodom*, however, the world of work does not apply to them. The aristocrats and the clergy are exempt from the droning demands of mass civilization. This allows them, therefore, to experiment with their suppressed desires. They are prime examples of what Bataille calls the sovereign man who stands apart from the normal man in that he does not adhere to the same principles of the masses, and thereby expends his energy in pleasure. Bataille explains this economic excess:

But pleasure mocks at toil, and toil we have seen to be unfavourable to the pursuit of intense pleasure. If one calculates the ratio between energy consumed and the usefulness of the results, the pursuit of pleasure even if reckoned as useful is essentially extravagant; the more so in that usually pleasure has no end product, is thought of as an end in itself and is desired for its very extravagance. This is where de Sade comes in. He does not formulate the above principles, but he

implies them by asserting that pleasure is more acute if it is criminal and the more abhorrent the crime the greater the pleasure. (168-69)

The Marquis de Sade was also a sovereign man who afforded himself the same extravagant and criminal privileges until he was incarcerated. Surely the sovereign libertines in the text are in tune with their deviant desires, but does that exempt them from the inherent laws of Nature which deter the crimes of murder or sacrifice, allowing them to override any feelings of nausea or disgust?

The laws of Nature are what Bataille calls universal taboos, and Claude Lévi-Strauss has written extensively on them as being such. This said, however, the four friends often philosophize in *Sodom* that their actions do indeed correspond with Nature. It is Curval who provides the thrust of the argument:

What the devil difference can it make to Nature whether there are one, twenty, five hundred more or fewer human beings on the earth? ... Nature has wrought her law, and the one commandment she graves deep in our hearts is to satisfy ourselves at no matter whose expense... I hope to convince you, as convinced am I, that the single way of serving Nature is blindly to respond to her desires, of whatever kind they may be, because, for the sake of maintaining the divine balance she has struck universally, vice being quite as necessary to the general scheme as virtue, she is wont to urge is to do this, now to do that, depending upon what it is at the moment necessary to her design. (de Sade 534)

The argument of necessary evil is indeed quite convincing in this context. The idea of a balance having to be maintained is de Sade's own view which he effectively places in the mouth of Curval. It is fair enough for the Président to make such an assertion, not only because of his social status, but because of his position as a libertine. But does the argument exempt him or his comrades from the universal laws Nature has put in place? The obligatory response would be that no human being is exempt from the laws of Nature, but what if one's natural inclinations do not correspond with the intentions of Nature? It is a major stretch to suggest that the friends are free by default. Curval is not a sociopath. He knows that his actions are evil, but he believes them necessary according to Nature's own will. The issue of morality is not helpful in determining the guilt of the libertines; for, if they truly believe their ill will is right, morality is irrelevant. Moral

decay is not a concern for these particular libertines because it is a consequence of evil actions done in vain. The libertines' actions are not done in vain, but are done according to the necessity Nature requires.

As author and narrator of the events, de Sade is very strategic in his undertaking. Well aware that the masses find him repugnant, and that his life principle is not practised by most, he begins his tale in such a way as to invite the reader into his world without causing them to run off in horror. The movement from the simple passions to the murderous passions exemplifies this nicely. The simple passions, as interesting as they may be, are those which most readers can relate to – if they can relate to anything at all – thus they are given the most attention. The somewhat natural passions, however, do not erotically entice the libertines to their desired extent. The more general their appeal, the less the main characters in the text are concerned with them. The more transgressive the stories become, however, the more chance de Sade has of losing his audience. He progressively reels his audience in, making them comfortable with sadism before he delves into sacrifice, for example. He gives an uncharacteristic voice to violence throughout the text, but silences the complex passions, the criminal passions, and the murderous passions, thus striking a careful balance. On the other hand, the more degrading the passion, the more liberating for the character and the author. The respect for storytelling – such a "talent must always be respected" – is clearly identified in the work (de Sade 247). The power to entertain is not only heralded, but rewarded. In the text, de Sade awards Duclos, the most detailed and vivid storyteller, with the most space to express herself in the text, and the luxury to live in the story itself. The storytellers, all female, make up one-quarter of the final survivors. The ability to entertain, therefore, is crucial for both de Sade and the libertines.

The ability to illuminate the often macabre stories, therefore, is crucial to the success of *Sodom* and the stories within the text. The most effective way to do so is through laughter. To sustain this laughter is to invoke the carnivalesque practices Mikhail Bakhtin details in *Rabelais and His World*, which map nicely onto *Sodom*. Cataloguing sexual deviancy as a premise of a novel seems laughable in itself, but that alone could not sustain five-hundred pages. Hence, de Sade provides his readers with various and spectacularly cacophonous orgy scenes alongside other examples of sexual deviancy that

go on behind closed doors. If these variations did not occur, *The 120 Days of Sodom* would become boring for both character and reader. There are two key reasons why carnival is not constant: one, it is only temporarily allowed into the social, and two, if it were constant it would not act as a release from anything. Perhaps this is why the text is given a swift end. By the end of *Sodom*, there is nothing more to disclose, and the reader would have had enough of sexual vices.

In order to distract his audience, de Sade places focus on another natural need the friends have: nourishment. This image of fulfilling all the desires of the lower bodily stratum is culminated with the pleasures received from eating, or rather engorging oneself. The beauty of satisfying this craving, however, is that once satisfied the desire will return yet again. The opulence and variety of the meals, which appear as festivals in themselves, guarantee their long term success (de Sade 280). Sexual appetite is clearly in danger of expiring before the appetite of the stomach. Everything involved with the digestive process is appealing, which is why the fascination with excrement exists. Excrement continues the cycle of carnival and of feast, until of course more charming ways to exercise passion are discovered (de Sade 472). These passions, such as murder, however, are dictates of Nature, and the friends who abuse them do so necessarily.

According to Bakhtin, "[t]his is no commonplace, privately consumed food and drink, partaken by individuals. This is a popular feast, a 'banquet for all the world'" (278). While this statement is said in direct reference to Rabelais, the same may be said for de Sade's works, especially given the desire for both community and henceforth continuity. Regardless if one is actually consuming, or being consumed in a sexual manner at the dinner table, each individual has a specific role to fulfil in terms of the whole and rules apply here just as they apply elsewhere. These feasts become just like orgies, especially given that evening meals are served by naked little girls and often both food and sex are mixed together. The urge to feast upon flesh works with banquet imagery. But the meals become less of a community as time passes. The more one-sided and increasingly violent the community becomes, it slowly ceases to exist as one. In sadist fashion, the friends kill off most of the visitors at the Château. They take the few remaining survivors with them to Paris where they will enter another community. But as

Bataille vehemently states in his comments on de Sade, the sovereign man is not looking for a partner to share in his lust:

Communion between the participants is a limiting factor and it must be ruptured before the true violent nature of eroticism can be seen, whose translation into practice corresponds with the sovereign man. The man subject to no restraints of any kind falls on his victims with the devouring fury of a vicious hound. (167)

There is no harmony between de Sade's sovereign men and the survivors. The latter group are ultimately victims of the pursuit of pleasure, both in and outside of the Château.

Libertinage is as much a part of Nature as asceticism. This is fundamental to understanding de Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom*. What is documented in the text is not the extreme perversions of Nature, but rather the other side of Nature which civilization has caused the human individual to forget, or at least deny. As agents of necessary evil, de Sade's characters act in accordance with Nature, but at the same time transgress her laws which prohibit the same behaviour Nature has them partake in. The truth is that a balance is struck between civilization and libertinage, and without these elements of control, the need for revelry would not be as necessary as it is. Nature dictates that the bestial urges suppressed in the individual need release. At one time they dominated mankind, but now they are only permissible in society through carefully controlled carnival. What de Sade offers in *Sodom* is an image of a society that has replaced civilized practices with libertinage, thus making it the dominant doctrine. This does not necessarily mean that their society is freer, for it is not exempt from following a code of conduct, but that the priorities have changed, rather than the structure itself. Instead, the desire for laws to maintain libertinage are encouraged for the simple reason that they are critical in order to prevent libertinage from becoming commonplace. It is the manipulation of these rules, Nature's or society's, which makes life more interesting.

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