

## the literary eroticization of the death drive

### Sadism and Masochism as narrative structures

Sex has become, strictly speaking, the actualization of desire in pleasure—all else is literatures.

—Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*

But my notes have a curious tendency, as I realize at last, to annihilate all they purport to record.

—Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies*

As promised, I shall begin this first discussion with a look at the context of opposition, which in the case of Sade and Masoch has generally meant the opposition to pornography. (It is possible to confuse these two authors' work with sadistic or masochistic practice and object to it on that ground. However, this is to shift the focus away from the works of literature with which they in fact present us.) I am not going to defend pornography, though I certainly believe that could be done, but rather intend to show that both Sade and Masoch in their work undermine the very project of the pornographic, and to show why the specific objections against pornography fail to address their work.

The objections to pornography come from both radical feminists and the religious right. The former center upon the idea that pornography, in its overt sexualization of the body (especially the female body), devalues and even denies the personhood and subjectivity of those portrayed, leading to misogynistic attitudes, casual violence

against women, and (an argument made by the more sex-positive among these groups) bad sex, since good sex depends upon caring intersubjectivity. The latter tend simply to oppose the titillating possibilities of the graphic portrayal of sex. (Some Christian objections are more nearly allied to those of radical feminism. These see as immoral much of what pornography, in their eyes, glorifies—violence, nonmonogamy, and the lack of a context of interpersonal commitment—which the feminist critiques see as antiwoman.)<sup>1</sup> Because the Christian and even the more generally right-wing political arguments are more often founded upon an unshakable belief system, I shall chiefly consider the more thoughtful feminist arguments.<sup>2</sup> While I believe that the arguments for this position are largely bad, the real issue with Sade and Masoch, whose work I evaluate here, is otherwise. In fact I would argue that their work is *subversive* of the pornographic genre as these theorists see it. In their subversiveness of this more widespread pleasure, these works take their place in the context of counterpleasure.

The aim of pornography, according to these antipornographic arguments (and in most propornographic arguments, as well), is neatly Freudian: sexual stimulation (by visual imagery or, more rarely, textual description) followed by sexual release (autoerotic or, in the arguments of the more extreme antipornography activists, nonconsensually partnered) via the corporeal mimicry of the acts or at least the attitudes depicted. It is claimed that this mimicry treats women as objects only; for some theorists, it is enough that those depicted are “used” for erotic stimulation (that is, women are already objectified if their images are put to erotic purposes).<sup>3</sup> For those who object to pornography, this aim and function are importantly understood as almost exclusively male; Susan Gubar in “Representing Pornography” writes of “the long history of pornography, a gender-specific genre produced primarily by and for men, but focused obsessively on the female figure.”<sup>4</sup>

Catharine MacKinnon goes so far as to insist, “pornography is masturbation material. It is used as sex. It therefore is sex. Men know this.”<sup>5</sup> She insists as well that the stimulating effects of pornography on men are irresistible: “Sooner or later, in one way or another, the consumers want to live out the pornography further in three dimensions. Sooner or later, in one way or another, they do.”<sup>6</sup> Evidence linking the reading or viewing of pornography to sexual violence, or even to an overbearing insistence upon consent obtained by persistent nagging, is at best ambiguous.<sup>7</sup> Nor does evidence suggest that

pornography has, as its opponents most often insist, a purely male-oriented appeal:

Considering the impact of pornographic material on sexual arousal and behaviour, the studies of the 1970s reported that a large proportion of adult males and females did find sexually explicit material arousing; men tended to display more arousal in response to films and photographs, women to written material.<sup>8</sup>

This finding, if true, has some relevance to MacKinnon's influential position. MacKinnon elides not only image and act (a man who sees a pornographic image will find a woman to treat as a sexual object) but also image and *word*. Her famous antipornographic text may bear the title *Only Words*, but her focus is on images, particularly photographs and films (those forms of pornography that statistically appeal to more men, and can give her the strongest case regarding the "use" of women in the making of pornography). This has been true of much of the argument that pornography harms women. (One important exception to this neglect of literature is, surprisingly enough, Andrea Dworkin, who like MacKinnon sees words as indistinguishable from actions, but who does work on literary analysis in such texts as *Pornography* and *Intercourse*.)

Sade and Masoch, however, are conspicuously literary, and translate rather poorly to other media.<sup>9</sup> Of course, both created before film or photograph, still less cheap video, was easily possible; but what is important here is not what else they might have done but what they did, the works we in fact have. (After all, neither of them chose to work in the visual arts, which more nearly approach the effects of film or photography.) MacKinnon's analysis simply does not translate across media boundaries so easily or at least so obviously as she supposes.

It would already be problematic to try to evaluate these written works by theory designed to deal with the pornographic image. In fact, though, neither Sade nor Masoch fits within the tradition or the aims even of *written* pornography. But this claim cannot be made casually, because some opponents of pornography have seen them as the paradigmatic examples of the practice. Others see "sadism" as central to pornography, understanding by the term a set of practices derived from the acts described in Sade's work (not the practices of those who consider themselves sadists in consensual contexts). Andrea Dworkin devotes an entire chapter of *Pornography: Men Op-*

pressing *Women* to Sade—the only author accorded this dubious privilege. Though her work is hugely problematic (notably for its failure to consider the relevance of language and style—works are only plots—or the distinction between physical act and text; and for its sometimes startling leaps to the assumption of causal connection), it is hardly insignificant that for a woman who is one of the leaders in the movement against pornography, Sade is *the* pornographer.

Similarly, the collection *Take Back the Night* includes an article by Susan Griffin from her book *Pornography and Silence*,<sup>10</sup> under the title “Sadism and Catharsis: The Treatment is the Disease.” Her argument here is that pornography, far from providing a cathartic outlet for a harmless release of male sadistic tendencies, in fact stimulates these destructive desires, which are presumably too much like those of the Marquis. Susan Gubar, in her article already cited, makes Sade’s *Philosophy in the Bedroom* an important part of the history of pornography. George Steiner ominously suggests “there may be deeper affinities than we as yet understand between the ‘total freedom’ of the uncensored erotic imagination [presumably responsible for pornography] and the total freedom of the sadist.”<sup>11</sup> Kathleen Barry brings this range of criticisms together, as Gubar also notes, referring to “Kathleen Barry’s point that pornographic texts and pictures which stimulate male masturbation accompanied by conscious fantasies of ‘cultural sadism,’ function as ‘handbooks or blueprints for sadistic violence, mutilation, and even gynocide.’”<sup>12</sup> These are not the only voices in the antipornography movement, even on its feminist side, but they are among its loudest, and their arguments are heard.

The reasons for the association of Sade, and to a lesser degree Masoch,<sup>13</sup> with pornography are fairly clear. If one reads casually and with a singularity of purpose that is willing to disregard the lengthy and spectacularly boring lectures on philosophy and politics, which form a considerable part of these works, and to ignore the elaborate framing devices that both authors employ, and to refuse to confront the unsettlingly deliberate failure of erotic resolution within the overtly sexual passages of text, then Sade (especially) exemplifies what these theorists consider pornography: violence in a sexual context, sexual explicitness with a focus on body parts and disregard for relationality, the degradation of women (and men, but this doesn’t seem to perturb such theorists). Masoch, again, tends to portray the degradation of *men* (but of course, one might argue, as degraded they are necessarily feminized), but in other respects his work also

fits this list of traits. Ergo, the works are pornographic. But this list of things we must ignore, to which we can add the odd use of language and the strangeness of narrative structure, are a lot to disregard. And it is in fact in these disregarded elements that Sade and Masoch's work fails as pornography and becomes something of different, perhaps greater, philosophical interest.

It is not accidental, that is, that as pornography their work is a series of failures. Their language is wrong; it is in Sade's case too clinical, in Masoch's too florid; it is too overloaded with details that contribute nothing to any discernible sexualization of a scene (Masoch is obsessed with hats and interior decorating, Sade with machines and philosophy lectures). Their structure is wrong, failing to lead to climax: Sade's narrative climaxes are immediately irrelevant (it is only the next that matters) while Masoch's never quite manage to appear. The philosophical reflections that intersperse both sets of work, though Sade's more often, would make for *very* slow one-handed reading. The pornographic tropes of explicit, repeated, poorly contextualized sexuality greatly change meaning here; they become not merely subverted but self-subverting, losing their stimulating or prescriptive "value" (which might lead to masturbation or intercourse) in their bizarre overuse. As I shall suggest, they are violent beyond any pornographic possibility; they are in love with the manifestations of death as it invades the very possibilities of language.

Without this oppositional context, these analyses of Sade and Masoch might at first seem altogether aesthetic, entirely apolitical. Thus, one would think, the pleasures here discussed must not be particularly powerful forms of subversion (even if subverting the aims of pornography ought to count). But even aside from the intrinsic interest of the literary, the classical or literary forms of Sadism and Masochism—that is, to be narrowly specific, the texts of Sade and Masoch—give us two *subversive* forms of literary pleasure. That is, they subvert our customary pleasures not only in the pornographic but also in the novelistic. They reveal to us unexpected pleasurable possibilities inherent in textuality even as they subvert our sense of narrative structure and time. Our culture's demand upon language, as Foucault has pointed out, is that of confessional speech—tell everything. The demand for utter, explicit exposure is especially pronounced in pornography (for some, this differentiates the pornographic and the erotic). But when *everything* is told, as Sade shows us, no trace of language remains. The subversion is nearly perfect:

the confessional demand is defeated by being too perfectly met. Similarly, everything, in a disciplinary culture and a disciplinary discourse, must be *articulated*—yet in these strange narratives we encounter language in the face of the inarticulable—the force of silence within language. What both writers give us is language, nonetheless; it remains language, but a language in its very detail and precision become strangely inarticulate.

This approach does not create literature that is, in any customary sense, a pleasure to read. One could quite legitimately call both Sade and Masoch very bad writers. Sade's grammar-book clarity is placed alternately in the service of grotesque anatomical detail and of numbing political rhetoric. Masoch's famous "pornography" has an unmistakable air of the worst type of romance novel, full of heaving bosoms and sartorial detail. Thus it seems reasonable to suppose that it is linguistic transgression, and not the usual reader's (or, for lack of a more polite term, wanker's) pleasure, that draws philosophers and literary theorists to both Sade and, less frequently, Masoch.

I have not, of course, analyzed every conceivable aspect of the considerable bodies of work that Sade and Masoch have left us. Rather, I have concerned myself with the ways in which these works construct *pleasure*. Because the objects of analysis are works of literature, the analyses focus on textual pleasures, particularly on their temporal structures, their forms of repetition and their peculiar rhythms.

We need to understand these pleasures, literary pleasures that language cannot survive, not only for what they can tell us about language and the possibilities of literature but also to see how different they are from the pleasures discussed in the later essays here, those of actual sadomasochistic practice beyond literature. I have attempted to keep this distinction clear by using capitalized terms (Sadism and Masochism) where referring to the literary pleasures, reserving lower-case for extratextual practices. I have not, however, "corrected" others' use of the terms.

More precisely, we need to see that the continuity of these works with the other counterpleasures is not that of simple succession or precedence. They do not redescribe the sufferings of the saints, though Masoch hints toward this. Nor are most of the acts they describe noticeably popular with practicing sadists or masochists. However, their disruptive refusal of the usual meanings of pleasure (stimulation leading to gratification), and the corresponding perversity of their subjective senses of temporality, do indeed carry over to

embodied practices. The relation of language to body is never simple, and certainly the relation of counterpleasurable literature to counterpleasurable act is not one of imitative depiction in either direction (from act to literature or vice versa). This may perhaps teach us to be careful in assuming that any practicing "sadist" acts like the Marquis de Sade of either life or text, or that Masoch himself or in the person of his protagonist Severin is a prototypical "masochist." The discussion of Sade and Masoch's texts is *not* a history of s/m, and if we are to understand any of these pleasures, then understanding *why* they differ will be important—if only to counter the claims we shall later note that these men are virtually responsible for, or at any rate identifiable with, all sadomasochistic practice.

This discontinuity of act and description, then, is important not only to an understanding of contemporary practices, but for our understanding of Sade and Masoch. We discredit both if we see them as script writers. Their works are important not because of the acts or scenes they depict, but, once more, because of their use of language (Sade's precision, at once crystalline and clinical; Masoch's feverishly imagistic detail) and their narrative structures (making, as I shall show, remarkable and divergent uses of the pleasures of repetition). They are important, if not really "good," works of literature, and literature is important, because language and art are important, and all the more so if they refuse to be reduced to the useful.

Another point follows from the fact that this discussion is not a history of sadomasochistic practice, nor an outgrowth of the more perverse strains of Christianity (though this last is not as strange a claim as it might seem. Susan Griffin insists that "every theme, every attitude, every shade of pornographic feeling has its origins in the church."<sup>14</sup> Here too the discontinuity is not complete). The distinction between representation in description and enactment in the flesh means that a literary interest is not a practical endorsement. Periodically these figures, particularly Sade, reemerge into intellectual fashion as models of transgressive daring. But if one could somehow embody Sade's pleasures in a nonliterary context (and I am not at all convinced of this possibility; Sade's I believe is a pleasure *dependent upon* textuality)<sup>15</sup>, it is hard to see how they could be defensible—Sadean pleasure depends in considerable part upon the necessary unwillingness of at least one of the parties involved in the scenes described. The relations of body and text in Sade's writing are complex and interesting, but what is most fascinating about the text—its repetition and acceleration, its grammatical purity in the face of ethical

defilement—is lost in the attempt to translate from the page to the flesh.

Much work done on sadism and masochism in recent theory has in fact come out of literary interests. The theorists themselves may be quite clear about this, as is Carol Siegel in *Male Masochism*, in which she argues that “masochism has meaning only in reference to language, [so] I will focus my investigation of it on its textual inscriptions and on some of the literary events attending its birth into history.”<sup>16</sup> Kaja Silverman bases her analysis of Sadism and sadomasochism, terms she rightly distinguishes,<sup>17</sup> on literature and film, though not all of her theoretical sources (Theodor Reik chief among them) seem to be aware of the importance of examining the practices of the flesh as well. (In fact, Reik seems to base his analysis of his patients on their fantasies rather than their practices, and Silverman is not always careful to draw this distinction.)

Unlikely as either is, it would be less politically problematic to render Masoch’s pleasure extratextual than it would be to do the same for Sade. In fact, Masoch’s fetish for contractual alliance and explicit mutual agreement is really very politically correct, and some masochists actually like *Venus in Furs*, despite occasional reservations about its style. But the more extreme form of this contractual fetishism, an immobility that denies the completion of any movement, a sensuality aimed at its own destruction, is finally foreign to the flesh and, like Sadistic acceleration, has its proper place on the page. This, of course, problematizes the Dworkin-MacKinnon style argument that would draw a straight causal line from pornography to violent behavior, or even to relatively mild behavioral displays such as masturbation.

Both Sadism and Masochism, in these classical forms, are fascinating literary structures, and their peculiar rhythms of acceleration and suspension show up in much literature that we wouldn’t generally regard as sadomasochistic, or even pornographic<sup>18</sup> or erotic. Literary investigation, however, is limited in what it can tell us about extraliterary practice. Here we find only a narrative counterpleasure, but counterpleasurable structures will already be seen to be in—and, intriguingly, slipping out of—place. Whatever the place of pornography, oppressive or liberating, it aims at arousal and the possibility of gratification, which these texts repeatedly and determinedly defy.

Here we begin in a vein at once structured and structural. It is *form* that fascinates—but, like Sade, we find ourselves most profoundly drawn by the moment of form’s self-inversion or -destruc-



tion, by its autotransgressive aspects. Anarchy, seductive though it can be, has nothing on the fascinating spectacle of self-immolating form. This self-immolation of the texts' narrative pleasure provides their link to the other counterpleasures: not only are these, like those, paradoxical; they are unsurvivable, even by the relatively disembodied, wholly discursive subject. Though I have emphasized my belief that we must avoid the terminological temptation of seeing the practices that go by the names of sadism and masochism as fully continuous with these texts, I must note again that there is a commonality of disruption, a disruption through the intensification of ordinary possibilities to the extreme at which those possibilities invert in meaning. What remains fascinating is that these texts, finally, are as pornographic as not, using the conventions of pornography (that is, its habit of presenting repeated sexual descriptions with little concern for caring, relationality, or the more personal or subjective traits of the bodies depicted) against its aims (sexual arousal and gratification). In their narrativity they must be distinguished from more bodily pleasures, but at a more abstract level, in their tendency to displace by intensification, they share a great deal. This is a level of theoretical subtlety (though it is not really very subtle) that more overtly politicized thought might wish to reject, but theory is never so rarefied as it seems. Thought, as Foucault reminds us, is always a little bit dangerous.



## Sadism

Whilst in many places the effect . . . on the reader undoubtedly is somewhat emetic, nowhere does it tend to be an aphrodisiac.

—John M. Woolsey<sup>1</sup>

Though the topics of Sadean and Masochistic pleasure have a certain prurient appeal, it may still not be immediately apparent why they should matter to us philosophically, what might be theoretically intriguing about them. What makes the perversity of classical Sadism or Masochism (that is, these literary works, as opposed to contemporary practices) philosophically interesting (and ultimately transgressive), I would suggest, is the *paradoxicality* of their pleasures.

I have already used the term “paradoxicality” in connection with the self-inversion of Freudian theory, and it has a particular fit for perversity. To say of something that it is paradoxical is not to say that it is either untrue or illusory, but that its truth is unstill, that its sense is multiple and mobile. Our word “sense” has among its original meanings that of directionality (though this meaning today is stronger in the Romance than in the Germanic languages).<sup>2</sup> Directionality is not unrelated to the understanding of “sense” as meaning: what Deleuze in *The Logic of Sense* calls “good sense” is sense that moves only in one direction, pointing us to one final truth. Paradox moves meaning in double directions at once; it is polysensuous, or, to be Freudian, polymorphously sensuous. In fact, in its refusal to follow a single straight path paradox partakes of the turning-away which is both perverse (from the Latin *perversus*, turned the wrong way) and seductive (from the Latin *seducere*, to lead aside or away).<sup>3</sup> Paradox as

polymorphously sensuous leads us (astray, seducing us) straight into the perverse. The paradox that is Sadism moves between reason and the infinite. Here we shall see three forms or aspects of this notion, touching on three senses of reason: as discursive, as free, and as objectively disinterested, each with its infinite countermovement.

The work of Donatien Alphonse François, Marquis de Sade, has had a philosophical importance altogether disproportionate to its apparent literary value—though in its way Sade’s use of literary language is extraordinary, and those philosophers who have taken his work most seriously have been theorists of the literary as well as of the philosophical, and often among those responsible for the blurring of the distinction between the two. In fact, it is in the literary oddities of Sade’s texts that their philosophical value resides, more than in the rather trite philosophical diatribes with which he punctuates them (of which Bataille accurately remarks, “the philosophical dissertations which interrupt de Sade’s narrative at the least excuse make them exhausting reading”).<sup>4</sup> The oddities and the philosophizing are not, of course, altogether separable, but Sade exemplifies better than he explains.

Many interpreters have pointed out the double impossibility of Sade’s project: it is at once incommunicable (unwriteable) and unreadable. Bataille remarks that “since language is by definition the expression of civilized man, violence is silent.”<sup>5</sup> It is their very violence, their Sadistic essence, that these texts *cannot* communicate except, to use Bataille’s formulation, in the language of the victim. Violence itself, he argues, is contrary to language and to linguistic expression.<sup>6</sup> In Bataille’s claim that violence is essentially *silent* we find an echo of Freud: the death drive, too, is silent—and this drive is, of course, destructive, fragmenting and fragmented, violent.<sup>7</sup> Anti-pornography activists argue that the (masculine) violence of pornography has the effect of silencing others (women)<sup>8</sup>—but if violence itself is silent, then the sense of destruction must take quite a different turn.

To understand the paradoxical expression of inexpressible violence we turn to the paradoxical movement of the Sadistic pleasure attained in that violence. The most readily and superficially apparent characteristic of Sadistic pleasure as it appears in Sade’s work is that it arises through the act of inflicting pain on another person (more rarely, and so far as I know in Sade’s case not at all, on animals, for reasons that will come up later). As such, it seems less puzzling, though often much more violent, than the apparently self-destruct-

tive pleasures of *receiving* pain in action or in description, the pleasures described in Masoch, or the ascetic pleasure of self-deprivation and mutilation. As it turns out, it is every bit as odd.

That the infliction of pain is violent is not a claim likely to encounter much opposition, at least when the victim is unwilling and the pain is a major motive for the act. (In fact, if we are willing to distinguish between different senses of violence, it may be violent to inflict pain even under other conditions, but this less restrictive claim would require argument that seems unnecessary here—Sade's depicted violence certainly meets the stated conditions.) More strangely, it may be violent to inflict *pleasure* as well, as also happens to the characters in Sade's texts. Here the violence arises in the forcible eliciting of undesired sensation. Still, it is not altogether clear just what (and more, just where) this violence is. What, if violence is silent, finds its way to expression in "the violently impure, monstrously . . . unwieldy Sadean text"?<sup>9</sup> If violence is silent, who or what speaks (and writes) through the Marquis de Sade? It is, as Bataille suggests, on and through the victim that Sadistic violence is communicated and written, on whom the violence of Sadistic pleasure leaves its mark, its trace, its disfigurement. Often in Sade we find stories first spoken, then corporeally inscribed, to make them real, to make them last—and then, through Sade, written, to make them last longer still—and we might note here that for at least one of Sade's interpreters, Maurice Blanchot, the real violence is in the writing. What, then, is the violence that we find inscribed—or, as we shall note, failing to be inscribed—on the bodies of those victims?

It is, to be Cartesian, a violence against "mind" as well as "body" (though the failure of this disjunction will be evident). The former will become important when we look at reason as freedom. It is in the latter, the violence against the body, that Sadism is most immediately evident. Here it becomes clear that, despite superficial similarities, the works of Sade and Masoch do not depict reciprocal perversions in which the role of the torturer and tortured are merely exchanged. Even Freud, who apparently never considered the more radical differences between Sadism and Masochism in literature or practice, recognizes this disparity, remarking in 1924 that "masochistic tortures seldom convey an impression of such seriousness as the brutalities—phantasied or actual—of sadists."<sup>10</sup> Sadean violence aims to produce pain as intense and various as possible—that is, correspondingly, pleasure as intense and prolonged as possible. To this end Sade equips his libertines with elaborate devices of torture as well as with

wildly improbable personal proportions, the better to leave their marks on the necessarily unwilling bodies of their victims.

A closer look at the nature of this marking, via Blanchot's analysis of writing, will open up a first reading of the Sadean paradox.

### marking and effacing

Effaced before being written. If the word trace can be admitted, it is as the mark that would indicate as erased what was, however, never traced. All our writing . . . would be this: the anxious search for what was never written in the present, but in a past to come.

—Maurice Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*

In Sade's texts only that which can be *told*, can be made public in words, can thus be made sense of, may be (described as being) done. If I were to say that Sade's characters can only do what can be said and then written, I should at least approach tautology; the characters have, after all, a purely textual existence. It is more interesting that Sade deliberately draws attention to the telling of stories. Many of his texts are constructed *as* the telling of stories by characters urged or forced to serve this function by other characters.

The most spectacular example of this, the *120 Days of Sodom*, is presented as a series of courtesans' stories, which are then echoed by the actions of the libertine audience. In his notes to himself at the end of the mercifully unfinished manuscript, Sade writes "above all, never have the four friends do anything until it has first been recounted. You have not been sufficiently scrupulous in that connection."<sup>11</sup> In accord with this attention to the narrative character of the novel, Sade provides an oddly postmodern commentary to the reader, for example: "and I am absolutely convinced the reader has already had occasion to be grateful for the discretion we have employed in his regard; the further he reads on, the more secure shall be our claim to his sincerest praise upon this head, why, yes, we feel we may almost assure him of it even at this early stage."<sup>12</sup> or: "A little patience, friend reader, and we shall soon hide nothing from your inquisitive gaze."<sup>13</sup> and again: "'Tis for the reader to invent the combinations and scenes he'd like best, and kindly consent to be conveyed, if 'twould please him to accompany us, directly to the throne room, where Duclos is about to resume her narrative."<sup>14</sup> Not only the reader but the writer himself is incorporated into the text: "Everyone

knows the story of the brave Marquis de S\*\*\* who, when informed of the magistrates' decision to burn him in effigy, pulled his prick from his breeches [et cetera]."<sup>15</sup>

In Sade's elaborate narrative layering we are given a hint toward one of the paradoxes, one of the necessary impossibilities, which drive the violence of Sadistic rage. It is a violence driven by rage at its own limits, the limits of textual repetition. There is a multiple repetition at work in which spoken words which recount events once enacted (the courtesans' stories of *120 Days*, the successive narrations demanded of Justine), are then rerepeated by those acts' inscriptions on the flesh of the Sadists' victims—exactly the sort of inscription that, upon the body of the courtesan or of Justine, preceded the speaking. Already suggested, and emphasized by Sade's incorporation of both reader and writer into the text, is a repetition with neither origin nor end, words before and after acts, yet another repetition of the "same"—the text as written. The written text precedes the action that it can only follow, action that took place and that can only take place in the text. Thus the writing exists in Blanchot's "past to come."

The insistence of repetition is itself a form of violence, and Sade has plenty of it. The peculiarity of repetition in inscription plays itself out as reason is of and in discourse, written as well as spoken. In Sade's work the effort to inscribe—to mark the page and the flesh—has two kinds of outcome. The first and most odd is exemplified in the person of Justine, the embodiment of structuralist linguistics. Written language, says Roland Barthes, is paradoxical: "immutably structured and yet infinitely renewable" (Justine too has this renewability), "unless," Barthes adds, "for some perverts the sentence is a *body*."<sup>16</sup> For some perverts like Sade—and, of course, like Barthes. Justine like language reappears new, pure—at times even reborn as virginal—for each retelling, for each new use. No one can inscribe her surface permanently; even the brand on her shoulder is finally removed, while her soul, of course, is eternally unsullied. She returns insistently, astonishingly, as an uninscribed surface—until inscription has its final revenge, and she is burned through and, according to the text, thoroughly disfigured, by lightning. (We shall see the contrast with Masoch, who throughout his work is preoccupied with the creation of lasting impressions.) Justine may be objectified, but she is no ordinary object.

In this lightning stroke, the second outcome of inscription appears: inscription may last only to have the surface itself disappear.

Many of Sade's libertines are thoroughly scarred in more or less disgusting ways. Many of the victims of the cloisters, convents, or castles that enclose the movements of Sade's texts retain their scars—the amputated digits and limbs of the children of *120 Days*, for example, do not grow back. But at the height of inscription—when the body has been mutilated in every conceivable fashion, or when it no longer exists as an inscribable surface, being covered over and not infrequently torn open with marks—it disappears from the text. A body that has reached a maximum of inscription is declared dead and is strikingly absent thereafter (there is surprisingly little necrophilia in Sade). When she is burned straight through, left dead and disfigured, Justine likewise vanishes; there is no more room to write on her. A fully inscribed, thus uninscribable body/page no longer exists. To inscribe every surface is to destroy both the meaning and the possibility of inscription, to write without white spaces. Inscription no longer exists: it can only be present as yet to come. Or, as Blanchot says, "writing marks, but does not leave marks."<sup>17</sup> Repetition is the mark of impermanence.

Writing's time as repetition guarantees inscription's permanent impermanence. Sade's heroes want infinite repetition, crimes of infinite reverberation, effects that will go on forever (keep repeating pain's infliction). But infinite repetition also means the impossibility of permanent inscription—it means that the blown-apart universe re-coheres, that Justine resurfaces virginal and trusting, that a fresh body replaces the vanished corpse. It is not merely as act, self-evidently violent and enraged, that Sadistic pleasure is impossible; it is impossible because it is a textual pleasure that carries within it a desperate drive to exceed the text. (That is: it is a drive to the infinitely repeatable which exceeds the discourse that is its only place.) To write is to seek permanent inscription; since Plato, we have seen the writer's act as a quest for immortality. Thus when Sade responds to the loss of his manuscript of *120 Days of Sodom* by "weeping tears of blood," as he claimed to do, he expresses the rage of impermanence as much as any perverse sociality desirous of sharing his work. Yet writing, as the quest for infinity, comes somehow both first and last without ever lasting: to write is already to mark the absence of what is written, the silence of the speaking voice, the empty space left by the once moving body.

First expression of the paradox: the impossible drive to the infinite as writing, the desire for the mark that lasts, already effaced and disappearing in its own completion.



## thought and the unthinkable

One day I counted them. Three hundred and fifteen farts in nineteen hours, or an average of over sixteen farts an hour. . . . Four farts every fifteen minutes. It's nothing. Not even one fart every four minutes. It's unbelievable. Damn it, I hardly fart at all, I should never have mentioned it.

—Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*

The second expression is hinted at in the necessary unwillingness of Sade's victims. The importance of dread and fear in his characters' victims, the importance of some *understanding* of their own plight, is one reason that animals seldom appear in Sade's texts: presumably animals lack this rational capacity.<sup>18</sup> In the Sadean text violence is always preceded by threats of violence; even if a particular act may seem unpremeditated, the victim has already been made aware of his or (more often) her potential role as victim. The victims in Sade's texts are forbidden the psychological comforts of friendship, prayer, the possibility of escape. It is imperative that the victims recognize their entrapment, the impossibility of escape, their unfreedom—the violence against their existence as free. This would put them neatly into line with the meanings of pornography, but for a pair of problems. The less significant is the number of women among the libertines (Juliette is the most spectacular, but she is not alone)—a relatively insignificant point as women too may objectify women. More important is the violence of the libertines, regardless of gender, against themselves, not just in what they do but in the satisfaction and satiation they forbid themselves.

Unwillingness is essential to Sadistic pleasure because, says one of Sade's heroes, it provides the necessary contrast by which pleasure is heightened: "It is the pleasure of comparison, a pleasure which can only be born at the sight of wretched persons. It is from the sight of him who does not in the least enjoy what I enjoy, and who suffers, that comes the charm of being able to say to oneself: 'I am therefore happier than he.'"<sup>19</sup> But what is more interesting than mere comparison, what lends Sade's discourse its paradoxicality, is the relation of its violence to reason. With the violence of the Sadistic text, and more with its constant acceleration of violence, pain, and cruelty, we edge toward the second formulation of the Sadistic paradox: Sadistic pleasure moves between reason and the infinite not only as reason is discourse, but as reason is thought and freedom—as reason is Kantian.<sup>20</sup>

Sade's works are, as more than one commentator has pointed out, exceedingly rational, and not merely because "pornography has reason on its side."<sup>21</sup> In fact, the Sadistic text often takes on the character of a mathematics textbook. This is particularly evident in *120 Days of Sodom*. Here great care is taken with the scheduling of events, with the listings of characters, their measurements, their convoluted relations to other characters.<sup>22</sup> In places this becomes rather comic, for example: "He employs eight women to frig him; each of the eight must be situated in a different posture. (This had better be illustrated by a drawing.)"<sup>23</sup> or: "In connection with that evening's entertainments, we must fully explain the character of the Saturday punishments—how they are meted out and how many lashes are distributed. You might draw up a list itemizing the crimes and, to the right, the appropriate number of lashes."<sup>24</sup> This absurd precision gives the text an odd air of Beckett, his obsessed characters counting away—or of Kant, tidying up the categories of pure reason.<sup>25</sup>

Sade presents his pursuit of pleasure as ultimately rational, in oddly Epicurean terms: "The idea of oblivion has never frightened me."<sup>26</sup> "The torch of reason is now dispersing the shadows into which superstition has plunged you."<sup>27</sup> Yet Sade's discursive rationality is self-inverting; as Pierre Klossowski points out, "Sade immediately puts universal reason into question; he makes it contradict itself by being applied."<sup>28</sup>

Some commentators, including Deleuze, see Sade's despair as reflecting the limitations of action compared with the reach of reason. This seems a legitimate reading. But it may also be that the violent activity of Sadism *is* that of reason—that reason really is every bit as violent as Sadism suggests, that Sade is perhaps more like Kant than we have supposed. The raging frustration of the Sadist would be the frustration of Kantian reason: the inability to burst *all* bounds, to transgress all limits, to conquer the infinite. Deleuze's claim that Sade is enraged by the inability of his actual or enacted crimes to match reason's scope seems to separate reason and violence. My own reading is closer to that of Bataille, who claims that "discursive thought is evinced by an individual engaged in action,"<sup>29</sup> linking rather than unjoining the two. Elsewhere he notes that "de Sade's doctrine is nothing more or less than the logical consequence of these moments that deny reason. By definition, excess stands outside reason."<sup>30</sup> This implies the paradoxical movement of Sadistic action toward the infinite: reason, as both discourse and violence, undone from within by the very force of its own movement.

Reason destroys itself by pushing toward the excess that stands outside it, following reasonably, as a matter of logical consequence, what turns out to defy it.

Kant links reason to freedom: it is through reason that we are free. We are free rational beings, and to be either free or rational entails both. When one recognizes the nature of one's own freedom, one is forced by that very recognition to grant freedom to all rational beings.<sup>31</sup> Reason as freedom therefore limits freedom: because of the way in which we are free (that is, as rational), we may not act as we please.

Within the Kantian system, reason is a regulative faculty with regard to cognition—to thought—as well as action.<sup>32</sup> It makes systems in which every thing is to be included, in its proper place; what falls outside the system has no place.

Our great rationalists and systematizers of reason, from Descartes to Kant and Hegel, would have been appalled, or even infuriated, by the notion of there being anything left over, any excess. Reason is never excessive; it is always precisely enough. Things left over imply bad mathematics. Sade, yet another great (though entirely perverse) rationalist, is perturbed by bad mathematics. Notes at the ends of the second and third sections of the *120 Days* finish the series of stories with a calculation of their number and the editorial remark "find out why there is one too many."<sup>33</sup> Yet where Descartes curbs his will to maximize his reason (setting reason's limits at what is clearly and distinctly revealed by the natural light),<sup>34</sup> Sade urges will's full force, delighting precisely in breaking every limit he can find. Where Kant uses reason to set limits to exhort philosophers to remain within them,<sup>35</sup> Sade sets limits solely to have the pleasure of going beyond them; he is only sorry that he cannot conceive of a crime still greater than the annihilation of the universe and its God. Where Hegel carefully uses reason to gather seeming contradiction into a greater synthesis, which finally omits nothing,<sup>36</sup> Sade uses reason to push beyond reason, to rip his world apart as his characters dismember their victims.

Good systems of reason are constructed to include all possible knowledge. Sade must strive for impossible knowledge, for what exceeds all boundaries and defies all possible inclusion. He must push beyond what the most tolerant citizen of the most liberal republic could accept; to be accepted or tolerated is to be contained within. His characters strive for the unacceptable—not merely that which would perturb society matrons or textbook committees, but that

which cannot come within the compass of any acceptance, the crime that would blow apart the universe. The Sadistic hero is enraged by the limit that appears as soon as reason, which should promise the infinite, emerges. The infinite opposes reason from within reason: it threatens to use reason to destroy reason.

Reason by its very nature requires and sets limits; it may be self-limiting (limited by no other force) but it is never unlimited. Sadism is driven by a passion for the unlimited, which comes out of reason itself but can only use reason to move toward the infinite: hence the counterrational demand that the victims of reason be free rational beings. All rational men, and not a few women, are frightened by infinity.<sup>37</sup> The infinite suggests that there are no limits—but reason is the process of setting limits, of placing concepts into their proper niches.

Sade's characters, to say it again, wish for crimes of infinite reverberation. They demand pleasures of infinite (unexperientable) intensity—as we shall see, for the sake of intensity they will take pleasure through the detour of apathy and ultimately disregard "pleasure" itself. Reason says, "This is enough. Resist the temptation to go beyond it." The infinite poses precisely this temptation; Sade's imperative is to resist the urge to remain within limits. He systematically sets about exceeding any possible system, any conceivable order, any stretch of comprehension. Sade must demand the infinite, that which goes beyond conception, that which defies the limits that unlimited reason so unfairly places. While ordinary pornographers may enjoy the sense of freedom that so worried George Steiner, the freedom of the Sadean hero is far from total; it is by its own rationality self-inverting.

### apathy and intensity

Detached from everything, including detachment.

—Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

It is not altogether clear, if it is evident at all, how this movement between reason and infinity is a movement constitutive of a particular sort of *pleasure*. A third description of the paradox, implicit in what has already been said, may be more persuasive. This is a movement more clearly of pleasure, that between apathy and intensity. This formulation, too, should clarify the paradoxical *self*-destructiveness of reason.

Sade himself is explicit about the value of apathy, even of insensibility, and his interpreters have made much of the point. Bataille sees apathy as the very source of libertine ferocity:

All the great libertines who live only for pleasure are great only because they have destroyed in themselves all their capacity for pleasure. . . . They have made themselves insensitive; they intend to exploit their insensitivity, that sensitiveness they have denied and destroyed and they become ferocious. Cruelty is nothing but a denial of oneself carried so far that it becomes a destructive explosion; insensibility sets the whole being aquiver, says de Sade.<sup>38</sup>

Note the interesting, and at first glance odd, claim linking Sadism and self-denial. Klossowski, whose interpretation of Sade is much influenced by Bataille,<sup>39</sup> interprets Sade's "You shall have acquired the habit of doing evil" as "the purpose of the deliberate apathetic reiteration"<sup>40</sup>—thus Sade becomes a sort of inverted Aristotle. Simone de Beauvoir links this apathy to Stoic and Epicurean indifference, thus emphasizing the relationship of apathy to reason: "hedonism ends in ataraxia, which confirms the paradoxical relation between sadism and stoicism."<sup>41</sup> Both pleasure *and reason* deny themselves—Sade's is a surprisingly thorough negation. It is in its deliberate and explicit valuation of apathy that the Sadean text moves most clearly beyond both teleology and the pornographic. Apathy refuses gratification: its aim is the resistance of aim, vital to the desire to be thrown outside time into infinite reiteration. Yet only a sufficient intensification can generate an adequately violent explosion.

It seems improbable that Sade's characters should be apathetic. After all, Sade makes a point of the frequency of their sexual activity. They are continually seeking, it seems, to inflame their own desire, and are enraged by the occasional failure of their objects to excite them. The constantly increasing intensity of the violence inflicted in the *120 Days* suggests that the four friends who are its heroes are at pains to keep from becoming jaded, to keep their lives interesting. In tandem with them, the text accelerates both rhythmically and descriptively: the stories shorten, the frames become more elaborate, the acts are intended to be more shocking.

However, it is precisely the numbing effect of this intensity at which the Sadistic libertine, with his author, aims—or more accurately, this effect which is at once numbing and inflammatory. Sade

writes of one such hero that “he was just as much an atheist, an iconoclast, a criminal after having shed his fuck as when, before, he had been in a lubricious ferment, and that precisely is how all wise, level-headed people should be.”<sup>42</sup> “Sensitivity proves weakness,” says Sade.<sup>43</sup> Other passages in Sade suggest the accuracy of Bataille’s observation, linking apathy to the source of Sadistic desire: “His presence of mind once restored, his frenzy was immediately replaced by the most complete indifference to the infamies wherewith he had just indulged himself, and of this indifference, of this kind of apathy, further sparks of lechery would be born almost at once.”<sup>44</sup>

We might be willing, perhaps, to concede that intensity leads, or can lead, to apathy. We have all been to some extent benumbed, if not by Sade’s texts, then by television footage of war, by newspaper accounts of child abuse, by all the reasonable discourse on violence. The secret of Sadistic apathy is that it also engenders intensity, that it is of indifference that its violent lechery is born, and likewise its still more violent pleasure: “The soul,” says Blanchot, “passes on to a kind of apathy that is metamorphosed into pleasures a thousand times more wonderful than those that their weaknesses procured them.”<sup>45</sup> Juliette prescribes apathy after being chastised for her lack of it; her first crimes are too passionate. Deleuze notes of another character that “enthusiasm is precisely what [Sade] dislikes in Rétif, and he could rightly say (as he always did when justifying himself publicly) that he at least had not depicted vice as pleasant or gay but apathetic. This apathy does of course produce intense pleasure, but ultimately it is . . . the pleasure of negating . . . the ego itself. It is in short the pleasure of demonstrative reason.”<sup>46</sup> (That is, it is the pleasure of reason in negating the individual, personal, subjective, and passionate. Once more we note a divergence from the traditionally active, engaged, and pleased subject—the man who triumphs over women-as-objects—of stereotypical pornography.)

On the other side of apathy, moving in the opposite direction, we find intensity. Indeed, Jane Gallop suggests that, on Bataille’s interpretation of Sade, pleasure is deliberately transformed into pure intensity: “the intense pleasure must be so violently extreme that it is no longer pleasure but simply pure intensity.”<sup>47</sup> The *120 Days*, most clearly of all Sade’s works, is an effort to build to an infinite intensity of violence, an effort that finally ascends into absurdity, beyond the possibilities even of Sade’s bizarrely creative use of language. Thus one of the last scenes of *120 Days*:

Then her nerves are laid bare in four adjacent places, the nerve ends are tied to a short stick which, like a tourniquet, is twisted thus drawing forth the aforesaid nerves, which are very delicate parts of the human anatomy and which, when mistreated, cause the patient to suffer much. Augustine's agonies are unheard-of.<sup>48</sup>

After this Sade's descriptive powers come down to: "the most refined tortures are put to use . . . they are all much more painful, more severe than the others employed upon Augustine."<sup>49</sup> The intensity of Sadistic violence is responsible, nearly as much as the philosophical interludes, for the unreadability of Sade's texts. But, as I have suggested, violence can only go so far. Sade is perhaps as much disheartened as he is philosophically excited by the possibility of actually enumerating all the possible permutations of erotic violence. Certainly his characters are not merely disheartened but enraged at the limitations they see on their own abilities, lamenting the fact that "there are . . . but two or three crimes to perform in this world, and they, once done, there's no more to be said; all the rest is inferior, you cease any longer to feel. Ah, how many times, by God, have I not longed to be able to assail the sun, snatch it out of the universe, make a general darkness, or use that star to burn the world! oh, that would be a crime, oh yes, and not a little misdemeanor such as are all the ones we perform."<sup>50</sup> Similarly, one character urges the others on to "whatever infamy you wish to propose, even if it were to dismember Nature and unhinge the universe."<sup>51</sup> (That not everything repeated is physical violence suggests that Deleuze is right in his claim that Sade is attempting to create violence by sheer force of repetition, a violence as much against the sensibilities as against the corporeal subject.<sup>52</sup>)

It is here that Sade's precise language becomes so important. The precision of detail and clarity of structure both reinforce the repetition—the exactness of similarity, the minute detail that pushes each perversion further—and highlight the violence, all the more shocking in that it is never *out of control*—it never burns the world nor unhinges the universe.

Sade's violence is not admirable—"To admire Sade is to diminish the force of his ideas,"<sup>53</sup> as Bataille writes, or, as Blanchot says, "To say, I like Sade, is to have no relation at all to Sade. Sade cannot be liked, no one can stand him."<sup>54</sup> To like Sade is to defy the demand for apathy as well as to ignore the deliberate outrage Sade perpetrates on every civilized sensibility that he can recall. His unad-

mirable violence is, however, impressive. It is also repetitive; its intensity builds in its repetition, and yet it is only by repetition that the necessary apathy can be cultivated.

Some of Sade's repetition is simply repetitiveness. Inventive though he is, and insistent upon fine distinctions, in the course of his work much is repeated, and at certain points even the most patient (or perverse) reader is likely to be moved to great weariness at the notion of yet another detailed portrayal of yet another vigorous "embuggering" by yet another oversized male member. Repetition is essential to the oddly intense and demonstratively rational pleasure of apathy; "it is through the intermediary of description and the accelerating and condensing effect of repetition that the demonstrative function achieves its strongest impact."<sup>55</sup> Repetition's effect is crucial both to reason—everything must be iterated, however like what came before, however redundant it may seem—and to infinity, again and again, more and more, without limit. (Though much pornography seems repetitious, seldom is the effect so clearly relevant to the movement of the text.) Apathy displays reason's objective disinterest. Intensity demands infinite sensation and builds from within apathy to render both impossible even as both are attained in repetition.

Pierre Klossowski sees Sade's *time*, the repetitive time in which the text occurs, as that of the dream, space of infinite repetition. Sade brings, as Bataille has pointed out, violence (the essentially silent force of the unconscious death drive) to consciousness.<sup>56</sup> In Sade, Klossowski argues, consciousness deliberately makes itself an accomplice to its own invasion by "dark" forces; it casts itself "suicidally" into the time of infinite reiteration.<sup>57</sup> Sade never gets to the object of his reverie, of his waking dream or masturbatory fantasy; he suffers, Klossowski writes, from constantly being-in-potency.<sup>58</sup>

Finally this is the most notable trait of Sadistic violence: it is *never enough*, however-too-much it may be for the reader. Never enough, an impossible demand for the infinite, for the near immortality that repetition gives to the Sadistic gesture. Deleuze remarks: "The sadistic hero appears to have set himself the task of thinking out the Death Instinct (pure negation) in a demonstrative form, and is only able to achieve this by multiplying and condensing the activities of component negative or destructive instincts."<sup>59</sup> But of course the Death Instinct proper is inaccessible to the light, to reason—thus to reason to death is to destroy reason itself. Sadistic pleasure depends upon an extreme eroticization of the death drive, and is as paradoxical as ei-



ther instinct within it. "The fact is," writes Bataille, "that what de Sade was trying to bring to the surface of the conscious mind was precisely the thing that revolted that mind . . . From the very first he set before the consciousness things which it could not tolerate."<sup>60</sup> Kaja Silverman, in her analysis of Fassbinder's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, writes that "Sadistic ecstasy . . . hinges upon a 'swelling' of the self."<sup>61</sup> One need only add that the self is swollen to explosion.

The final Sadean violence is not against the other, the body of the victim, but against consciousness itself, using its own methods—its own iterative, discursive, and free rationality—to bring into it the potent force of destruction, the infinite intensity of repetition. When everything has been said again, all sense is shattered. Sade is the absurd culmination of Enlightenment rationalism; in his texts reason is pushed to the limit at which it negates its ostensibly pleasurable and liberatory character.