Materialism and morality: Sade animates Newtonian virtue

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Sade integrated 18th century French materialism into his work at a such an elemental level that it is no exaggeration to say, as we will show here, that his pornography dramatises it directly. I will further argue that there is a strongly moral tone to his materialism: that characters are expected to practise what they preach, and to believe in their value system. The last part of my paper will look at how the opposing value system, Christianity, is satirised through the figure of Justine and that of the passive victims in general.

Sade was an atheist, a Lockean sensationist and a materialist; he avidly read Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* and the writings of the *philosophes* d’Holbach, Robinet, Condillac, La Mettrie and Buffon. He littered his works with references both tacit and explicit to the *philosophes* and passionately espoused what he saw as their cause. Their thinking was crucial to the construction of his own œuvre, and as he commented himself on his writing practice, “que veux-tu qu’on fasse sans livres ? Il faut en être entouré pour travailler, sinon on ne peut faire que des contes de fées, et je n’ai pas cet esprit-là.” [what am I supposed to do without books? You have to be surrounded with them to work, otherwise you can only do fairy-stories, and I’m not that way inclined]. I hope to show here just how close his own work was to the materialism of the *philosophes*.

The *Encyclopédie* itself advocated a close expository relationship between science and literature. The article “Lettres” explains that:

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1 As consultation of Hans-Ulrich Seifert’s painstakingly-compiled catalogue of Sade’s reading shows. (See Seifert, *Sade: Leser und Autor* [Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1983], pp.175-278. Alain Mothu has provided a definitive list of Sade’s library at Lacoste, see Alain Mothu, “La Bibliothèque du marquis de Sade à La Coste” in *Papiers de famille : Le marquis de Sade et les siens* (1761-1815), ed. Maurice Lever [Paris: Fayard, 1995], annex 1, pp.592-711.) The only absentee is Diderot, whose key materialist texts only emerged after Sade had written his most important works. There is, however, evidence to show that Sade was familiar with the *Encyclopédie*: he wrote to his wife and asked her to copy out for him the article on “geôlier” [jailer] (Sade, *Lettres à sa femme*, ed. Marc Buffat [Arles : Actes Sud, 1997], p.176 [17.9.1780]). He also mentions Cardan in a way which Michel Delon has identified as being almost certainly lifted from the article on Cardan in the *Encyclopédie*, see Sade, *Œuvres*, ed. Michel Delon (Paris: Gallimard Pléiade, 1990).

2 He famously wrote to his wife from prison that he would defend d’Holbach’s *Système de la nature* “jusqu’au martir s’il le fallait” [to martyrdom if necessary] (Marquis de Sade, *Lettres à sa femme*, p.427). For the vast array of his tacit references, quotations and textual echoes, see Michel Delon’s superb annotated edition of Sade’s *Œuvres* (Paris: Gallimard Pléiade, 1990-1998), 3 vols. There are also numerous explicit marks of his affiliation: one such is as follows: “Aimable La Mettrie, profond Helvétius, sage et savant Montesquieu, pourquoi donc, si pénétrés de cette vérité, n’avez-vous fait que l’indiquer dans vos livres divins ?” [Amiable La Mettrie, deep Helvétius, wise and erudite Montesquieu, why, penetrated by the truth as you were, did you merely trace it in your divine books?]. *Histoire de Juliette*, ed. Delon, vol. 3, p.334. Jean Deprun uses exactly this passage to retrace Sade’s explicit borrowings, see “Sade et le rationalisme des lumières,” *Raison Présente 3* (mai-juillet 1967) : 85. See also Caroline Warman, “Sade and the jewels of virtue: Sade’s claim to the legacy of materialism,” *Sade and his legacy*, ed. John Phillips, *Paragraph* 23:1 (March 2000), pp.87-97.

“… les lettres et les sciences proprement dites, ont entr’elles l’enchainement, les liaisons, et les rapports les plus étroits; c’est dans l’Encyclopédie qu’il importe de le demontrer.” [literature and science are linked by the closest contact and relationship; it is up to the Encyclopédie to show that this is the case].

This assertion is of course based on the belief that science and literature are or should be about the same thing, that is to say, they are about life and nature. Life and nature, in the Encyclopédie, mean matter in all its various forms. Matter was defined by the Encyclopédie as a “substance étendue, solide, divisible, mobile et passible, le premier principe de toutes les choses naturelles, et qui par ses différens arrangements et combinaisons, forme tous les corps,” [a vast, solid, divisible, mobile and malleable substance, the first principle of all natural things, and which through its different arrangements and combinations, forms all bodies]. I would emphasise here that “all bodies” really means all bodies – molecular, simple, complex, human – this is one of the features of materialism, retained since classical times and of course rapidly in the late 18thC to disintegrate, that the same natural laws apply to all matter however it is “organised,” to borrow an 18thC term. So when Buffon invoked Newton’s great discovery, “la loi générale de l’attraction commune à toute la matière” [the general law of attraction common to all matter], he was talking about something fundamental and which applied at all levels. Attraction, he writes, is what gets the universe moving:

“… il est clair que l’impulsion a besoin, pour opérer, du concours de l’attraction; car si la matière cessoit de s’attirer, si les corps perdoient leur cohérence, tout ressort ne seroit-il pas détruit, toute communication de mouvement interceptée, toute impulsion nulle !” […] it is clear that impulsion needs the help of attraction in order to function; for if matter ceased attracting, if bodies lost their coherence, would not motivation itself be destroyed, and all communication of movement intercepted, all impetus void !]

This statement, to be found on the second page of the first volume of his Supplément à l’histoire naturelle (which Sade, incidentally, owned), is as fundamental as its location suggests: Buffon is starting with first principles. Without attraction there is no movement, no network, no communication, no coherence. Without attraction there would be no system at all, only a series of isolated phenomena. Sade transports this fundamental law into his pornographic world, translating it into human terms. Between all bodies there is attraction; between all humans there is desire. Sade’s libertines are as impelled by desire as the particles by attraction: this is not just an analogy, it is the same law operating on all material bodies, varying according to their “organisation”.

And this is where it starts to get more specific and more Sadean. The accepted model for the workings of matter as motivated by attraction was a violent one, whereby what we understand as molecules collided and ricocheted endlessly with other molecules. D’Holbach, in his work – beloved of Sade – Système de la nature (1770) described interacting matter thus:

“Les différentes matières dont l’univers est composé, ont dû de toute éternité peser les uns sur les autres, graviter vers un centre, se heurter, se rencontrer, être attirées et repoussées, se combiner et se séparer […]”. [The different matters out of which the universe is composed

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7 Buffon, Supplément à l’histoire naturelle, i.2.
must, since the beginning of time, have been weighing on each other, gravitating towards a
centre, clashing, meeting, been attracting and repelling, combining and separating [...].]

The Encyclopédie creates a similarly energetic, ceaseless vision:

“les masses... se choquent, se pressent, se résistent, se divisent, s'élevent, s'abaissent,
se'entourent, s'enveloppent, se pénètrent [...]” [the masses collide into one another, squeeze,
resist, divide, rise up, bow down, surround, envelop and penetrate each other].

The overview of symmetrical flux that each passage evokes does not conceal the pugnacious
mechanics of their actual interaction. Matter, divided into opposing forces, attracts and repels,
collides and separates (d'Holbach), hits out, pushes and resists, rises, falls, envelops and penetrates
(Encyclopédie). The attraction which impels them to move in the first place displays aggression and
works according to the laws of mechanics, that is, the straightforward capacity, inherent in the
combined mass and movement of any given body, to displace another body in its way. This is what
we might call the “mechanics of attraction”. Attraction is activated and conducted on a model of
force. The importance of such a model for the corresponding Sadean world is obvious.

Collision and violence are written into a system based on attraction. Worked into the dramatic
tissue of the Sadean text this becomes “desire” enacted through the violent meeting of bodies. This is
clear from the most cursory glance at his pornographic texts, and the most cursory reader will
nonetheless be aware that they are a mixture of sex and violence. That the ties between the passages
quoted above and Sade are also tight at a very detailed level can also be seen when comparing the
vocabularies.

Juliette’s friend Clairwil declares that “la sensibilité n’est que mécanique” [sensibility is purely
mechanical]. The libertine Saint-Fond talks of “le choc des atomes voluptueux” [the clash of the
voluptuous atoms] which are made to “heurter avec plus de force sur les molécules qu’ils doivent
ébranler” [collide with greater force into the molecules which they must shake].

“Se heurter” appears in d'Holbach’s passage. “Choc” is in the Encyclopédie extract, as is “pénétrer” and
“presser.” “Pénétrer” features in Clairwil’s speech: “si les objets extérieurs agissent sur nos organes
d’une manière forte, s’ils les pénètrent avec violence... les effets de notre sensibilité, dans ce cas,
nous déterminent au vice” [if exterior objects act strongly on our organs, if they penetrate them
violently, the effects of our sensibility, in that case, orientate us towards vice].

Thus “choc,” “heurter” and “presser” denote the essential violence underlying sexual encounters,
while “pénétrer” indicates the form they take and “frotter” [to rub] is its forerunner. “Frottement”
[rubbing] is frequent and appears in the Encyclopédie article on “électricité.” In the same direction
Robinet and d’Holbach’s “ébranlement” [vibration] becomes Sade’s “il s’agit seulement d’ébranler la
masse de nos nerfs par le choc le plus violent possible” [it is simply a question of vibrating the mass

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11 Sade, Histoire de Juliette, p.482.
12 It is frequently used : another instance is provided by Buffon, see below p. XXX (flagged by n.46).
13 Sade, Histoire de Juliette, p.422.
14 The passage is quoted below, p. XXX (flagged by n.70).
of our nerves with the most violent shock possible] which then mutates into the straightforward “branler” [wank] of so many examples.

In all these cases, the term which was initially used to denote the behaviour of matter in general is applied to human behaviour in particular, and the generally violent model of material interaction becomes a specifically sexual and equally violent one. Other bifocal verbs Sade uses are “frapper” [hit] and “porter un coup” [strike] : they are as generally applicable as they are specific in practice, referring to use of the whip.

Robinet, describing here ‘les transports de la passion,’ confirms the importance of violent force for sensation, simultaneously seeming to underwrite the sexual dimension that Sade exclusively gives it.

« [ Les transports de la passion] naissent de la violence avec laquelle la présence des objets, ou à son défaut la force de l’imagination, agite les fibres sensitives, idéales, volitivés, musculaires… les réactions sont également furieux et confuses; l’attention de l’âme n’étant fixée sur rien de ce qui passe en elle, dans ce trouble, elle ne sent ni ce qu’elle veut ni ce qu’elle fait; et après l’accès, il lui paroit qu’elle étoit hors d’elle-même. »

[The transports of passion are born of the violence with which the presence of objects, or in their absence the force of the imagination, agitates the sensitive, ideal, volitionary, muscular fibres… reactions are equally furious and confused; the attention of the soul, in this muck, being fixed on nothing of what is going on inside it, neither feels what it wants nor what it does; and after the fit, it seems to the soul as if it had been beside itself.]

The body in passion undergoes a frenzy or even attack of sensation, during which the soul is “outside” or “beside” itself. The mechanics of brute force that Robinet relies on here confirm that rapidity, strength and violence, even fury, are therefore “good” characteristics of the active body, whether evidenced in the action of the body or object which hits another or in the reaction of that which is hit.

In the model I am following attraction and violent clash is followed by repulsion. Buffon evokes this next stage in the drama of matter as follows:

“Or ne pouvons-nous pas concevoir que cette attraction se change en répulsion toutes les fois que les corps s’approchent d’assez près pour éprouver un frôtement ou un choc des uns contre les autres[...]”

[Can we not conceive that attraction changes into repulsion each time that bodies draw near enough to feel the rub or shock of the other]?

Something very similar occurs to the Sadean heroes, we may remember. Having frenziedly possessed the victims, they frenziedly throw them off. When Buffon’s explanation of repulsion is added to the Sadean interpretation, what results is a scenario where two (or more) bodies are compulsively attracted and violently carry through their desire into penetration and, having come as close to occupying the same space as it is possible for humans to do, subsequently and violently repel.

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16 One of which would be Juliette’s description of what her wealth made her feel: “j’allais quelquefois […] me branler le con en déchargeant sur cette idée singulière : j’aime le crime, et voilà tous les moyens du crime à ma disposition” [I sometimes used to go and masturbate my cunt, discharging at this singular idea : *I love crime and here are all the means to commit crime at my disposal*]. (Sade, *Histoire de Juliette*, p.544 : his italics.) This is very near the idea of “frôtement sur [les] nerfs” [rubbing on the nerves] and shows how little of a euphemism this latter phrase is. Conversely, the directly “sexual” formation of the nerves is also emphasized.

17 Jean-Baptiste Robinet, *De la nature*, vol. 1 (Amsterdam, 1761), p.477.

18 Buffon, *Supplément*, i.7.
Buffon’s vocabulary seems to clinch the dramatisation we have been pursuing: not just bodies, attraction and repulsion but also “éprouver” [feel], “choc,” “frottement les uns contre les autres” [rubbing against one another].

However, the picture is not as simple as that, either in terms of materialist theory, or for the corresponding Sadean universe. In the former there are two distinctly different types of matter – “vive” [live] and “brute” [crude], while in the latter there are the heroes and the victims. Buffon describes the behaviour of the two sorts of matter as expansive – that’s ‘matière vive’ – and attractive – ‘matière brute.’

“Or cette matière vive tend toujours du centre à la circonférence, au lieu que la matière brute tend au contraire de la circonférence au centre; c’est une force expansive qui anime la matière vive, et c’est une force attractive à laquelle obéit la matière brute: [...] de la combinaison de ces deux forces également actives résultent tous les phénomènes de l’Univers.”

Responsible for all phenomena in the universe, these two forces could not be more important. The attraction discussed so far works between them, the “matière brute” passively compelled to the other which actively reaches out to it. One is essentially passive, the other active. This notion of the expansive and the attractive force is absolutely crucial to the construction of the Sadean universe. The heroes are active, their activities “expand” the circle of their operations but they need their victims, passive co-operators, to motivate their movement.

The dualism that provides the basic division of characters is further elaborated in terms of ‘elastic’ and ‘soft’ bodies. The heroes, of course, are elastic and energetic, whilst the victims are flaccid and feeble.

Under the *Encyclopédie*’s definition of ‘matière’ we find this division elaborated as follows:

“Si le corps est compact, et qu’il plie ou qu’il cède intérieurement à la pression, de manière qu’il revienne ensuite à la première figure, il est alors élastique…. Si les parties peuvent être déplacées, mais ne se rétablissent pas, le corps est alors malléable, ou mol.” [if the body is compact, bending and yielding inside to pressure, in such a way that it returns to its initial shape, then it is elastic. On the other hand, if parts can be displaced but do not return to their former shape, then the body is malleable, or soft].

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19 “... indignés contre les autels qui ont pu nous arracher quelques grains d’encens, notre fierté et notre libertinage les brisent dès que l’illusion a satisfait les sens, et le mépris presque toujours suivi de la haine remplace à l’instant dans nous le prestige de l’imagination,” [hostile to the altars which managed to extract a few drops of incense from us, our pride and libertinage smashes them as soon as illusion satisfies the senses, and disdain almost always followed by hatred instantly replaces the prestige of the imagination]. Duc de Blangis, *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* in *Œuvres*, ed. Delon, vol. 1 (1990), p.66. Also, “C’est plus cruellement que jamais… que je conçois le ferme projet de me venger de l’illusion où ses attraits ont pu me jeter; je la vois comme un monstre en horreur à mes yeux.” [I hold more cruelly than ever to the firm plan of making her pay for the illusion that her attractions threw me into]. Jérôme, *La Nouvelle Justine*, ed. Delon, vol. 2, p.711.

20 Buffon, *Supplément*, i.2.
The idea of elasticity is particularly clear in its Sadean equivalent, explaining the ability of the libertine flesh to reconstitute itself after any degree of abuse (although it may end up in a rather leathery state)\(^{22}\) while the victim’s body is progressively pulped or “meurtri” [bruised]. The libertines literally rebound after their experiences while the victims as literally fail to. This can similarly be viewed as the inability to react to stimulus deriving from a body’s “époque des organes” [thickness of organs], “peu de vitesse” [lack of speed] or “peu de disposition à être mis en mouvement” [lack of disposition to be swayed to movement] in the least sensitive body which is sluggish, lethargic, non-reactive.\(^ {23}\) Receptive organs, on the other hand, let impressions pass rapidly through, such that reactions are swift and strong, even violent.

From this brief outline it should be clear how ‘religiously’ Sade translates the theory of the behaviour of matter into a drama of humans functioning according to the same laws. There are three interconnected points I would like to make here: firstly, as I have already mentioned – materialism in the broadly mid-18thC version that Sade was acquainted with – did strongly assert that its rules applied to all matter, whatever its composition, be they particles slugging it out in liquids or human beings on collision courses in the world. This is not about analogy but about fundamental sameness of essence. Secondly, and it’s not something I am going to go into, the materialist theory of language is that it should function in a similar fashion, i.e. impress itself upon – in the case of a book – its reader and cause a palpable effect.\(^ {24}\) The model here is not so much that of particles in collision but of language and writing working on the senses and creating strong, even violent sensation and reaction. Sade’s passion for consistency demonstrates itself once more therefore, and if the best way to have the strongest effect on the senses is through violent, penetrative means, then Sade’s violent pornography will be the best text. Lastly, a clear strain of moralisation emerges as an important extension of the truly consistent system. The case is clear in terms of logical coherence: if axiom x is a general law, applicable to all phenomena, and it is the only true explanation of the workings of the universe, then other false explanations should be rejected, and the true one embraced: a sadean hero SHOULD behave in the way he does. He is helping nature when he does so, as well as behaving consistently according to his principles. This link is made explicit in numerous rehearsals of the libertine credo too numerous to mention. One such would be where Noirceuil encourages Juliette to see her murderous desires as not only prompted by nature but serving it, or in the anthropomorphised Sadean version, serving “her.”\(^ {25}\)

The structure of sadean texts, moreover, alternates between practice and preaching. In case we were inclined to overlook Sade’s emphatically moralising subtext, we should remember that Sade chooses the highest moral authority available in his world - the POPE – to underwrite the entire system.\(^ {26}\) Of course you are/may be thinking right now that the point of Braschi’s intervention is that

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\(^{21}\) “Matière,” *Encyclopédie* (Neufchastel, 1765), x.190.


\(^{23}\) *Histoire de Juliette*, p.422.

\(^{24}\) See my study, *Sade: from materialism to pornography*, ch. 6.

\(^{25}\) Noirceuil explains the relationship of desire to its justification in nature when he points out to Juliette that: “ Ces chatouillements indicibles que nous éprouvons au complot d’un crime […] cela ne nous prouve-t-il pas que, puisque[...] [la nature] a si bien placé l’attrait auprès du délit, c’est qu’elle veut que nous le commettions; et puisqu’elle a doublé cet attrait en raison de l’énormité, c’est que le forfait de la destruction, regardé conventionnellement comme le plus atroce, est pourtant celui qui lui plait le mieux ?”, *Histoire de Juliette*, p. 334.

\(^{26}\) *Histoire de Juliette*, p. 868-901.
it is blasphemous, and turns the Catholic church on its head: obviously I agree with this – and I will come to Sade’s satire of catholicism in a moment – but I think it is ALSO true to say that the existing ancien régime hierarchy of church and state is simply removed intact from its ideology and grafted onto a new one: Sade’s pope is not a weak figure of fun but the strongest most authoritative libertine there is – the one who defines principles and behaviour to the less experienced, such as Juliette.

And the morality of materialism dictates that a libertine must imitate the behaviour of matter, implicitly something he wants to do anyway, because in following the natural laws programmed into his own body, he is obeying the general laws governing all matter.

The sorceress la Dubois in La Nouvelle Justine allows us to see bad, i.e. conventionally “evil” behaviour reclaimed as good materialist practice when she paints a picture of the healthy if cruel society. The passage is as follows:

“... dans une société toute corrompue... mes vices... n’outrageant que le vicieux, déterminent dans lui d’autre vices qui le dédommagent; et nous nous trouvons tous les deux contents : la vibration devient générale; c’est une multitude de chocs et de lésions mutuelles, où chacun, regagnant aussitôt ce qu’il vient de perdre, se retrouve sans cesse dans une situation heureuse. Le vice n’est dangereux qu’à la vertu, qui, faible et timide, n’ose rien entreprendre.”

[In a completely corrupted society, my vices only outrage the vicious, determining him to further vices which compensate him; and we find that we are both happy: the vibration becomes general; there is a multitude of mutual shocks and lesions, whereby everyone, immediately retrieving what they have just lost, is re-established once more in a happy situation. Vice is only dangerous to virtue which, feeble and timid, does not dare to undertake a thing.]

From the Encyclopédie’s “les masses... se choquent” to Sade’s “c’est une multitude de chocs et de lésions mutuelles” is only a slight shift: the vocabulary of violence and the model of reactive knocks remains the same. The notion that this is a healthy and natural process is conveyed by the symmetrical justice of the ups and downs that restore the wicked to their “situation heureuse.”

As in any self-respecting moral system there are penalties for failing to observe the rules: Juliette twice finds herself in difficulties: firstly when she is observed to be too “enthousiaste” and not apathetic enough, and secondly when she hesitates for a second before agreeing to poison the water system of a town – she is obliged to flee from the ire of Noirceuil. The penalty of failing to be a good enough libertine, i.e. insufficiently murderous and principled, is of falling into the victim camp, losing immunity, and being killed. This happens to Olympe Borghèse and Clairwil, both of whom fall culpably in love with Juliette. Their weakness signs their death warrant.

The general centrality of moral issues is further reinforced by the satirisation of traditional christian catholic virtues. There are multiple strands to this satirisation, not least the blasphemous one of putting a virtuous girl, Justine, at the heart of a piece of pornography. However this can also be seen as a pornographic stock-in-trade. The strong presence of blasphemy in general – the insults at


28 It is interesting to note the “capitalistic” flavour of the passage: only the enterprising succeed.


30 Histoire de Juliette, p.1101.
God, the use of priests as main libertine characters, etc... – is also not so much satirisation as straightforward calumny, deriving from Sade’s ingrained opposition to the church. More interesting again, is the mapping of vice and virtue onto the profiles of active and passive matter, as I have suggested before.

The passive victims, although it is not perhaps generally recognised, are attracted to their forceful generals: Justine was in love with Bressac. More obviously, it is clear that Justine, wherever she went, always ended up within the ambit of a new torturer. The inevitability of this process could be interpreted as an effect of attraction, the unavoidable pull of a force. It puts into perspective her inability to learn from her experience and also in a way makes it irrelevant that she tries to be the incarnation of Christian virtue. The mockery of that virtue and its ideology is, according to this interpretation, one that sits on top of the real meaning that Justine is simply acting according to the principles of passive matter, thereby adding an extra twist of derision: Justine never understands why her “fate” leads her back again and again to her persecutors. She believes it is God’s will, when in fact she is obeying an entirely different law: that of matter - in her case, passive matter. Thus the explanation renders her heroic attempts to uphold Christian virtues senseless, as well as casting that Christianity as a glorification of the behaviour of passive matter and thereby subsuming it within materialism as a whole. Sade simultaneously shows Justine to be in a state of advanced delusion and also removes any integrity remaining to Christianity - it is merely a romanesque way of accounting for the characteristics of passive matter. Religion also emerges as a piece of mis-information that obscures the reality - the supremacy of active matter. That it could be thought that the story is about “good” and “evil” when it patently is not, is Sade’s special private joke.

The wicked/virtuous opposition is of course a part of Sade’s gleeful debunking of Christian morality. The glee comes from the fact that Sade is able to argue (as we begin to see) that active matter is ‘vicious’: it is the more forceful and the more violent of the material twins and its activity and energy derive from its collisions. It indicates that what has come to be known as “sadism” - sexually-titillating cruelty - is actually a worked-up form of theories of the interaction of matter. And this is where mere ‘Sadism’ and materialist philosophy unarguably meet.

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