H-France Review Vol. 25 (March 2025), No. 13

Alyce Mahon, *The Marquis de Sade and the Avant-Garde*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. 296 pp. $52.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-0691141619; $39.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9-78-0691264622.

Review by Effie Rentzou, Princeton University.

The cover of Alyce Mahon's book *The Marquis de Sade and the Avant-Garde* is graced with the arresting image of a half-naked woman hanging from her neck, sided by a second woman kneeling in front of her and a probably male figure behind her, ready to strike. This is the cropped version of an illustration by artist Leonor Fini for Pauline Réage's (pseudonym for Dominique Aury) 1954 "Sadean" novel *Story of O.* Fini's ink and wash illustration strikes the viewer with its delicate lines and pale, almost ethereal hues, contrasted to the brutality of the scene. This is a scene of cruel torture, a whipping bestowed upon the central heroine of the novel, O. Mahon discusses the *Story of O* in the third chapter of her book, when she explores the "Sadean imagination" in post-war France, in the 1950s and 1960s (p. 1). Aury's book is one loop in the chain of continuous interpretations, appropriations, and returns to Sade's work within the avant-garde, a chain that Mahon forges meticulously in this brilliant monograph. Key in this exposé is indeed the notion of the "Sadean imagination," defined as "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" (p. 1). "Within this imaginary locus," Mahon continues, "power is played out by and on sexual bodies without any concession to law, religion, or public decency" (p. 1). Based on this premise, the book explores the ways that the avant-garde, in a loose and broad sense, deployed this Sadean imagination throughout the twentieth century in order to create "individual or collective situations and experiences that propose, hypothesize, or imply the possibility of a better reality" (p. 1). Aury's *Story of O* is perhaps the paradigmatic case of the avant-garde's entanglement with Sade. In a richly argued chapter, Mahon shows how the *Story of O* recasts Sade from a female perspective, and stands in the crux of feminism, sexual liberation, political radicalism, and censorship in the long 1960s. The story of abject humiliation that ultimately turns the heroine into "a mass, a shape, and eventually a no-thing" (p. 155)--a nothingness echoed in her name, "O," which can also be a zero--is seen as a sex-positive, feminist empowerment narrative about a woman who refuses to play by the societal rules of motherhood and marriage. Instead, O explores and explodes every taboo in the name of sexual pleasure, a move that Mahon discusses in tandem with its contemporary "humanist feminism" of Edith Thomas and Simone de Beauvoir (p. 126).

Leonor Fini's remarkable illustrations for Aury's book may encapsulate, however, a central paradox in the Sadean imagination as proposed by Mahon. In Fini's work, there is a chilling contrast between its exquisite aesthetics and the abhorrent scene. This is a contrast between form and content, but also a contrast that duplicates the one between a presumed principle running through Sade's work and its actual subject matter. On the one hand, Mahon, and a long array of the avant-garde artists and thinkers studied in the book, see in Sade an understanding of the human as a desiring, complicated being, anchored in the body and the senses, which, through pleasure, catapult him to total freedom--this would be the principle. On the other hand, this total freedom is predicated on terror--emanating from the subject matter of murder, torture, rape, mutilation. Terror, argues Mahon, while horrific in real life, can be pleasurable when experienced through the distance of representation, reaching almost the sublime. Mahon's use of terror for understanding Sade is very close to Aristotle's use of *φόβος*, fear, in his description of the experience of tragedy. But while for Aristotle fear experienced by the viewer is the pathway to katharsis, the feeling of relief and pleasure derived by watching the calamities of others, Sadean terror does not offer such relief. What is offered, instead, as a possible release from terror is *jouissance.*

According to Mahon, the pursuit of jouissance, orgasmic bliss, is the driving force of Sade's work. The terror of the Sadean imagination finds its resolution in jouissance, or at least its justification in the "will-to-jouissance" as Lacan put it, which becomes a "right to jouissance," a right that determines human nature, challenges morals and law, and ultimately the "freedom of the Other" (p. 16). This interpretation of jouissance might sound too close to surrealist notions of desire as an aesthetic, ethic, and political principle--which Mahon explored and explained masterfully in her landmark book *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros* (2005).[1] But it also seems to dismiss an important question: whose jouissance is it? Pier Paolo Pasolini recasts this question in different terms when he states, talking about his film adaptation of Sade's work*, Saló or 120 Days of Sodom,* "all the sex in Saló [is a] metaphor for the relationship between power and those subjected to it" (p. 227). Indeed, what is salient in Sade--and in works like *Story of O*--is that the sexual encounters, tableaux, and orchestrated sexual operations, are less about jouissance and more about power. Those who get tortured, mutilated, flayed, killed, etc. are overwhelmingly women, children, teenagers, babies. They are put in a passive position for the jouissance of either a powerful male--exemplified in the *120 Days of Sodom* as socioeconomic power, with the four libertines acting out their most depraved fantasies, an aristocrat, a bishop, a magistrate, and a banker, representing the pillars of society--or of a female that pursues jouissance from the symbolic position of the male--this is the case of Juliette in *La Nouvelle Justine suivi de L'histoire de Juliette* (1797). The right to jouissance, based on the human common denominator of sexual desire, might sound as universal as the Enlightenment's rights of man, but it is equally limited. The rights of man proclaimed in the eighteenth century were de facto the rights of white, male, abled people, and left outside the realm of rights and of humankind vast populations (women, non-white, disabled, and so on). Similarly, the right to jouissance in Sade seems to be reserved for those who are in an actual or symbolic position of power, or who choose to adhere to an established power dynamic. Terror *may* lead to total freedom but only for those who inflict it.

With impressive intellectual virtuosity, Mahon morphs this power differential into empowerment for women. The first chapter of the book, "The Marquis de Sade and the Fairer Sex," sets up this

reading by interpreting the female heroines of Sade, and specifically Justine and Juliette, as alternative role models for a new femininity that rejects traditional patriarchal roles, especially that of the mother, in the pursuit, precisely, of bodily pleasure. Mahon follows this feminist thread in chapter three, when discussing Aury's novel in tandem with second wave feminist discourse. This empowerment, however, seems to allow only two positions for women: either jouissance through subjugation to (symbolically male) power (this is the case of O and of Justine), or, as mentioned above, through the adoption of a (symbolically male) position of power (this is the case of Juliette). While the Sadean imagination is touted by Mahon and the intellectuals and artists who saved Sade from oblivion or censorship in the twentieth century--from Apollinaire and Breton, to Jean Paulhan, Georges Bataille, and the censored publisher of Sade's work, Jean-Jacques Pauvert--as one of total liberty, one in which everything is possible, it is, in fact rather limited, as it revolves around a binary structure of dominator and dominated.

Another binary structure underlies Mahon's definition of the Sadean imagination quoted above, that of imagination and reality. Avant-garde artists find in Sade a paradigm to free imagination and think the unthinkable, and thus reimagine rules and conventions, providing an insight for a new, better reality. In this foundational definition, and the ensuing chapters, the relation of imagination and reality proves to be fluid. Often, imagination projects a reality not-yet-there, one of "radical thinking" that "interrogates systems of patriarchal, governmental, institutional, and imperial power through sexual relations in modern culture" (p. 19). This is the case of new gender roles (chapters one and three), but also of "Surrealist Sade," in chapter two, which follows the adaptation of the Sadean imaginary to a surrealist aesthetic. The surrealists, starting with their forefather Guillaume Apollinaire, writers like Robert Desnos, and André Breton, or photographer Man Ray and painter André Masson, harnessed Sade in their dream of total liberation operated through a sexuated, sensual body. In the last chapter of the book, "Screaming for Sade," the Sadean imagination becomes the paragon for contesting and resisting a conformist capitalist and utilitarian conception of the human, in performative works ranging from Guy Debord to Peter Weiss and Peter Brook. In all these instances Mahon outlines convincingly and with verve the "use value" of Sade in different historical contexts and underscores its metaphorical value as a liberation of the possible. Going back to the tension mentioned above, the interpretation here stands on the side of the principle scaffolding Sade's work.

When dueling on the other side of this tension, however, that of the subject matter, Sade's universe is envisioned almost as a cautionary tale and Sade becomes a moralist who imagines monstrosities and warns us about the bottomless cruelty of humanity. This is the case for Pasolini's film, which the director mounted as an extended metaphor for fascism, conflating Sade's universe with the last days of the fascist regime in Italy and suggesting that the Sadean imaginary is not about liberation and freedom, but on the contrary, about imposing terror as co-substantive of absolute power. Pasolini's interpretation and "use value" of Sade seems very close to Adorno and Horkheimer's reading of Sade in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) as the apex of Enlightenment, when, as they explain, pure reason becomes unreason. In their reading, Juliette is the "daughter of the Enlightenment" and not a "radically new kind of subject" (p. 182), as Mahon reads her: she exemplifies a society in which God is dead and with him the fear of eternal punishment, and is replaced by an earthly regime of terror and of intricately organized systems of penance, exemplified in Sade's hyperbolic fantasies. While in Pasolini's film Sade's regime of terror is equated with the historical experience of Fascism, Mahon resists a similar parallelism in

Dialectic of Enlightenment, characterizing Adorno and Horkheimer's interpretation as a "vulgar equation of Sadism and Nazism" (p. 182). This resistance may be due to the unwillingness to cross the line between imagination and reality: Pasolini's film is a representation which functions through metaphor, Adorno and Horkheimer's theoretical discourse eschews metaphor to explain twentieth-century totalitarianism. In other instances, however, Mahon does not seem so hesitant. The case of Simone de Beauvoir's protests during the Algerian War and its "state-sponsored atrocities," often of sexual nature against Algerian women, is telling (p. 184). This critique, according to Mahon, is predicated on de Beauvoir's understanding of Sade as a "moral" philosopher who exposes the cruelty of society by amplifying it and exaggerating it, "in a criminal society, one must be criminal" (p. 159). By bringing together De Beauvoir's political critique of the Algerian War and her interpretation of Sade, Mahon comes close to erasing the line between fiction and reality, and the imagined terror of Sade is, if not equated, at least overlapping with the real terror of war.

This distinction between real and fictional is captured in Sade's words, printed as a frontispiece in the introduction of the book, "I am a libertine, but I am neither a criminal or a murderer" (n.p.). Mahon spells out this clear-cut demarcation only near the end of the book. Referring to photographs of Abu Ghraib in the work of contemporary artist Paul Chan who juxtaposes them with illustrations of torture from Sade's original works, she differentiates between "a libertine work of fiction" (Sade) and a photograph of "an actual torture and homicide" (p. 235). While in this instance Mahon is careful to distinguish between "imagined and real systems of terror" (p. 234), throughout the book this important line of demarcation is sometimes eroded and sometimes reinforced in a way that seems arbitrary. There is thus a paradox in Mahon's book that can either be seen as weakness or strength, as a methodological oversight or, on the contrary, as a conscious decision which highlights precisely the "use value" of Sade in the twentieth century. Sade's "use value" is to be an echo chamber for the preoccupations of different historical moments, which privilege different aspects of his work. A pean for sexual liberation, a conduit for women's empowerment, and a blueprint for radical politics, or, on the contrary, a cautionary tale for the dangers of unchecked patriarchal power, an allegory for the organized violence of state. The perspective changes not only as the decades roll, but also as the focus may shift from style--the exquisite lines of Leonor Fini--to content--the unbearable atrocities of the Sadean repertoire--from principle to subject matter, or from the realm of imagination to that of the real. Mahon's book is not for the faint of heart; it embraces contradictions and tensions, which respond to the controversial nature of the work and legacy of Sade. The result is a powerful, bold, and thought-provoking study, a compelling, even if at times uneasy, read, calling us to decide for ourselves on the paradox of Sade.

NOTES

[1] Alyce Mahon, *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros, 1938-1968* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005).

Effie Rentzou
Princeton University

erentzou@princeton.edu

Copyright © 2025 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172