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Since the Enlightenment, one of the most persistent countertendencies in Western art and writing has evolved around the ideas and narratives of Donatien Alphonse François de Sade, otherwise known as the Marquis de Sade (1740–1814).¹ In Sade’s own lifetime his libertine novels were published anonymously but became best sellers: *Justine, ou Les malheurs de la vertu* (*Justine, or The Misfortunes of Virtue*; 2 vols., 1791, followed by five editions in ten years); the equally explicit but more pedagogical *La philosophie dans le boudoir* (*Philosophy in the Bedroom*; 2 vols., 1795), which contained the now infamous political tract “Français, encore un effort si vous voulez être républicains” (“Yet Another Effort, Frenchmen, if You Would Become Republicans”); and *La nouvelle Justine, ou Les malheurs de la vertu, suivie de L’histoire de Juliette, sa soeur* (*The New Justine, or the Misfortunes of Virtue, Followed by the Story of Juliette, Her Sister*, 10 vols., 1797).² *Les 120 journées de Sodome, ou L’école du libertinage* (*The 120 Days of Sodom, or The School of Libertinism*), which Sade wrote on long scrolls in his cell in the Bastille in 1785, was presumed lost until it resurfaced and was published in 1904. In his own lifetime Sade experienced repression, imprisonment, and censorship and narrowly missed the guillotine, but he was considered an icon of free and subversive expression by much of the twentieth-century avant-garde, and his distinctive concept of “philosophy in the bedroom” was seized as a radical engagement with sexual desire, society, and politics.³ Many writers, artists, dramatists, and filmmakers embraced Sadean sexual terror and taboo as a means to make people see and think differently. They recognized that while it is not easy to read Sade’s fiction, it is impossible to forget it once you have: his work brings sex and terror, aesthetics and ethics, crashing together, demanding an active engagement with what I call “the Sadean imagination.”

The Sadean Imagination

By Sadean imagination I mean a Sadean world, created in the imagination, in which our understanding of humanity is expanded through an exploration of humankind’s dark, sexually explicit, violent, and cruel nature.⁴ Within this imaginary locus, power is played out by and on sexual bodies without any concession to law, religion, or public decency, in keeping with Sade’s assertion that “[m]orals do not depend on us; they have to do with our construction, our organization.”⁵ In this way, it is not only the imagination and its every possible terrifying desire that are unbridled in the Sadean universe but the very notion of taboo itself and its civilizing mission. My focus in this book is on the avant-garde’s turn to the Sadean imagination for the creation of individual or collective situations and experiences that propose, hypothesize, or imply the possibility of a better reality. The writers, artists, dramatists, and filmmakers I concentrate on adhere to a particular sense of art as praxis, a progressive weaponizing of the imagination and

creativity. Some approach Sade's writings by indirect inspiration—Man Ray (1890–1976), André Masson (1896–1987), Hans Bellmer (1902–75), and Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–75). Some created pastiches of the Sadean novel—Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918), Robert Desnos (1900–1945), Dominique Aury (born Anne Desclos, 1907–98). Others execute biographical depictions of a fictionalized Sade—Peter Weiss (1916–82) and Peter Brook (b. 1925), or celebrate the collective and transgressive potential of the Sadean imagination—Guy Debord (1931–94) and Jean-Jacques Lebel (b. 1936). They all insist that “one must allow one's imagination free play,” to borrow the words of Sade's heroine Juliette.⁶

Whether one is disgusted or excited by Sade's fictional plots, with their obsessive cruelty and abject detail, whether one sides with his virtuous Justine or the amoral Juliette, Sade's storytelling draws the reader into an active world of eighteenth-century libertinage where liberty itself is the real protagonist.⁷ In the twentieth century, notably with the birth of the new avant-garde movement of surrealism and contemporary movements such as existentialism, situationism, and happenings, a complex dialogue developed between Sade and visual artists and writers who were inspired by his persona and writings. Further, their efforts ensured that Sade and his writings had to be taken seriously by intellectuals and philosophers. Sade's fiction seemed to offer a pitiless mirror of humanity but also a series of metaphors of subversive value, allowing for the exploration of political, sexual, and psychological terror. It pushed the boundaries of the body and body politic, offering a literature of “absolute solitude” and “absolute domination,” as Maurice Blanchot claimed in 1949.⁸ According to Peter Bürger in his influential study *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), the avant-garde's intent was to make art the organizing center of life, to abolish the idea of autonomous art, and integrate art into “the praxis of life.”⁹ When the avant-garde's sociopolitical ambitions are conjoined with the Sadean imagination, we find an uncensored aesthetics of terror wherein the forces of the unconscious are unleashed and libidinal drives are configured as sources of emancipatory revolution.

This book traces an arc from the French Revolution to the early twenty-first century. In the earlier period, my analysis revolves around the “Terror,” a particularly repressive phase of the French Revolution, when the Committee of Public Safety enacted a draconian regime of political repression against its domestic enemies in 1793–94, which resulted in tens of thousands of violent deaths.¹⁰ In this era, the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* of 1798 defined terror as “[e]motion caused in the soul by the image of a great evil or a great danger; dread, great fear”—a definition that resonated with new force following the Terror, which came to serve the French Revolution and its association with revolutionary tribunals and the guillotine, and which persists to this day.¹¹ Indeed, it was after the fall of

Maximilian de Robespierre (1758–94) on July 27, 1794, and his execution on July 28, 1794, that the alignment of terror with revolution that had marked his reign quickly changed to the alignment of terror with tyranny, complete with the coining of a new term “terrorist” to denote “an agent or partisan of the regime of the Terror, which took place as a result of the abuse of revolutionary measures.”¹²

In the twentieth century, the idea of terror as a physical response to a text or image was seized on by writers and artists to craft a form of resistance, aligning their terrifying art with revolutionary goals and discourse. Their strategy emerged at a time when the use of the term “terror” expanded greatly to describe oppressive regimes from European imperialism to Nazism, Stalinism, and beyond. They chose to depict or imply a threat of violent death to the body in order to take a stand against despotic regimes of terror while not simply equating one with the other. Unlike horror, terror does not involve paralysis; rather, it elicits a response, as its etymology suggests (from the Latin *terreo* and *tremo*, “to tremble”).¹³ We might recall Sade’s contemporary Edmund Burke, who interpreted terror as the ruling principle of the sublime (though he did not equate them): it typically overwhelms, but when experienced from a distance can cause delight: “When danger or pain press too near, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful.”¹⁴ Sade and his modern-day followers exploited this tension between danger and delight as they aimed for immersive explorations of terror, whether through excessive syntax, orgiastic descriptions or improvisations, a scream, or a blank cinema screen.

Virtue, Vice, and Gender Politics

Sade’s idea of “philosophy in the bedroom” has been hugely influential even if it has rarely won widespread support.¹⁵ It has created especially heated debate among feminist cultural critics. For example, in an interview in 1998, Nancy Miller insisted libertinage was an intrinsically male will to master that could not be framed within a liberationist politics.¹⁶ Yet in the same decade, Camille Paglia argued that “[n]o education in the western tradition is complete without Sade. He must be confronted, in all his ugliness.”¹⁷ For Paglia, Sade does enable liberationist, feminist politics, especially through the figure of the “Great Mother,” a supreme fictional character she describes as a “pagan cannibal, her dragon jaws dripping sperm and spittle.”¹⁸ It is Sade’s particular focus on feminine virtues and on the female protagonist in his libertine novels that is the focus of my feminist analysis of his “philosophy in the bedroom” and his cultural legacy. *Vertu* (virtue) took on near mythical powers during the French Revolution, when it fused politics and ethics and became the terrifying

embodiment of republicanism itself. Robespierre would famously align terror and virtue in his speech of February 5, 1794, to the French National Convention, stating, “If the mainspring of popular government in peacetime is virtue, amid revolution it is at the same time [both] virtue and terror: virtue, without which terror is fatal; terror, without which virtue is impotent.”¹⁹ Soon after, Louis de Saint-Just (1767–94) asserted, “Monarchy is not a king, it is a crime; the republic is not a senate, it is a virtue.”²⁰ Etymologically “virtue” is gendered: its Latin root is *vir*, meaning “man,” aligning it with rational (masculine) control and indicating that the moral good of the individual benefited the moral good of the public.²¹ Fusing a critical consideration of the politics of virtue with feminist theory allows Sade’s sexual and textual terrorism to be appreciated in new ways. The role of the female in Sade’s libertine philosophy and novels links all the chapters in this book as well as my selection of artistic case studies—from my reading in chapter 1 of the popular caricatures of Marie Antoinette (1755–93) as a bad mother and insatiable harlot in pornographic prints and pamphlets in Sade’s day, to the tortured young girl, Renata, in Pier Paolo Pasolini’s feature film *Salò, o Le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (*Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*) of 1975, discussed in the conclusion.

My stance is indebted to both French and Anglo-American feminist debate on Sade. Especially pertinent to my analysis is Luce Irigaray’s observation of 1976 that Sade’s fiction brought women’s pleasure into play, the libertine text enticing women to enjoy each other sexually and forcing the reader to reflect on “the function of women’s sexual pleasure” in the process. However, I do not see his libertine women as “phalocrats,” trained in a quintessentially masculinist, phallocentric sexual economy, as she does.²² Rather, I agree with Jane Gallop that Sade’s writings may be read as examples of thinking and writing “through the body,” with readers finding “the image of their own unspeakable, aggressive desire” in his monstrous characters.²³ But I also want to think about how Sade’s female roles go beyond the traditional feminine body—of mother and whore, young virgin and old crone—and focus on the female as libertine philosopher. This new imago may be of any age and brings the body and mind seamlessly together in libertine acts and speech. For example, in Sade’s fictional sisters Justine and Juliette we find two radically different female characters, one the embodiment of innocence, the other of libertinage, despite sharing the same sex, family, and education. Nature and nurture are thus put to the test in their shared story, which Sade rewrote three times, elaborating his pedagogy with more lavish, detailed forms of “education” for each. Justine reveals nature at her cruelest, despite her virtuous ways, and ultimately dies at her hand (a bolt of lightning), while Juliette is the executioner of nature’s cruelty, as exemplified by her torture of her father, as we shall see in chapter 1. Traditional roles and supposedly natural female instincts are challenged

or done away with in their tale, and a brave new world of cruelty and terror that knows no gender boundaries is promoted in its place.

Gender is often queered and the phallus mocked in the Sadean school of thought. Consider, for example, the twenty-year-old nun Madame de Volmar in *Juliette*, whose three-inch clitoris enables her “to play the role of a man and a pederast,” as Iwan Bloch, the sexologist and first biographer of Sade, puts it in his analysis of tribadism in Sade’s novels in 1901.²⁴ Or the banker Durcet, who owns the château in *The 120 Days of Sodom* and has feminine breasts, hips, and buttocks, a small penis, and a penchant for coprophilia—details in which Pasolini revels in his later film homage to Sade, *Salò*. The opening up of sexuality beyond heteronormative boundaries was central to the turn to Sade of the 1960s counterculture, as witnessed in Jean-Jacques Lebel’s happening *120 minutes dédiées au divin Marquis* (*120 minutes dedicated to the divine Marquis*, 1966), in which a key role was played by the transsexual Cynthia, as we shall see in chapter 4.

The various artists I examine in this book search for innovation in expression and for radical change in the sociopolitical realm as they turn to Sade, some playfully, some more seriously, all sharing an open or “sliding” (*glissement*) notion of Sadean transgression.²⁵ While I have no desire to glorify or absolve Sade’s writings of their terror, or to celebrate transgression for its own sake, the open applicability of the transgressive Sadean imagination across moments in the history of the avant-garde is central to an operation which demands that the boundaries of both society and nature, the self and sexuality, are continually challenged. Sade’s belief that the creative act must go beyond the real still resonates for art and society today. He writes in “Notes on the Novel” (1800): “Let [the novelist] give way to the mastery of his imagination; let him embellish what he has seen . . . let your inventions be well presented; you will not be pardoned [for] putting your imagination in the place of truth, except where this is done in order to ornament and dazzle.”²⁶

The Marquis de Sade: Man and Myth

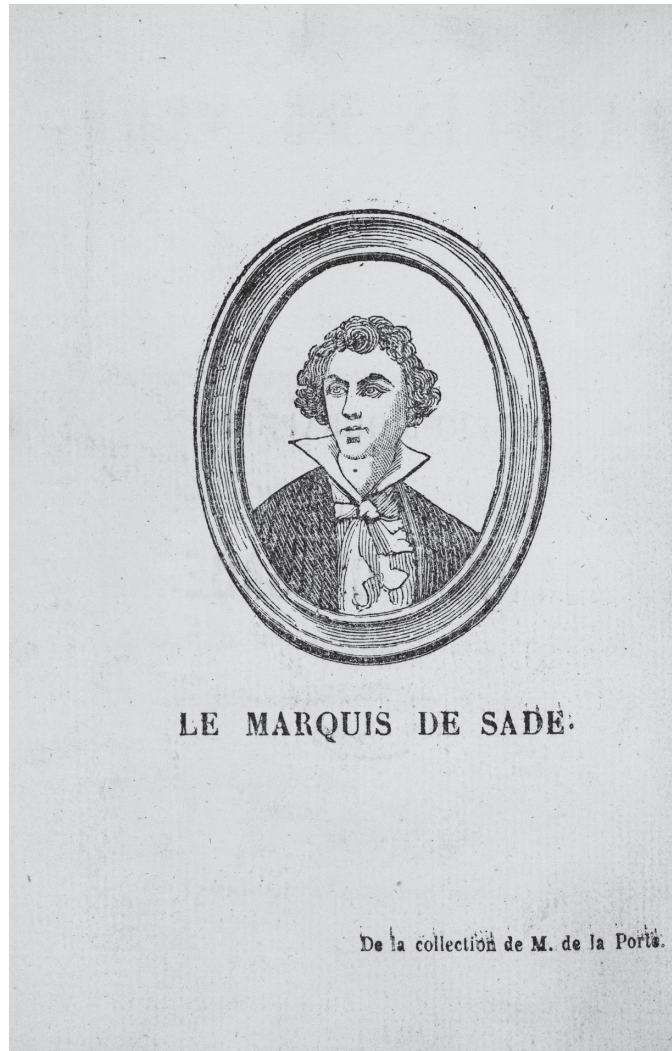
Beginning in the early twentieth century, the Marquis de Sade became an almost mythical embodiment of the total freedom of the imagination. However, his name was invoked considerably earlier to define “sadism” in the *Dictionnaire universel de la langue française* (Universal dictionary of the French language, 1834), which described it as a “terrifying aberration of debauchery, a monstrous and antisocial system that revolts nature.”²⁷ In that same year, Jules Janin published an essay on Sade in which he deemed his writings to be “foul” (*ordurier*).²⁸ His synopsis of Sade’s imaginary world remains an apt one—“bloody corpses, children torn from the arms of their mothers, girls having their throats cut at the end of an orgy, cups full of blood and wine, extraordinary tortures . . . in every page in every line.”²⁹

Also memorable is his synopsis of the challenge such a world imposed on the reader: “How his hands tremble . . . he finds himself beset by these wretched phantoms.”³⁰ Sade’s works were known to only a small group of writers in the nineteenth century—notably, Stendhal (1783–1842), Gustave Flaubert (1821–80), Charles Baudelaire (1821–67), Guy de Maupassant (1850–93), Arthur Rimbaud (1854–91), and Algernon Swinburne (1837–1909), who described Sade as a fatalist who “saw to the bottom of men and gods.”³¹ *Les crimes de l’amour* (*The Crimes of Love*), published under Sade’s own name in 1800, was widely available in France, and English translations of three stories (“Florville and Courval, or Fatality,” “Dorgeville,” and “Fax-elange”) appeared in *The London Pioneer: Utility, Instruction, Amusement and Information, for All Ages, Sexes, and Classes*, on February 17, 1848.³² His name was better known in medical circles, however, as evidenced in Richard von Krafft-Ebbing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis, with Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Forensic Study* (1886), in which von Krafft-Ebbing effectively criminalized Sade by stating he was a “monster” for whom sexual satisfaction only occurred “when he could prick the object of his desire until the blood came.”³³ In “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality” (1905), Sigmund Freud explained sadism as an “instinct for mastery” linked with the second pregenital, anal phase of the infant’s sexual organization, when the child realizes he/she holds power over the parent (the external object) through the production or withholding of feces.³⁴ This phase is not to be read as gender specific (masculine or feminine) and is pre-Oedipal, but if the infant does not progress beyond it, he/she may turn to sadism or masochism in later sexual life. Further, Freud noted that sadism and masochism are interchangeable, writing, “A person who feels pleasure in producing pain in someone else in a sexual relationship is also capable of enjoying as pleasure any pain which he may himself derive from sexual relations. A sadist is always at the same time a masochist, although the active or the passive aspect of the perversion may be the more strongly developed in him and represent his predominant sexual activity.”³⁵

It was not until the poet Guillaume Apollinaire published *L’oeuvre du Marquis de Sade* (*The works of the Marquis de Sade*) in 1909, with the aim of rescuing Sade’s writings from the forbidden collection or “hell” [*Enfer*] of libraries, that Sade’s work became not just more widely circulated but specifically promoted by vanguard writers and artists and aligned with freedom.³⁶ The scroll of Sade’s *The 120 Days of Sodom* took on cult status, not least as material proof of the compulsive power of the imagination, even when an individual is deprived of freedom. Sade wrote the book in an erotic reverie over thirty-seven days in October and November 1785, when he was in prison in the Bastille on criminal charges of poisoning and sodomy. He was unable to smuggle the manuscript out of his cell when he was transferred in the middle of the night, “naked as a maggot,” to the Charenton asylum on

July 3, 1789.³⁷ It was thought to have been taken by Madame de Sade when she cleared Sade's Bastille cell of its belongings—his papers, his library of six hundred books, furniture, and personal effects—on July 9, 1789, or destroyed in the storming of the Bastille on July 14. It was actually secreted away from his cell by one Arnoux de Saint-Maxim and later purchased by a Provençal aristocrat whose family kept it until the turn of the twentieth century. It was then discovered and published in Berlin in 1904 in a limited subscription edition of two hundred copies by Iwan Bloch, who introduced the work as an exploration of “the sexual life of man” in his preface.³⁸ In 1929, the scroll was bought by the French nobleman and patron of the avant-garde Charles de Noailles and his wife, Marie-Laure de Noailles, a descendant of Sade; they shared it with many members of the surrealist circle in Paris.³⁹ A distinctive aura grew around the document not only for its notoriously shocking content but for its association with the French Revolution and the destruction of the Bastille, a symbol of despotism to this day.⁴⁰ Indeed, the scroll's history has continued to resonate: it was given an estimated valuation of six million euros when put on display at the Hôtel Drouot auction house in Paris in December 2017, only to be declared a national treasure by the French government and withdrawn from the sale.

Because Sade, as figurehead of the repressed author and thinker, increasingly became a subject of great interest and inspiration, so his portrait came to fascinate avant-garde artists. In a lecture delivered in London in 1936, the surrealist poet Paul Éluard (1890–1976) glorified the libertine while reminding his audience that “[t]here is no portrait of the Marquis de Sade in existence. It is significant that there is none of Lautréamont either. The faces of these two fantastic and revolutionary writers, the most desperately audacious that ever were, are lost in the night of the ages.”⁴¹ However, two nineteenth-century “fantasy” portraits were known to the surrealist circle, and a pencil portrait would be discovered in the aftermath of World War II. The fantasy portraits were effectively caricatures of the libertine that served the dominant image of him as a monstrous mind and threat to the status quo. In the first, Sade appears as a Romantic rogue with dark curls and a dandy bow tie in the frontispiece to Janin's *Le Marquis de Sade* (1834) (fig. 1), in which Janin explained that “in all the libraries [Sade] sits on a certain mysterious and hidden row that one always finds; it is one of those books that are normally placed behind St. John Chrysostom, or Nicole's *Traité de morale* [*Treatise on Ethics*], or Pascal's *Pensées* [*Thoughts*].”⁴² The second was an engraving made in the Restoration period and published in Henri d'Alméras's *Le Marquis de Sade: L'homme et l'écrivain* (The Marquis de Sade: The man and the writer, 1906) (fig. 2) and Apollinaire's *L'oeuvre du Marquis de Sade*. There, Sade is a more devilish figure, surrounded by two satyrs, a crest consisting of a whip and a jester's hat, and a vignette showing him writing in his prison cell.⁴³



1. *Le Marquis de Sade* (Collection M. de la Porte), frontispiece to Jules Janin, *Le Marquis de Sade* (Paris: Chez les marchands de nouveautés, 1834).

In contrast to these fictional images, *Portrait de jeune marquis de Sade* (*Portrait of the Young Marquis de Sade*) (fig. 3) is said to have been drawn by Charles Amédée Philippe Van Loo around 1760–62, when Sade was fighting in the Seven Years' War (1756–63) as a captain of the Burgundy Cavalry. A pencil portrait, it was most likely a preparatory work for an oil painting destroyed during the revolution.⁴⁴ Around 1950, a member of the Sade family showed it to the writer Georges Bataille (1897–1962), who negotiated its purchase by his good friend, the writer, art critic, and collector Robert Lebel (1901–86).⁴⁵ In Van Loo's portrait, Sade appears with an almost girlish



2. *Le Marquis de Sade* (d'après une gravure de la Restauration) (*The Marquis de Sade* [After an Engraving from the Restoration]), frontispiece to Henri d'Almeras, *Le Marquis de Sade: L'homme et l'écrivain* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1906).

profile in keeping with contemporary accounts of his “delicate, pale face” and “feminine charm” at that young stage of his life, as recounted by Bloch.⁴⁶ It is a romantic image, completed for a larger work just prior to his marriage in May 1763 to the wealthy Renée-Pélagie de Montreuil (1741–1810).⁴⁷ A modest and traditional work in composition and style, it still reveals much about self-fashioning in the mid-eighteenth century. As Michael Fried asserts in *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (1980), “[P]ortraiture could never be de-theatricalized: it was always predicated, even in the private realm of domesticity, on the presence

of a spectator.”⁴⁸ Commissioning Van Loo presumably played to Sade’s aristocratic circle, insofar as Van Loo was an artist of notable pedigree and popular with courtly circles. He was born in Rivoli, near Turin, to a famous family of Flemish painters who subsequently moved to France. His father, Jean Baptiste Van Loo (1684–1745), was also a respected portrait painter, and his uncle, Carle Van Loo (1705–65), was appointed the *peintre du roi* to Louis XV (1710–74) in 1762. The younger Van Loo became portraitist to the Prussian King Friedrich II and his court in Berlin in 1748 but in 1759 moved to Paris, where he was given a teaching post at the École des Beaux-Arts and a studio at the Louvre, and painted *Portrait allégorique du roi Louis XV représenté par les vertus* (*Allegorical Portrait of King Louis XV Represented by the Virtues*, 1762). Later he also painted a series of four tapestry cartoons, *Le costume turc* (*The Turkish Costume*, 1772–75), woven at the Gobelins factory and supposedly commissioned by Louis XV’s official mistress, Madame du Barry (1743–93). In the tapestries, Van Loo advanced the vogue for intimate domestic scenes into a series of grand tableaux, presenting an emphatically female, private realm so exotic that one critic claimed the series was capable of “rekindling the desires of the most withered old man.”⁴⁹ With these credentials, Sade’s choice of portraitist would surely have endeared him to courtly society and to his soon-to-be in-laws. This would have been important not least because Sade spent much of his life balancing his noble bloodline and debauched tastes; later in life he would have to elicit the help of his wife’s family when running from the law and denying authorship of his infamous novels.

Donatien Alphonse François de Sade was the only surviving child of Jean Baptiste François Joseph, Comte de Sade (1700–1767), who was the French ambassador to Russia (1730) and London (1733), and Marie Eléonore de Maillé de Carman (1712–77), niece of Cardinal Richelieu and lady-in-waiting to the Princess of Condé. But Sade spent most of his formative years away from his home, as his mother left for a nunnery when he was four. From then until he was nine, Sade was educated and raised by his paternal uncle, the Abbé Jacques-François de Sade (1705–78), a friend of the writer Voltaire (1694–1778) and a *grand viveur* who was once arrested in the room of a prostitute, La Léonore, in a Paris bordello in 1762.⁵⁰ The Abbé raised the young Sade in his château, the Château de Saumane, a walled fortress surrounded by mountains, about fifteen miles from Sade’s family château in Lacoste, in the department of Vaucluse in Provence. In a letter of 1765 to his aunt, the Abbess of Saint-Benoît de Cavaillon, Sade described his uncle’s château as a place of vice: “Priest though he be, he always keeps a few whores at his place. . . . What is his château but a seraglio? No, even better, it is a b[ordello].”⁵¹

In 1750, when he was ten years old, Sade moved to Paris in the company of his tutor, Jacques-François Amblet, and he enrolled



3. Charles Amédée Philippe Van Loo, *Portrait de jeune marquis de Sade (Portrait of the Young Marquis de Sade)*, black chalk on paper, ca. 1760–62.

in the prestigious Lycée Louis-le-Grand, run by the Jesuits on the rue Saint-Jacques, whose ranks of notable alumni included Voltaire, Denis Diderot (1713–84), and Robespierre. Four years later, Sade's father enrolled him in the King's Light Cavalry Regiment, which attracted young men from noble families, and there Sade was schooled in horsemanship, sword fighting, parades, and military tournaments. By 1760–62, when Van Loo drew his portrait, Sade was experienced in battle and still in the elite cavalry regiment, but in many ways he still hovered between childhood and manhood. He was still dependent on his father for financial support, but he was a soldier who enjoyed many sexual affairs, from prostitutes in Paris to a

summer romance with an older woman in the northern French town of Hesdin, where he was garrisoned in the summer of 1762. His portrait, therefore, marks a turning point, as Sade was married off to de Montreuil at the time of his demobilization in 1763. Sade's father had begun looking for a bride for his son in 1759, hoping to find one who could assist with the Sade family's flagging finances and debts, and their marriage contract was approved and signed by Louis XV, the queen, and others in the royal family at Versailles.⁵² In sum, Sade's portrait, though not quite a marriage proposal, attempted to fashion a reliable nobleman out of a young man whose sexual tastes and philosophical ideas would quite soon get him into trouble.

In his 1999 biography of Sade, Neil Shaeffer explains that corporal punishment, including flagellation, was frequent at the Lycée Louis-Le-Grand and was based on the Jesuit pursuit of moral absolutism.⁵³ Shaeffer deduces that this must have had an impact on the young Sade, although, if it did, we cannot see it in the fine pencil lines of his portrait. Rather, all that we see for certain is a handsome young nobleman, soldier, and soon to be husband, with a slightly bemused expression. Only a few months after the portrait was completed, Sade was arrested for harassing a prostitute, and in the following few years he was regularly watched by the police because of his association with other women of ill repute and perverse sexual tastes. About a year after the death of his father, he was accused of imprisoning and torturing a thirty-six-year-old beggar woman, Rose Keller, in a house in Arceuil on Easter Sunday, April 3, 1768. He had stripped and whipped her and then poured molten wax into her flesh wounds. He was arrested and jailed in the royal prison at Saumur before being transferred to the royal prison at Pierre-Encize, near Lyon, but he denied all charges, claiming she was a prostitute and had accepted money for sexual acts (she had stated to Sade that she was prepared to work for a salary of three livres a day when she agreed to accompany him to his house). He was ultimately released, with a settlement of 2,400 livres, which was paid to her.⁵⁴

A few years later, on September 12, 1771, Sade was "executed" in effigy in the Place des Prêcheurs, in Aix, for worse crimes—sodomy (acts of sodomy were punishable by death) and the poisoning of prostitutes in Marseille with the aphrodisiac known as Spanish fly. In 1777, he was arrested again, further to an allegation that he imprisoned and sexually mistreated five girls and a boy at Lacoste. A *lettre de cachet* (a letter signed by the king to authorize imprisonment), obtained by his wealthy mother-in-law, Madame de Montreuil, helped save him from the death sentence. He remained imprisoned without a trial but safe from "the escapades in which he has so often compromised himself," as she wrote in a letter to his lawyer in 1778.⁵⁵ Throughout this period, as he ran from the law, Sade wrote and directed plays, even building a theater to seat over one hundred people at his château in Lacoste, where he happily staged plays that addressed the decline of the

nobility, the family, and morality: these included Philippe Néricault Destouches's *Le glorieux* (*The Conceited Count*, 1732), Diderot's *Le père de famille* (*The Family Picture*, 1758), and Bernard-Joseph Saurin's *Les mœurs du temps* (*The morals of the time*, 1761).⁵⁶ Sade had never championed the life of the royal court, but in his theatrical choices he seemed to rail against his in-laws as *robins* (nobility of the robe who emerged out of the bourgeoisie) and found refuge and release in the world of the imagination.

Sade would spend nearly all of thirteen years in prison from 1777 to 1789, first at Vincennes and then in the Bastille, before being moved, just ten days before the Bastille was stormed, to the Charenton asylum on the southeastern outskirts of Paris. During the Revolution, he lost his title and refashioned himself as a militant in the Section des Piques, joining the largely working-class and petit bourgeois sans-culottes, along with many other “*déclassé* intellectuals and journalists,” as Colin Jones has put it.⁵⁷ That said, in May 1790, he wrote a letter to his lawyer Reinaud, in which he advised, “[D]o not mistake me for an *enragé*. I tell you I am simply an impartial, annoyed to have lost so much, still more annoyed to see my sovereign in irons.”⁵⁸ His fiction was published anonymously but attacked all walks of life—clergy, bankers, aristocrats, noble and working-class families, chaste daughters, and pedophile fathers—and he found his place in what was a thriving market for licentious literature, or *la fautromanie* (fuckomania), at a time when he had no family income or lands and his ancestral home was in ruins, having been pillaged during the Revolution. Sade was also adamant that his writings were above common erotica: in 1791, he wrote that his work should not be likened to “miserable brochures, conceived in cafés or bordellos” because “[J]ust, daughter of opulence and superiority, cannot be treated except by people of a certain stamp . . . except by individuals, finally, who, blessed by nature to begin with, are also sufficiently blessed by fortune to have tried themselves what they trace for us with lustful brushes.”⁵⁹ He was never more proud a *philosophe* than when his work was attacked by critics for its power to subvert. One critic in the *Feuille de correspondance du libraire* in 1791 described Sade's *Justine* as “very dangerous . . . it is for this reason that the title [*Justine*] might lead inexperienced young people astray so that they might consume the poison that the work contains.”⁶⁰ Another, in *Petites-affiches* in 1792, complained of a “bizarre novel, whose title might attract and deceive sensitive and honest souls. . . . If the imagination that produced such a monstrous work is indeed deranged, it must be conceded that it is rich and brilliant of its kind.”⁶¹

In 1801, Sade was arrested in Paris along with his publisher Nicolas Massé on suspicion that he was reprinting *Justine*, and copies of his books were seized.⁶² He denied authorship of them and demanded a trial but instead was imprisoned until appeals by his sons to the prefect of police led to his return to the asylum at Charenton in 1803. There he enjoyed

comparative luxury in terms of his boarding (paid for by his family), the freedom to write and direct plays, and the company of his lover, the actress Marie Constance Quesnet (who moved into a room beside Sade's in 1804 and was referred to as his "niece"). Further, his journal dated 1814 reveals he was paying a seventeen-year-old girl, Madeleine Leclerc, a salary for her sexual favors too, as he refers to her "96th visit" to his room on November 27.⁶³ He also continued to write, completing the manuscripts of three historical novels in 1812–13: *La Marquise de Gange*; *Adelaïde de Brunswick, Princesse de Saxe, événement du XIe siècle* (*Adelaïde of Brunswick, Princess of Saxony, an Occurrence of the Eleventh Century*); and *Histoire secrète d'Isabelle de Bavière, reine de France* (*The Secret Life of Isabelle of Bavière, Queen of France*). While these books pale in comparison to his libertine novels, their focus on women is telling, and in his description of Charles VI's wife, Isabelle, as "extreme in her pleasures . . . as quick to suspect as to punish, to produce evil deeds as to contemplate them in cold blood" we find his fetish for the libertine female emerging between the lines of the real life character and his condemnation of the monarchy.⁶⁴ Sade's memoirs and other accounts reveal the dismal treatment of the inmates at Charenton, which included restraining them for harsh forms of hydrotherapy.⁶⁵ Sade remained there until his death from a pulmonary condition at the age of seventy-four on December 2, 1814. He was given a Christian burial in the Charenton cemetery, although he had asked in his will to be buried in a ditch on his property at Malmaison. Later, legends abounded about the exhumation of his skull. When analyzed by Doctor L.-J. Ramon in an autopsy at Charenton, the skull was judged to reveal no obvious flaws of character but to be "in all respects similar to that of a Father of the Church."⁶⁶ This intimated that Sade's passions and vices were not those of an insane or especially depraved mind, eventually giving weight to the avant-garde belief that he was an accursed artist, martyred by society under the three regimes of Louis XVI (1774–92), the Revolution (1789–99), and Napoleon Bonaparte (1799–1804, as consul; 1804–14, as emperor).

Sade, the *Philosophe*

Sade the man, the writer, and the figurehead of pure freedom were compounded one upon the other in the evolution of his revolutionary image long after his death. By the end of the twentieth century, he came to be identified with the fundamental (but diverse) issues of love, terror, and freedom of speech, and as a barometer of attitudes toward art and politics in a world that had witnessed two world wars, fascism, the Holocaust, and countless other horrors. As Éric Marty has also observed, where World War I led many poets and artists to canonize Sade as a hero of revolution, after World War II, philosophers also turned to Sade,

judging his world against that of fascism, and later a new Sadean discourse emerged in the sixties, led by writers such as Philippe Sollers.⁶⁷ The crucial unifying factor across these generations was the Sadean imagination, which offered a lens through which artists, writers, philosophers, and intellectuals in general could address specific events of popular revolt, religious intolerance, police violence, torture, and capital punishment. For example, the words of philosopher Simone de Beauvoir in “Oeil pour oeil” (“An Eye for an Eye,” 1946), remind us that issues of virtue and vice, good and evil were raging as cruelly in the aftermath of World War II as they had in Sade’s bloody lifetime:

Since June 1940 we have learned rage and hate. We have wished humiliation and death on our enemies. And today each time a tribunal condemns a war criminal, an informer, a collaborator, we feel responsible for the verdict. . . . We were pleased at the death of Mussolini, at the hanging of the Nazi executioners at Kharkov, with the tears of [Joseph] Darnand. In so doing we have participated in their condemnation. Their crimes have struck at our own hearts. It is our values, our reasons to live that are affirmed by their punishment.⁶⁸

As I explain in chapter 3, Beauvoir also wrote an important appreciation of Sade and defended what she saw as his moralism and suffering in an earlier time of violence and recrimination in French and world history. This is just one example of the many ways in which Sade’s name became transhistorical and transnational, as the politics of the Sadean imagination were played out in multiple contexts by numerous thinkers and artists who reflected on and critiqued such problems as the trauma of trench warfare in World War I; Nazism in Germany; colonial violence in Algeria; censorship in Britain, France, and the United States; and the Vietnam War. In such cases, debates about abuses and atrocities and responses to them in public policy and the law became inseparable from debates about Sade.

In rejecting the ideologies of the Catholic Church and the Enlightenment, Sade forced readers to question official morality, especially the fact that the church framed sexual acts in terms of procreation alone—to indulge in homosexuality, sodomy, incest, masturbation was to sin against nature and God.⁶⁹ While a rejection of the teachings of the church was promoted during the Enlightenment, the practice of such sexual “perversions” was known as “le crime des philosophes” (the crime of the philosophers), with homosexuality attracting the death penalty.⁷⁰ This sense of a Sadean philosophical “critique” of a godless world drew numerous modern-day philosophers to his writings. For example, in his influential essay “Kant with Sade” (1963), Jacques Lacan brings Sade together with his contemporary, Immanuel Kant, noting that Sade’s novel *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1795) came after Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788). Lacan argues that Sade

“gives the truth of the Critique,” questioning any sense of satisfaction or progress that might come of the moral good that Kant emphasizes.⁷¹ Viewing the two men as opposite sides of a theory of desire—Kant speaking to the repression of desire in the name of morality, where Sade speaks to the desire for, and delight in, evil—Lacan reads Sade’s proposal of a “rule for *jouissance*” as a subversive take on Kant’s understanding of universal rule.⁷² In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant wrote, “Suppose that someone says his lust is irresistible when the desired object and opportunity are present. Ask him whether he would not control his passions if, in front of the house where he has this opportunity, a gallows were erected on which he would be hanged immediately after gratifying his lust. We do not have to guess very long what his answer may be.”⁷³ In his fiction, Sade not only defied this logic but exposed a duplicity in it that would replace the sadism of the law with the much more powerful sadism of self-interest. While Lacan concedes an element of black humor in his proposal, he also asks that we take Sade’s writings seriously, that we ponder how a right to “*jouissance*,” permitted to all who invoke it, might challenge our sense of society, the moral law, and what he calls “the freedom of the Other.”⁷⁴ Lacan suggests that desire within the Sadean fantasy might be understood as the “will-to-*jouissance*,” given that it challenges and splits the subject.⁷⁵

Lacan’s historical framing of Sade’s philosophical worldview and his recognition of Sade as a productive voice for *jouissance*—whether in his orgies’ human pyramids, tales of the rape and murder of young virgins, or baroque play with Enlightenment logic—informs the larger argument I make in this book for an appreciation of the Sadean imagination as an ultimately meaningful and positive site of resistance and *jouissance* for the avant-garde. In orgy after orgy in Sade’s work, we are presented with human nature hurtling toward pleasure, rejecting the law, the church, and the family, without any fear or concern of the consequences. The lack of specificity about *jouissance* as a term, and the fact that its frequent English translation as “sexual pleasure” falls short of its sense of loss of the self, complements the open aesthetic of the Sadean imagination too. In *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), Roland Barthes translates *jouissance* as “bliss” to attempt to denote the sense of the violent pleasure that shatters the self.⁷⁶ In feminist writings that rework Lacanian and Barthesian ideas, notably French feminist theory or *l’écriture féminine*, a practice of what Elaine Showalter has called writing “in the feminine” is aligned with the avant-garde (male and female) and related “to the rhythms of the female body and to sexual pleasure.”⁷⁷ Showalter emphasizes the sense of *jouir*, or orgasmic “coming,” that underpins the term. She also reads the element of fear with the loss of the self as offering a nonphallogocentric avenue for the exploration of “coming.”⁷⁸ Thus the term and concept open up new feminist potential for a radical rethinking of sexual pleasure and fear within the Sadean

imagination.⁷⁹ Sade's libertines certainly take *jouissance* to its extreme and embody the idea that the subject can situate him- or herself as sadist or masochist and revel in pleasure and pain as they undermine traditional gender roles and give the imagination free rein. Take, for example, Juliette howling with pleasure as she witnesses the libertine Clairwil brutally thrusting the still-beating heart of a tortured male child into her vagina: "There is nothing like the effect of example upon an imagination such as mine: it suggests, it encourages, it electrifies: I soon have my victim laid wide open and promptly insert its living heart between my labia."⁸⁰ This is an explosive scene in a chain of *jouissance* all centered on the female orgasm, an arena in which gender identity and sexual norms are broken down and in which no subject position is stable. To borrow Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis's conceptualization of the space of fantasy, we might say that Sade locates the reader at the very syntax of the sexual imagination, thrusting him/her into "the *mise-en-scène* of desire—a *mise-en-scène* in which what is *prohibited* (*l'interdit*) is always present in the actual formation of the wish."⁸¹

This immersive strategy also reminds us that Sade's libertine literature "overturns the classical relationship between the reader and the book; Sade has left breaches allowing the reader's body to invade the textual fortress," as Philippe Roger argues in *Sade: La philosophie dans le pressoir* (Sade: Philosophy in the press, 1976).⁸² Sade's first-person narratives frequently act as "emotives"—that is, as speech acts that navigate both individual and collective emotions and the disjuncture between them.⁸³ In focusing on terror and the reader as textual invader within this world of *jouissance*, Sade's oeuvre not only tests society's moral boundaries but also the boundaries of aesthetics and representation, again helping us appreciate why the avant-garde turned to him to explore the politics of representation. Where the libertine in Sade's writings rejects political, religious, social, and moral norms, he or she also, paradoxically, insists on the pervasiveness of institutional power. The Sadean body—from the masterful libertine to the enslaved, terrorized, victim—thus offers a form with which to explore not just sexual and political terror, but dominant and countercultural ideology. Where the ideal beauty of the classical body traditionally elevates culture and the spirit in Western art and literature (even when erotic, it is controlled), the base, unruly, Sadean body represents its opposite—the obscene. I have argued along these lines in my previous books—*Eroticism and Art* (2005) and *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros, 1938–1968* (2005), but here I develop the argument with a specific focus on the Sadean body and its influence on the international avant-garde.

In early modern France, the term "obscene" was employed in law only in relation to visual culture, especially in the eighteenth century, when printing gave rise to a burgeoning market in forbidden books, many of

them graphically illustrated. The late eighteenth century was a golden age of the sexual underworld, in which Sade's work gradually became available in Paris, London, and other European cities, which were then enjoying an active metropolitan print culture of obscenity. Joan DeJean notes in *The Reinvention of Obscenity: Sex, Lies, and Tabloids in Early Modern France* (2002) that by 1734 there were arrests for the production of *gravures obscènes*, and that term was introduced to French law on July 19, 1791, in order to ban the sale of "obscene images," though prosecution was far from systematic.⁸⁴ Equally significant is DeJean's explanation of how modern, secular notions of obscenity centered on the flagrant display of "female body parts," typically with a heterosexual audience in mind.⁸⁵ The focus of the twentieth century avant-garde on the female body spoke to this established sense of the obscene, as avant-garde writers, painters, photographers, performance artists, and dramatists employed the obscene female body as a means of defying dominant culture. Moreover, the dominant culture they sought to subvert included the enclosed erotic encounter typical of high art tradition, and the values and morals of classical beauty and propriety it cherished. In the image of the obscene body, spectatorship is politicized, desire is interrogated, and the dynamic of the dominator and dominated is willingly explored. Hence, we find avant-garde artists and writers reveling in the libidinal, terrorized, and fragmented body while creating *embodied* readers, whose awareness of their own bodies and values was heightened and enriched the more they entered into the affective space of avant-garde praxis.

The Pornographic Imagination

In my understanding of the Sadean imagination I seek to build upon the stance set out by Susan Sontag in her 1967 essay "The Pornographic Imagination": it is an imagination that allows the artist or writer to become "a freelance explorer of spiritual dangers," someone who advances "one step further in the dialectic of outrage."⁸⁶ Sontag takes her cue from Georges Bataille's *Histoire de l'oeil* (*Story of the Eye*, 1928) and Dominique Aury's *Histoire d'O* (*Story of O*, 1954, published under the pseudonym Pauline Réage), but she also considers Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom*. She focuses on the ways in which literary pornography philosophizes desire, standing against mass culture and its numbing of the consumer. The pornographic draws our attention to oversaturation and the danger of passivity before an image of suffering. The element of outrage identified by Sontag is crucial, as it refutes one of the accusations brought against many images of sexual violence and terror today—that their production not only encourages voyeurism but numbs the reader/viewer. Sade's libertine writings and the Sadean imagination that followed him went far beyond a sexual,

masturbatory stimulus, as pornography is traditionally understood. While relentless in abject detail, they could never be said to anesthetize the reader. Sade's novels are excessive in their accounts and details, but they do not "freeze discussion" nor lead to the "exhaustion of empathy" in the way that both pornography and mass media images of terror might today.⁸⁷ This perspective, from which one perceives pornography and, specifically, the genre of Sadean pornography, as a "vanguard form of artistry," as Susan Gubar has put it—is not intended to sanitize Sade or distract from the sexual brutality of his work, but again to contextualize the turn of modern artists and writers to his oeuvre to explore and deplore dehumanization and terror.⁸⁸ In employing the word "Sadean" rather than "pornographic," I take inspiration from Sontag's socially and historically sensitive analysis, in which she argues that "some pornographic books are interesting and important works of art."⁸⁹ As she rightly observed, Sade offered artists and intellectuals after 1945 "an inexhaustible point of departure for radical thinking about the human condition."⁹⁰ I call this "radical thinking" the Sadean imagination, although in my view it was also widespread prior to World War II. I view it as a powerful means for artists and writers to interrogate systems of patriarchal, governmental, institutional, and imperial power through sexual relations in modern culture.⁹¹ I also base my use of the term on similar terminology developed by the avant-garde itself—for example, the figure of Juliette as "the pinnacle of the divinized Marquis's imagination," as André Masson wrote in "Notes on the Sadistic Imagination" (1947), which I discuss in chapter 2.⁹²

Robert Darnton has explained that "pure pornography" did not exist until well into the nineteenth century and that philosophy in the eighteenth century included "both theoretical treatises and general works, which criticized all sorts of abuses without being predominantly religious or political or pornographic in nature . . . scatter[ing] its shot across a wide spectrum of subjects."⁹³ By the time Walter Kendrick published his 1987 study *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture*, he could easily assert that "[f]rom the start, 'pornography' names a battlefield, a place where no assertion could be made without at once summoning up its denial. . . . '[P]ornography' names an argument, not a thing."⁹⁴ The evolution of the term is crucial to our appreciation of Sade's characters, plots, and legacy. The word "pornography" appears in the reform text by French printer and libertine author Nicolas-Edme Rétif de la Bretonne (1734–1806), titled *Le pornographe* (The pornographer), in 1769. A sentimental treatise in the form of an epistolary essay, he used the word very much to denote the social issue of prostitution or "A Gentleman's Ideas for a Project for the Regulation of Prostitutes, Suited to the Prevention of the Misfortunes Caused by the Public Circulation of Women," as the subtitle made clear.⁹⁵ It thus continued the Greek understanding of the term as "the writing about prostitutes,"

from the ancient Greek *pornē* (a lower-class whore) and *graphos* (writing, etching, or drawing).⁹⁶ Rétif de la Bretonne proposed a way of orchestrating the sexual workforce and ensuring it did not contaminate society, the institution of the family, or women's subservience to male authority. He acknowledged that prostitution is a necessary evil in society but effectively molded it into a regime that limited its infectious (physical and moral) potential. His promotion of state-run brothels, presented in a fictional case study around the libertine D'Alzan, and his *pornonomie*, or set of rules by which a brothel should be run, sheds light on the era's stance on sexuality and its control: in this "antidote" to Sade's *Justine*, the desirable but syphilitic character Conillette is sliced with a scalpel and eaten by a priest named Foutamort, her sexual objecthood made viscerally literal as cannibalism removes the problem of sexual immorality and disease in one fell blow.⁹⁷ The act allows the libertine to return to the "good" female character, whose virtue is preserved, Conquette-Ingénue.

During Sade's lifetime, the trade in pornography both cultivated a subversive (predominantly male) school of readers and challenged the ideals of domesticity that were developing and would soon become entrenched in society.⁹⁸ Etienne-Gabriel Peignot's *Dictionnaire critique, littéraire et bibliographique des principaux livres condamnés au feu, supprimés ou censurés* (Critical, literary and bibliographical dictionary of the main books condemned to be burned, suppressed or censored; Paris, 1806) was one of the first dictionaries to use the term "pornographic" (*pornographique*) to justify the censorship of certain immoral texts.⁹⁹ But it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that "pornography" emerged as a term to define the explicit representation of sexual organs and practices and as a regulatory category, as reflected in the *Oxford English Dictionary's* 1857 definition of the word: "a description of prostitutes or of prostitution, as a matter of public hygiene."¹⁰⁰ Alongside this production and policing of pornography lay a growing distinction between the definitions of the erotic and pornographic—the former aligned with desire and love and the latter, by the 1830s, with "obscene things."¹⁰¹ The discovery of "pornographic" Pompeiiian frescoes helped clarify the definition further and the *Littre Dictionary* of 1866, as with the *Oxford English Dictionary*, would extend the term to define pornography "in connection with public hygiene," suggesting that the modern definition of pornography was predicated on a view that the explicit sexual body was something dangerous to the public and needed to be controlled. Enlightened man recognized that society's sexual codes indicated society's strength both metaphorically (the biological vigor of a nation) and literally (the man force). As Michel Foucault recounts in *The History of Sexuality* (1976), "sex was a means of access both to the life of the body and the life of the species."¹⁰²

Revolution was not an abstract concept either—it had to rage within every man's body to succeed. As an anonymous article in the radical

newspaper *Les Révolutions de Paris* declared in 1802, “liberty, reason, truth . . . are not gods . . . they are *part of ourselves*.”¹⁰³ The heightened spirit and brutal desires of the crowd turned the peaceful individual into a violent savage, a phenomenon that artists and writers continued to reflect on in the decades and centuries after the French Revolution. In *Psychologie des foules* (*The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, 1895), Gustave le Bon (1841–1931) wrote, “Taken separately, the men of the Convention were enlightened citizens of peaceful habits. United in a crowd, they did not hesitate to give their adhesion to the most savage proposals, to guillotine individuals most clearly innocent, and, contrary to their interests, to renounce their inviolability and to decimate themselves.”¹⁰⁴ The dynamics and desires of the individual and the crowd were emphatically gendered, too—a fact that made the conflation of sexuality and power in Sade’s fiction all the more meaningful for the avant-garde writer and artist.

Sade and Feminism: “The first fairy tale narrated by the fairy herself”

Beatrice Didier has argued that while “feminists do not like Sade,” he does present female characters who command bodies and language alike, from Durand with her phallic clitoris in *Juliette* to the four storytellers in *The 120 Days of Sodom*.¹⁰⁵ Sade places female emancipation and equality firmly between pleasure and money and creates a utopian system of sexual equality with his account of the libertine group “Les Amis du Crime” (Society of the friends of crime). In the tale of *Juliette*, she happily asserts, “I like to use [the lash] and have it used upon me,” when initiated into the Society, a sodality with a specific set of rules for women in which she is advised to never confuse sex and love.¹⁰⁶ Annie Le Brun’s view of Juliette as a Sadean heroine—“[s]he is aided only by her imagination, which returns continually to her body, then transports her continually beyond it”—reminds us of the dynamic of excess that underpins her tale and the potential for her appropriation by the avant-garde.¹⁰⁷ Her description of Juliette’s story as “the first fairy tale narrated by the fairy herself” also demands that Sade remain within the realm of literature and not be weighed down by debate about feminism or fascism.¹⁰⁸ In *Soudain un bloc d’abîme, Sade* (*Sade: A Sudden Abyss*, 1986), which originated as Le Brun’s introduction to Jean-Jacques Pauvert’s 1986 edition of the *Oeuvres complètes de Marquis de Sade*, Le Brun defies any critic or artist to read Sade in the light of totalitarian ideology or theology and also defies feminist calls for his censorship.¹⁰⁹ Instead, she claims, “Sade hurls us into the abyss we naïvely thought existed between the real and the imaginary, but which turns out to be the unbearable infinity of freedom.”¹¹⁰ Le Brun’s stance underpinned her exhibition *Sade: Attaquer le soleil* (Musée d’Orsay, Paris, 2014) in which she

presented Sade as a “prism” from which to appreciate a huge range of artworks that engage with sexual desire and violence, from Eugène Delacroix to Francis Bacon. What Georges Bataille called Sade’s “use value” for ideological and political debate and action must not be lost within any broad, passionate defense, however.¹¹¹ This book is concerned with offering close readings of selected case studies to offer very precise explorations of the Sadean imagination at work in specific historical moments. The Sadean imagination goes beyond a convulsive spirit of freedom—its radical sociopolitical, humanist, and feminist use for the modern day artist must be fully documented and recognized too.¹¹²

Le Brun’s stance differs radically from many of her generation. The pro-ordinance, anti-pornography school led by Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon has argued with considerable effectiveness that pornography violates women’s rights and enacts their social subordination through sex and so must be stopped. For that school of thought, artists and intellectuals who laud Sade are only perpetuating the degradation of woman in society and creating “high-class pornography” as Dworkin calls it in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1979).¹¹³ This stands in marked contrast to the liberal feminist school of thought which argues that pornography is a genre and mode of representation that not only reveals systems of production and consumption of sexual desire but opens up the politics of seeing and culture, no matter how perverse the terrain. The latter school of thought would also argue that the censorship of pornography infringes on the right to freedom of speech, and that much anti-pornography feminism continues to view male sexuality as phallic, violent, and carnal and female sexuality as passive, inherently lesbian, or even asexual. As Linda Williams writes in *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* (1989), “[Dworkin’s] argument suggests, erroneously I believe, that if female sexuality were ever to get free of its patriarchal contaminations it would express no violence, would have no relations of power, and would produce no transgressive sexual fantasies.”¹¹⁴ In my reading of Sade and the legacy of the Sadean imagination, I aim to explore the critical issue 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. Also pertinent to my analysis is Jacqueline’s Rose’s challenge in “Where Does the Misery Come From?” (1989), in which she invites reflection on Freud’s phallicentric concept of the death drive. She contemplates “how we [feminists] can begin to think the question of violence and fantasy as something that implicates us as women, how indeed we can begin to dare to think it at all.”¹¹⁵ A leading argument in this book is that the Sadean imagination opens up violence for the male *and* female artist, author and reader, and questions any straightforward sense of causality. Such questioning is the first step toward

the Sadean imagination's liberating potential, followed by the refusal to restrict sadism and masochism, violence and suffering, to strict sexual and gender or libidinal and destructive divides. It refutes simple dichotomies and acts as a critical process and mode of expression with which to better understand subjectivity, sexuality, and the imagination and the role they play in our experience of society and politics. To my mind, this remains a crucial task and mode of intervention for our times.

Beyond the Pleasure Principle

In "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920), Freud wrote that the boundaries between the libidinal and destructive, or life and death, drives are permeable. Eros constantly battles with Thanatos: "We have always acknowledged a sadistic component in the sexual drive; as we know, this component can develop a life of its own and turn into a perversion that dominates a person's entire sexual life"; furthermore, the death drive is "ousted from the ego at the insistence of the narcissistic libido."¹¹⁶ In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Freud continued to view this battle of drives as underpinning civilization's attempts to police itself, as humans' "aggressive drives" are constantly countered by state- and law-enforced aggression.¹¹⁷ He insists such aggressive impulses begin "in the nursery," where affection and destruction emerge in the child's dynamic with the mother and father and where sexuality and aggression are restricted and repressed for the good of civilization.¹¹⁸ The "psychological misery of the mass" ensures that modern civilization functions.¹¹⁹ In contrast, "the sadistic drive . . . so utterly devoid of love" has no collective or libidinal purpose; it simply replaces tenderness with cruelty, happiness with suffering and allows the ego to triumph over the mass general good.¹²⁰ Further, Eros speaks to the gathering together of people, "libidinally bound to one another," where its counterpart, Thanatos, speaks to "man's natural aggressive drive, the hostility of each against all and all against each."¹²¹ It is the struggle between these drives that defines civilization and human existence, and crucially that struggle begins in childhood, when caregivers try to inculcate a sense of greater good through lullabies and example.

Sade's novels frequently begin with the child and the education of the child, especially the young female. Freud's theories on the child's sexuality are thus pertinent, as is his reading of the libido as constantly battling between procreative and destructive forces. Freud employed an emphatically gendered view of sadism and masochism, claiming the male is naturally sadistic and the female masochistic (not least in heterosexual copulation). While he had no copies of Sade's work in his private collection, Freud's view of the connection between sadism and masochism, aggression and the libido offers a useful framework through which to understand the

avant-garde subversion of gender binaries.¹²² Freud also reminds us that while art offers “illusions that contrast with reality,” it still can be “effective psychically, thanks to the role that the imagination has assumed in mental life.”¹²³ Art can intoxicate or terrify us; aesthetic experiences inform our lives, senses, and judgments; and when we discuss aesthetic pleasure (notably beauty), we effectively return to “the sphere of sexual feeling.”¹²⁴

The Marquis de Sade and the Avant-Garde: An Overview

This book explores Sade’s oeuvre and legacy not only historically, through its chapters and case studies arranged chronologically, but with a specific emphasis on how the avant-garde returned to an eighteenth-century use of sex and terror to criticize religious and political authorities and to force debate on freedom of expression. I do not attempt an exhaustive analysis of everything pertaining to Sade in art, literature, and philosophy in the twentieth century, and I concentrate primarily on the case of France (with significant reference to Germany, Britain, and the United States). In interweaving images and texts from the 1900s to the 1970s, my terrain might be said to be that of the now “canonical” avant-garde, but there was nothing canonical at all about the ideas and art in question in their day. Their recourse to the Sadean imagination was neither romantic nor timeless—rather it was always situated in and engaged with specific political issues and events in specific moments in time as it explored sexual terror. It is my contention that Sade’s oeuvre, and the legacy of the Sadean imagination, must be appreciated as “open”—eliciting rather than prescribing experience. I elaborate on this contention, for example, in chapter 4, where I read 1960s happenings and avant-garde theater inspired by Sade in light of Umberto Eco’s idea of the “open work.”¹²⁵ There is no “one” Sadean imagination that appears decade after decade, like the return of the repressed; rather it takes on new forms and battles depending on sociohistorical circumstance. That said, “the” Sadean imagination as presented here in a series of specific works remains yoked to the figure of Sade and his counter-Enlightenment stance. From Apollinaire’s claim in 1909 that Sade was “[t]he freest spirit who ever lived” to Pasolini’s translation of the Sadean universe into Italian fascism in his film *Salò* (1975), the excesses of his narratives and their style allowed for a radical reflection on both revolution and terror, metaphysical and real.

While my chosen case studies show a shared passion for Sade’s work, the various artists, writers, dramatists, photographers, and filmmakers involved interpret that work and build on it in very different ways, as we shall see. Their common ground remains the explicit sexual body, in keeping with Sade’s “philosophy in the bedroom” in which the libertine and

the victim, rhetoric and storytelling, constantly force the reader into a theater of the flesh. By extension, it will become apparent that all of the case studies share another Sadean trait: they all enact a *dialogue* with the reader, demanding an active response to the Sadean universe through recourse to abject sex and terror. The aptitude of Sade's writings for multiple but always *unprescribed* readings makes them a very rich a source for ideological and aesthetic debate, allowing a wide variety of interpretations of his oeuvre—from antihumanist and anticolonialist to Christian, totalitarian, and libertarian.

In the first chapter, I outline the key works by Sade that my study draws on to map out the traits and legacy of the Sadean imagination. I closely analyze the first illustrations produced for certain volumes, notably for *La nouvelle Justine, ou Les malheurs de la vertu, suivi de L'histoire de Juliette, sa soeur* (1797). I contextualize Sade's libertinism in light of popular philosophical treatises such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile, ou De l'éducation* (*Émile, or Treatise on Education*, 1762), and I examine the sexualized representation of the French Revolution in the form of both virtuous and debauched women: the young Marianne, the figurehead of the French Republic from 1792, who was depicted in popular iconography with flowing hair, bare breasts, and working-class garb; popular pornographic imagery of Marie Antoinette, Louis XVI's queen, as a flat-chested and cruel libertine; the pious mother Madame de Mistival in Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom* and her fifteen-year-old daughter Eugénie, educated in torture by monstrous libertines; and Charlotte Corday (1768–93), the enigmatic assassin of the politician and radical journalist Jean-Paul Marat (1743–93), whose image was widely circulated in paintings, prints, and publications where she was associated with the supposedly fairer sex.

The second chapter of the book brings the Marquis de Sade into the twentieth century, to the year 1904, when his scroll *The 120 Days of Sodom* was rediscovered. For the writers Apollinaire, Robert Desnos, and André Breton (1896–1966), Sade was a revolutionary hero of love and a liberator of desire, in keeping with the emancipatory etymology of the word “libertine.” I detail the vital role played by Sade's biographers Maurice Heine (1884–1940) and Gilbert Lely (born Pierre-Raphaël-Gilbert Lévy, 1904–85) in bringing Sade's life and oeuvre to new avant-garde audiences, the Sadean imagery of American surrealist Man Ray (1890–1976), and the surrealists' philosophical worldview that “[w]e really live by our fantasies when we give free rein to them.”¹²⁶ The second half of the chapter focuses on the French painter André Masson, for whom Sade offered a means to extend the “problem of desire” to its imaginary extreme, but also to confront burgeoning fascism in the 1930s.¹²⁷

The third chapter continues to document the pioneering role of those who battled to bring Sade's writings to public attention. I analyze the 1956

trial of Jean-Jacques Pauvert (1926–2014) for publishing Sade’s works, which mobilized some of the most influential intellectuals of the day in his defense. These included André Breton, Georges Bataille, Jean Cocteau, and Jean Paulhan. I examine the Sadean novel *Story of O* (1954), also published by Pauvert, which was assumed by most readers and critics to be the work of a man because of its scandalous eroticism but was actually written by a woman, Dominique Aury, who came to Sade with a humanist view that “prison itself can open the gates to freedom.”¹²⁸ This was at a time when the French were evaluating their recent experience of fascism while creating increased opportunities for women’s rights and feminism. I also compare Aury’s stance to that of Simone de Beauvoir, who argued that Sade was a moralist in her essay “Faut-il brûler Sade?” (“Must We Burn Sade?,” 1951), and I analyze the illustrations of luxury editions of *Story of O* by the surrealist artists Hans Bellmer (1902–75) and Leonor Fini (1907–96).

The fourth and last chapter focuses on the 1960s, considering the performative turn then made by the Sadean imagination, as art, theater, and film looked to Sade against the backdrop of—and as mean of response to—wars, civil rights struggles, sexual revolution, and youth counterculture. Four Sadean works are discussed in detail: Guy Debord’s short film *Hurllements en faveur de Sade* (Howls for Sade, 1952), Jean Benoît’s performance *Exécution du testament du Marquis de Sade* (Execution of the testament of the Marquis de Sade, 1959), Jean-Jacques Lebel’s happening *120 minutes dédiées au divin Marquis* (120 minutes dedicated to the divine Marquis, 1966), and Peter Weiss’s play *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade* (1964), directed by Peter Brook for the stage and for film in 1965–67. These works are compared in light of the idea of the “open work,” which was then widely influential, and a generational turn to the performative “theater of cruelty” of Antonin Artaud (1896–1948) in the pursuit of the Sadean imagination. These artists pushed their respective media to extremes through an emphasis on the material body, the libertine drive, and their sociopolitical relevance to dissent from what Debord called “the society of the spectacle,” as well as the brutality of the Algerian War (1954–62) and the Vietnam War (1954–75).

I end the book by reflecting on the Sadean imagination after the progressive mass protests of 1968 when Sade’s name was scrawled in graffiti on the walls of the Sorbonne in Paris: on the one hand, Sade was invoked as a means to reflect on real atrocities through imagined terror, as in Pier Paolo Pasolini’s film *Salò* (1975), an allegory of the last days of Mussolini’s fascist regime; on the other hand, Sade was profoundly influential in cultural theory, where Foucault, for example, saw him as a “rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality . . . by the grips of power,” while Michel Camus appreciated his exploration of the “abyss” of

language.¹²⁹ I bring this reflection on Sade's legacy up to recent times by discussing the "sadism" of US military police in the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, depicted in infamous trophy photographs during the so-called War on Terror that followed the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. But the systematic and state-sponsored use of torture in a facility that housed over seven thousand Iraqi prisoners was far from the life and fiction of Sade, who viewed state violence as the worst kind of terrorism. Although this book is more concerned with the twentieth than the twenty-first century, the terrifying and terrorizing imagined universe of Sade remains a crucial cultural and political barometer.

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