The Marquis de Sade and Materialism:

A Reading into the Unreadable

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Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

Kim Pham

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(Signature)
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Abstract

The Marquis de Sade was, and remains, a complex and controversial figure. Critics have argued that Sade explored the very edges of literary and psychological boundaries only in order to outrage expectations. However, in this thesis I argue there is a consistent materialist philosophy running through his works, and to understand Sade it is necessary to understand the materialism within his context. I begin by tracing the ideas in his work back to the materialist philosophers Lucretius, La Mettrie, and d’Holbach. I then explore the political implications of Sade’s materialism, and position his politics within the context of the French revolution. I then finish by positioning his sister novels Justine and Juliette as a response to the criticism of materialism articulated by Jacobi. Though, the ways Sade portrays his philosophy is quite simply horrifying, even to a modern reader, the ideas they portray reveal a unique and fascinating figure.
Introduction

The Marquis de Sade was, and remains, a complex and controversial figure. The extreme sexual nature of his works led to his name being the definition of sexual torture and humiliation, but beyond this his works reveal a fascinating materialist philosophy that provides unique insights to his context of France before and after the Revolution. French critic Philippe Roger argued that Sade’s works reveal no particular philosophical or political positions and simply seeks to push literary and psychological boundaries. However, in this thesis I argue that there is an ideology consistent throughout many of his works, and that is the philosophy of materialism. This philosophy of materialism informs the political ideas present in his works, which positions him as, for his context, a political anomaly. There is a consistent thread of materialist philosophy running through his works, and to understand Sade it is necessary to understand materialism within his context.

Materialism is a philosophical position which argues that everything that exists in the universe is solely material, which thereby omits the possibility of a supernatural or spiritual dimension. Materialism has at its roots in ancient Greek and Roman thinkers such as Epicurus (341 – 270 BC) and Lucretius (99 BC – c. 55 BC), and its thought can be linked to the advancement of modern science, primarily in the realm of the physical and natural sciences. However, despite how long materialism has been around, it has throughout history been considered a heretical philosophy that threatens to reduce all human experience to the physical, by rejecting anything supernatural. Though the philosophical tradition of materialism can be traced back to its roots, distinct branches have emerged, and the branch that emerged in eighteenth century France with La Mettrie and d’Holbach is particularly important for this thesis. This is because it is these authors that the Marquis de Sade specifically referred to as the inspiration for his works. It is, however, important not to forget the roots of

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materialist philosophy, as Sade clearly didn’t, and this thesis will also explore the impact Lucretius had on Sade’s mind and works.

Materialism and its assessment of the body are often described as “mechanistic”: “as signifying that the properties unique to organic, living embodied agents are reduced to or specified as mechanistically specifiable properties that characterize matter as a whole”. When we think of mechanistic, however, we think of industrial machines, but the materialist philosophy is fixated with man as a being of nature, and sees the events of natural life as repetitive, producing both beauty and destruction, and no innate understanding of purpose. Industrial machines are reflective of this part of nature, and it is this aspect of nature that Sade explored.

By exploring Sade through a materialist lens, this work will discuss whether there exists a consistent thread of thoughts within the inconsistencies, uncertainties and contradictions that is Sade and his works. Sade explores the facets of the materialist philosophy that were yet to be discovered, and forces the reader’s attention to the obscene, not to create an aversion to the philosophy, but because this facing up to the nature of things is an essential aspect of it. For example, in Sade’s amoral vision of nature, the duality of creation and destruction (and how one cannot exist without the other) shows us the potential for evil that lies dormant within all of us, and how it is better to understand it and confront this beast before it consumes us entirely. This is what distinguishes Sade’s works from the other materialist atheists of his time, as he pushed the materialist philosophy to its logical extreme, by taking the extreme worst of moral actions and exploring them in great detail. He therefore forced the reader to confront the carnal and animalistic side of their own humanity. A devotion to reason demands its use in all instances, even those parts of humanity and existence that seem irrational. This incompatibility hides the secrets Sade uncovers.

Before continuing along this pathway of analysis, it is necessary to address the corollary question immediately raised by the proposition. That is, by looking at Sade’s works as being an expression of a materialist philosophy we can make sense of the inconsistencies between the values proffered both in his written works and in his lifetime. However, if the nature of the investigation is centred on inconsistencies, how

can there be a consistent framework? An intrinsic feature of the materialist philosophy is its belief in the power of reason to discover the truth. Reason is, however, not an end point, and is rather a vehicle used in a number of different ways as a pathway to the truth. For example, in _120 Days of Sodom_ Sade’s libertines reject the notion that there can be such a thing as crime, and argue instead that their actions are simply nature’s will manifested. However, in the _Dialogue between a Priest and a Dying Man_, the dying man, when accused of excusing the reprehensible, responds as follows:

“I say nothing of the kind. Let the evil deed be prescribed by law, let justice smite the criminal… God forbid that this be construed as encouragement to crime, no, we should avoid it as much as we can, but one must learn to shun it through reason and not through false fears… Reason, sir – yes, our reason alone should warn us that harm done our fellows can never bring happiness to us and our heart”.

Moving from Sade’s fiction to his life, it is also clear through his correspondence regarding the Revolution that he views the death penalty as a crime sanctioned by the state. So, these values proffered can simply be seen as the ramblings of a man unable to settle on a proposition, but it is the argument of this paper that these inconsistencies are examples of Sade exploring materialist philosophy and applying to it the strict expectations demanded by its inferences.

The instances given above can be seen as Sade exploring the edges of his materialist philosophy, no matter how unwelcome the proposed conclusions. This shows in Sade an extreme honesty and commitment to reason, as well as extreme bravery. That is to say, Sade is not only brave in the mortal sense – all of his correspondence was censored as any expression of support for atheistic ideals were deemed as dangerous and those offering the support were prone to the guillotine. Indeed, even the progressive authors of the _Encyclopaedia_ Diderot and d’Alembert

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vilified atheism in public, declaring that in the case of atheists, it may be necessary to “put them to death, even if there is no other way of delivering society from it”. Sade’s bravery in exploring his explicit atheism and materialism is, in contrast, exceptional. There is also a remarkable bravery in Sade’s exploration of materialism’s implications, regardless of how unwelcome the conclusions may seem.

In chapter 1, I begin by exploring Sade’s connections to past materialist philosophers: Lucretius, La Mettrie, and d’Holbach. The influence of Julien Offray de La Mettrie’s *Man a Machine* is most explicitly found in Sade’s *Dialogue Between a Priest and a Dying Man*. D’Holbach’s *The System of Nature* proposes one of the key purposes of materialist philosophy as dismantling religion, and this is most explicitly found in *120 Days of Sodom*. I explore this by comparing the castle of Siling to Noah’s Ark. In these texts, Sade’s materialism and atheism are explored in distinct opposition to Christianity rather than as an independent philosophy. This is, however, not always the case in Sade’s texts, and in the second chapter I look at the political side of Sade’s materialism. He fit neither with the aristocracy from which he came nor the revolutionaries that overthrew them. This is not because Sade was apolitical, but rather, despite the extreme nature of his texts, his political positions were too mild for either regime. That is, his politics are inversely proportionate to the ways in which he expresses them. In this chapter I look at *Philosophy in the Boudoir* as the main text through which Sade expounds the political implications of his materialism. In the final chapter I give an account of Jacobi’s critique of materialism from his *Letter to Fichte* and position Sade as a response to this critique. I do so by looking at Sade’s sister novels *Justine* and *Juliette*. This follows on from the ideas explored in the second chapter; Sade does not push boundaries and subvert expectations just for its own sake, and rather has unique perspectives on materialism consistently present throughout all his works.

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Chapter 1

God is dead?: Sade’s Atheism and Materialism as Opposition

“Piety is indeed a true disease of the soul. Apply whatever remedies you please, the fever will not subside, the patient never heals; finding readier entry into the souls of the woebegone and downtrodden, because to be devout consoles them for their other ills…”

120 Days of Sodom

Sade spent over half of his adult life either in prison or in an insane asylum. Thirty-two years of isolation gave Sade the time to grow from an avid reader to a voracious, borderline obsessive reader. While imprisoned at Vincennes and the Bastille, Sade amassed around six hundred books, which made quite an impressive personal library. These included classics that he had read since childhood, “Homer, Virgil, Lucretius, Montaigne, Tasso, Ariosto, the Contes of La Fontaine, Boccaccio’s Decameron” as well as scientific writings vital to any Enlightenment thinker: an “Essay on Fluids, The Elements of Physics, Buffon’s Natural History”.

The focus of this chapter is on the materialist philosophy that Sade espoused, and the key materialist thinkers that he read, praised, and in some instances copied extracts verbatim. Two of the most influential philosophers on Sade’s works were Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709-1751) and Baron d’Holbach (1723-1789), whose most well-known works are Man a Machine (1748) and System of Nature (1770), respectively. In the case of the latter, once Sade managed to secretly secure a copy of

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d’Holbach’s *System of Nature* in prison, he “plagiarized from it extensively inserting large hunks of [the] text into his fictional protagonists’ polemics against the notions of Soul and Deity”. In a letter to his wife in November 1783, Sade considered *System of Nature* to be “truly and incontestably the basis of my philosophy”, and declared that he was prepared to defend it “to the point of martyrdom if necessary”. Sade’s devotion to these texts almost mirrors religious devotion to religious texts. That is, the fervour of his unwavering commitment to materialist ideas is reflective of how the religious discuss the Bible. However, there is a meaningful difference that helps illuminate the difference between the two, at least from Sade’s perspective. Whereas religious devotion is built upon superstition, indoctrination, hope, community, to name a few, from Sade’s perspective, materialism is built upon reason, and only reason.

The materialist philosophy espoused by La Mettrie, d’Holbach, and thereby Sade, is centered around the “rejection of the spiritual and immortal soul” and the creation or discovery of a natural, human centered equivalent. The universe and its inhabitants are, therefore, solely physical organisations of matter interacting in a myriad of different ways, creating (and destroying) the diversity we see in nature. As man is part of nature, the materialist perspective celebrates difference and diversity, whereas its religious antithesis seeks to create conformity and homogeneity. It is therefore useful to explore Sade’s materialistic ideals by tracing them back to the philosophy’s founder, Lucretius, in order to understand the foundations upon which Sade’s work is built.

Sade’s epistolary novel *Aline et Valcour* (1975) opens with the following epigraph from Lucretius’ *On The Nature Of Things*:

> Just as doctors, when they try to give children foul-tasting wormwood, first touch the rim around the cup with the sweet, golden liquor of honey,

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11 Ibid.
to trick the children's naive youth
just as far as the lips, so that meanwhile they drink down the bitter
wormwood's juice: the intent is deceptive, but not destructive:
it is restoration of the patients' health that they seek.

(1.936-943)\(^{13}\)

Though Sade does not comment on Lucretius as much as he does on La Mettrie and
d'Holbach, we can follow the thread running through his works and find Lucretius
holding the needle. By establishing the image represented by this embroidery, Sade
forces us to take note of its reverse side and understand that which is necessary for
such a thing to exist. That is, Sade explores the logical conclusions of the materialist
philosophy, and argues that accepting the aspects of the philosophy that are easiest to
digest also requires accepting the conclusions that are immediately unpleasant. This is
perhaps his greatest contribution to the philosophy, and his works, through their
incessant instances of impurity, are the purest form of materialism. They accept and
even celebrate conclusions that are, to put it mildly, unwelcome.

Following the Thread: A Brief History of Sade’s Materialist
Influences

If Newton was only able to see so far because of the shoulders he was standing
on, Sade was only able to dig so deep by using the tools built by his predecessors.
Sade was, of course, influenced by many thinkers, but here I will follow three key
figures in the philosophy of materialism and examine their impact on Sade’s works.
These three figures are Lucretius, La Mettrie, and d'Holbach, and by examining their
influence we can better understand the nature and intent of Sade’s creative
cacophonies.

\(^{13}\) Lely, Gilbert, *The Marquis de Sade: A Biography*, p. 252.
Titus Lucretius Carus (99 BC – c. 55 BC) was a Roman poet and philosopher, best known for his epic poem, *On The Nature Of Things*. He was one of the earliest materialists of his time and in his poem, he sought to propagate Epicurean philosophy to a Roman audience. He argued that the fear of death and the fear of the gods were the greatest impediments to peace of mind.\(^\text{14}\) In order to remove this impediment, Lucretius attempts to explain phenomena in a naturalistic, almost scientific way. Lucretius divided power into two factions: constituted power [*potentia*], which would be our capabilities and potential, and constitutional power [*potestas*], which is the state/official power and religious institutions. According to Lucretius, these two powers are always conflicting. The limit of our *potentia* is death, and *potestas* uses the fear of death to oppress the masses.\(^\text{15}\) In the Sadean oeuvre, as a protest against this fear, death is a release, especially death after orgasm, which is the ultimate pleasure and the ultimate protest against the control of the *potestas* over our *potentia*.

In *Man a Machine*, La Mettrie argued that humans, as beings part of and subject to nature, can only be understood and defined via scientific observation and experiment, positioning man as a machine. This machine is, like all others, subject to the laws of physics and the laws of motion, and its inputs and outputs can be examined and understood. Humans are, however, unique machines in the sense that they are in control of their input and output. The reason for the existence of this machine is therefore living in a way that creates the most amount of pleasure possible, whilst inflicting the least amount of pain possible.\(^\text{16}\) In Sade’s *Dialogue between a Priest and a Dying Man*, the dying man offers his own version of this idea:

“Dying Man: the entirety of human morals is contained in this one phrase: Render others as happy as one desires oneself to be, and never inflict more pain upon them than one would like to receive at their hands”.\(^\text{17}\)

The dying man’s moral beliefs can be seen here as a reverberation of La Mettrie’s *Man a Machine*. Sade borrows La Mettrie’s ideas and presents them as an opponent to

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\(^\text{15}\) Ibid.


\(^\text{17}\) Sade, “Dialogue Between a Priest and a Dying Man”, p. 27.
the dominant religious depictions of humanity. He also uses mechanistic imagery throughout his texts, for example, in *120 Days of Sodom* Sade describes how the “Duc rose up like a shot and measured his engine’s circumference against Michette’s slender little waist”.18 The Duc is simply a machine, inspecting an essential part of his anatomy before working on an output.

*La Vérité* is a poem written in 1787, five years after *Dialogue Between a Priest and a Dying Man*. In between the time of creation of these two texts was Sade’s most infamous and notorious work, *120 Days of Sodom*, which French literary critic Annie Le Brun claims represents Sade’s “rupture with the world – both his contemporary world, and our world of today”.19 In 1782, in *Dialogue between a Priest and a Dying Man*, we read that “all human mortality is contained in this sole precept: make others as happy as we would like to be ourselves, and never do them more harm than we would like them to do us”.20 Yet, after all the unspeakable horrors of the Revolution, Sade’s tone changes in his poem, *La Vérité*:

> “All things please nature: she has need of our misdeeds.  
> We serve her as we sin: the bloodier our opus,  
> The greater her domain – and her esteem for us”.21

Another interesting point of reference is that after writing the poem, Sade tried to falsely attribute its authorship to Julien Offray de la Mettrie.22 This is evidence that though Sade’s tone did transform, he still believed to be exploring the materialism of La Mettrie. The poem is also didactic in nature, and its form appears to mimic that of Lucretius’ epic poem, *On The Nature Of Things*. Wolfgang Bernard Fleischmann’s essay, *The Divine Marquis Under the Shadow of Lucretius* provides insight into how Sade was indeed inspired by and adopted many Lucretian themes, but also how he reversed the order of them causing a “perversion of Lucretius ideas”.23

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18 Sade, *120 Days Of Sodom*, p. 263.  
20 Ibid.  
21 Ibid.  
22 Lely, Gilbert, *The Marquis de Sade: A Biography*.  
Sade considered d’Holbach’s *System of Nature* to be the fundamental basis from which the seed of his materialist philosophy grew by perpetuating the idea of an absolutely atomistic world. From this perspective, everything is material, even our consciousness, which is shaped and driven by our physical interactions with the world. Morality does not descend from the heavens, but rather is simply a product of pragmatism. d’Holbach states a key purpose of materialism as being the repudiation of religious ideas: “If the ignorance of nature gave birth to such a variety of gods, the knowledge of this nature is calculated to destroy them”.24

In a secret journal entitled *Phantoms*, in which Sade kept while imprisoned at the Charenton asylum in France somewhere between 1787-1790, he espouses the same ideas. He often seems to be in conversation with the imaginary, man-made God that he detests so much. On multiple occasions he calls for this fabricated and scoundrel of a deity to prove his existence:

“Show yourself if you exist. Surely you cannot allow some weak creature to dare insult you, defy you, scorn you as I am doing, to dare deny your wonders and laugh at your existence, vile fabricator of so-called miracles! Do just one thing to prove to us that you exist!”25

Sade’s tone begins to sound pleading, as if he secretly wishes that he was wrong and that there is an answer forthcoming. He continues in his journal:

“Oh, vain and fanciful being whose very name has caused more blood to be shed on the surface of the globe than any war about politics ever will, may you sink back into the oblivion from which men’s insane hopes and ridiculous fears dared to drag you! Your appearance has caused nothing but suffering for the human race”.26

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26 Ibid., p. 65.
Sade states that the idea of God was solely created by the minds of men, and his inclination to find purpose and meaning in life through divinity and “insane hopes and ridiculous fears”. For Sade, this dogmatic devotion has brought mankind “nothing but suffering”.

In many of his works, Sade’s materialism and atheism exists in direct competition with religion and society. That is, his anger and obsession with religion and with God shows a latent connection that persisted. In many of his texts he does not simply provide an alternative, but rather explicitly and with extreme crudeness criticises and degrades his opposition.

**Dialogue Between a Priest and a Dying Man (1782)**

This notion is explored by Sade in a number of texts, starting with his dramatic play, *Dialogue Between a Priest and a Dying Man*, which was composed while he was incarcerated in the Bastille in the summer of 1782. As a young aristocrat, Sade was educated at the College de Louus-le-Grand, administered by the Jesuits, who believed “theatre as a pedagogical instrument of the first order”. Annie Le Brun, a prominent French academic and writer, argues that Sade’s early passion for the theatre played a pivotal role throughout his life and works. This can be seen in Sade’s dramatic fusion of both the real and imagined events set against the backdrop of a virtual stage. Brun argues that the unique physicality of the theatre and the multidimensional and interactive nature of the stage overwhelmed all the senses and created “a space both where the borders between illusion and reality dissolve and

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28 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
where illusion becomes reality”. The theatre is a “space of excess where illusion is embodied and where the dramatization of reality gives unlimited access to the imaginary”.33

Sade’s Dialogue Between a Priest and a Dying Man is a dramatised philosophical treatise, which employs the literary technique of dialogue d’antagonistes. This rhetorical tool allows for a conversationally didactic debate between a dying man and a Catholic priest, who has taken it upon himself to administer the last rites and to listen to his last confession in order to ensure that the dying man secures a place in heaven.34 This is the earliest of Sade’s compositions and is very tame in comparison to his later works, yet despite its brevity it offers the most insightful and penetrating of Sade’s anti-religious views.

The denouement of Dialogue Between a Priest and a Dying Man signals the abandonment of the religious values which have proven to be futile in the life of the dying man, and continue to be as useless in his death. The priest, who represents these values and ardently defends them against the dying man’s vilifying rhetoric, finally caves into his innate human desires and takes part in the licentious act of sleeping with six prostitutes, whom were “more beautiful than day”.35 The priest’s submission is revealed in a postscript at the end of the play:

“The dying man rang, the women entered; and after he had been a little while in their arms the preacher became one whom Nature has corrupted, all because he had not succeeded in explaining what a corrupt Nature is”.36

According to Brun, this is written like a “stage-direction” and a masterfully conceived coup de theatre, in order to reveal the sensationally sudden subversion of the priest’s role as the ultimate man of God, of the highest act of worship and sacrifice. The

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33 Ibid.
35 Sade, “Dialogue Between a Priest and a Dying Man”, p. 32.
36 Ibid.
priest’s shocking submission to his carnal desires reveals how Sade’s atheism was materialised by theatre.\textsuperscript{37} Through this, Sade invented a completely new form of theatre: “the first theatre of atheism”, in which nothing exists beyond the physical realm of human instincts and desires and the material body.\textsuperscript{38} Sade’s emphasis on the body in theatre and philosophy is precisely what differentiated him from other contemporary atheistic philosophers, as he “goes further than to set the sovereignty of his mind against the illusion of a divinity. For Sade, this sovereignty is established by the reality of the body alone, which is why the theatre, insofar as it functions as the site of bodily incarnation, will offer him the best means of taking free thinking beyond the limits of philosophy”.\textsuperscript{39} By taking atheism to its ultimate physical conclusions through the art of theatre, Sade points out that abstract freedom must be predicated by physical freedom; the freedom to think and the freedom to act are inseparable. For Sade, the world of his novel is a stage, and he was performing the last show on earth.

The Castle of Siling as Noah’s Ark

Writing much of his work in the Bastille before the French Revolution, Sade’s texts are reflective of his time, exploring the very extremes of literary freedom. Sade’s texts captivate the curious reader and seduce them to an uncharted realm of sexual hedonism and erotic ecstasy, yet behind this mirage of satisfaction and pleasure is Cerberus guarding the underworld that is Sade’s imagination. His works transform from being illustratively beautiful one scene to being morbidly dull and tedious the next, and then further, to being downright terrifying and disgusting. Sade’s obsession with extreme repetition and acute numerical detail is an important literary feature of the Sadean text. This obsession with physical symmetry and numbers is seen in great detail in the Marquis de Sade’s magnum opus, \textit{120 Days of Sodom}, written in 1785 while imprisoned in the Bastille. The act of writing the book was nearly as strange as

\textsuperscript{37} Le Brun and Phillips, "Sade or the First Theatre of Atheism", p. 43.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., p. 44.
the contents of the book itself. Desperately fearing its confiscation if discovered, Sade endeavored to write it in almost microscopic handwriting, on a roll of paper about forty-nine feet long, that he painstakingly glued together from small, separate pieces of paper smuggled into the prison.⁴⁰ He chose to work on it only from seven to ten each evening behind the clandestine curtains of night, and managed to finish his first draft, culminating an impressive 250,000 words in just thirty-seven days.⁴¹ Sade took extreme precautions to avert any ill fate that might befall on his beloved creation, but as fate would have it, things quickly went awry just before the beginning of the French Revolution.

A prisoner officer by the name of de Launay wrote in the Bastille logbook under July 2nd 1789:

“The Marquis de Sade at midday, went to his window and at the top of his voice, so that he could be heard in the whole neighborhood and by passers-by, yelled that he was being slaughtered, and that the Bastille prisoners were being murdered, and would people come to their aid. He repeated his cries and vociferous complaints several times”.⁴²

The following day, the same officer wrote in a letter to Lord de Villedieuill, Minister of State, asking for permission to quickly transfer Sade to the Charenton or another prison some distance away from the general public. In the postscript after the letter was written and signed, the officer adds:

“P.S. He [de Sade] had been told that he would not be able to walk on the towers, that he would have morning and evening exercise in the quadrangle, which he indeed was granted, but which did not satisfy him, and he threatens to shout again”.⁴³

⁴⁰ Gray, At Home With The Marquis De Sade, p. 264.
⁴¹ Ibid.
⁴³ Ibid.
Though when this letter was written, it is doubtful that the officer would have found it amusing, now we are given a comical image of Sade clamoring and shouting from the bars of his cell, and after being lightly punished, flippantly threatening the officer that he will yell again. Left out, abandoned and isolated from both the old, aristocratic world that brought him up as well as the new republican world he later found himself in, Sade revolted against every institution he found himself in. Merely days after he was forcibly removed from the Bastille for his disruptive behavior, the prison was stormed and looted on July 14th 1789.44

Utterly traumatised by the loss of his most treasured masterpiece, Sade wrote a heartfelt letter to his close friend Gaufridy in May of 1790, not long after his release:

“My manuscripts, for whose loss I’ve shed tears of blood! … One can replace beds, tables and commodes, but ideas – never! … No, my friend, no, I could never succeed in expressing the despair I feel at this loss, which is beyond repair”.45

Perhaps, Maurice Heine was the first to realize, how much Sade suffered from the creative chasm left from the loss of his works, and it was as if, “the rest of his literary life will be governed by the need to repair the consequences of this irreparable mishap”.46

Nevertheless, Sade persisted and managed to rewrite his chef-d'oeuvre, in which he explores in gruesome detail a story of extreme, repeated sexual torture and humiliation of exactly 46 victims, for exactly 120 days, orchestrated by four sadistic libertines. The four libertines responsible represent the key institutions (that is, the postetas) responsible for maintaining the hierarchies in France. They were a duke, a bishop, a magistrate, and a financier, and they represent the system responsible for Sade’s imprisonment.47 Numbers are also responsible for controlling and regulating the extremity of the abuse, as the slow increase of violence eventually culminates into a cascade of slaughter. The days of the victims are systematically numbered with a set

45 Le Brun, Sade: A Sudden Abyss, p. 4.
46 Ibid.
47 Gray, At Home With The Marquis De Sade.
timetable of their torture and eventual execution, drawing similarities to the lives of prisoners at the Pipcus that he witnessed being guillotined.

“Punctually at six o’clock is the approved schedule of deflowerings… the orgies shall cease at precisely two in the morning”.

All events and procedures held in Siling are strictly arranged by the exact time and date, without the slightest miscalculation. Even sex transforms into a highly mechanical and controlled operation:

“Duc de Bonnefort’s passion required a woman, armed with a dildo, to frig herself naked in his presence… for three hours without a moment’s interruption. He has a clock there to guide you, and if you drop the work before having completed the third hour, no payment for you… at the precise instant the clock strikes the third hour, up he gets, approaches you, and discharges in your face”.

Sade’s obsession with extreme repetition and numbers reflects the monotony of the horror that was taking place around him. That is, in writing in this way he is “normalizing the abnormal”. One execution is a horror show, an event, but ten thousand executions turns each one trivial. Gilles Deleuze argues in his provocative essay, “Coldness and Cruelty” from his book, Masochism, that the Sadean oeuvre "cannot be regarded as pornography… because its erotic language cannot be reduced to the elementary functions of ordering and describing". Deleuze suggests that the eroticism that gilds the surface of Sade’s fiction and his powerful pornographic language that conjures up vile images of suffering and death, were not written merely to satisfy, but to explore the edges of artistic freedom. Sade’s language does more than paint a picture of the body and flesh; it is an instrument for philosophising. The philosophy it explores is materialism, and Sade takes the same approach to materialism as his libertines do to their prisoners; every cavern is excavated.

48 Sade, 120 Days Of Sodom, p. 146.
49 Ibid., p. 524.
According to Philips, Sade’s readers feel trapped, almost imprisoned, by “the sense of claustrophobia generated by the repetitiousness of structure”.\textsuperscript{52} This links to Sade’s manic fixation with perfect square numbers (1, 4, 9, 16). The name "square number" stems from the fact that these particular numbers of objects can be arranged to fill a perfect square. This concept of the “perfect square” may allude to the physicality of Sade’s imprisonment, the confining four walls of his cell that he was bound by. A square number is generated when you multiply a whole number by itself. In this sense, square numbers share similar properties to Sade’s materialistic view of nature: nature is self-regulating, self-producing and self-destructive. The true prisoners of the text are the readers, forced to witness the horrors of the result of normalising the abnormal. The reason for this can be found if we approach the text as an allegory for the story of Noah’s Ark, which, according to Sade, deifies the abhorrent.

Interestingly, the number 120, which represents the duration of the events at Siling, is not a square number. Rather, I believe it is an allusion to the devastating flood that God released onto humanity on the Day of Judgment. In the Book of Genesis 6:3, God declared,

> “My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years”.\textsuperscript{53}

Here, God warns mankind of his waning patience and tolerance for man’s sinful behaviour on Earth, and how in exactly one hundred and twenty years, if man had not changed and repented, he will return to cleanse humanity of their sins by way of a worldwide flood. The biblical flood lasted forty days and killed everyone on Earth except Noah and his family, which consisted of his wife, three adult sons (Shem, Ham, and Japheth) and their wives (who are merely there for reproductive purposes), as well as a large selection of all of Earth’s animals in an orderly male and female pairing. The story of the flood illustrates a powerful parallel with the biblical story of Creation, with a particular focus on the ideas of punishment, death and salvation. The

\textsuperscript{52} Phillips, Sade: The Libertine Novels, p. 15.
Ark becomes a microcosm of the fate of all mankind and the cyclical nature of life: creation and destruction.54

In this vein, Sade’s *120 Days of Sodom* is an extreme parody that mirrors Noah’s Story of the Ark; the libertines are the materialist reincarnations of Noah and his family, and to condemn one is to condemn the other. The castle of Siling in Sade’s narrative of excess, desolate and perched on the fringe of existence is a satirical allusion to Noah’s Ark, the only remaining fragment of life left floating on earth. The roles and stature that the four libertines hold resemble that of Noah and his three sons. The meticulous procuring and categorisation of all of Earth’s animal species by Noah, is also comparable to the calculative mass abduction of prisoners at the castle of Silling:

“So they went into the ark to Noah, by twos of all flesh in which was the breath of life. Those that entered, male and female of all flesh … every beast after its kind, and all the cattle after their kind, and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth after its kind, and every bird after its kind, all sorts of birds”.55

“Four accomplished procurresses to recruit women, and a similar number of pimps to scout out men…Four supper parties were held regularly every week in four different country houses located at four different extremities of Paris…to these sixteen husbands was joined the same quantity of boys, much younger…and always be at hand sixteen young men”.56

This makes the castle of Silling, the first, if not only, “absolutely atheistic monument”57.

In both texts, both people and animals are treated as no more than livestock, existing solely to procreate, and to then be destroyed. Sade therefore equates Christian

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56 Sade, *120 Days Of Sodom*, p. 194.
57 Le Brun, *Sade: A Sudden Abyss*, p. 47.
teaching with the amorality often depicted as being innate to atheism and materialism. However, the fate and purpose of people and animals differed greatly. In Noah’s Ark, the importance of the specific male and female pairing of animals serves only one purpose, and that is “to keep the seed alive upon the face of all the earth”.58 It is clear that the process of reproduction and the preservation of the lineage of each kind held a great importance in God’s grand plan to repopulate the earth again. However, in Sade’s 120 Days of Sodom, the role of reproduction serves no purpose in the Sadean experience. Rather, it is looked upon with disdain, and sexual pleasure is rarely achieved through vaginal intercourse. Flagellation, masturbation and, of course, sodomy served as a parody of traditional procreative intercourse and the sacrilegious sexualizing and misuse of the body and life that God bestowed to humans.59 Christian theology considers the act of sodomy a sin, because it serves neither the natural process of procreation nor does it help establish the basis for an ongoing mutual relationship and bond between species, but instead its purpose is to bore through and lacerate the sexual partner’s orifice only to release and exchange bacteria and possibly disease through excrement.60 Thus, for Sade, not only is sodomy a powerful act of pleasure and eroticism but it is also, theologically, the ultimate “assault on the human species, an act of monstrous singularity and an act directed against God”.61 Sade’s sodomite perversion and atheistic contempt for the vagina and its reproductive purpose is shown through President Curval’s horrid portrayal of Therese:

“As for her vagina, it was the receptacle of everything ungoldly, of every horror, a veritable sepulcher whose fetidity was enough to make you faint away”.62

This is not a comment to be expected from someone who has and will engage in exceedingly foul and repulsive sexual acts, ranging from the eating of feces to necrophilia. To him, creation is more repulsive than this, and the only real constant is destruction. The libertine conscious expounds a negative relationship with God, yet

58 Grossfeld, *Genesis*: 6, p. 54.
61 Ibid., p. XIII.
62 Sade, 120 Days Of Sodom, p. 283.
the very idea of God’s non-existence is indispensible to him.63 That is, Sade deplores God, but his works could not exist without the idea of a God. Ironically, his atheism does not stem from a “cold-blooded” and detached core, but rather the notion of God fuels the libertine’s conscience with a fiery and all-consuming atheism that makes it “the results of effervescences and therefore of resentment; his atheism is only a form of sacrilege”.64 That is, his atheism is not a position but an opposition. In terms of independent atheism, sacrilege has no value and offers no real position, but rather only acts to reveal an inherent weakness of will or reason in the individuals who revel in it: “By sweet Jesus’ sweet face I’m coming…Ah, gentle Jesus! Double –fucked Christ!”65 The libertine’s sexual routine demands shouting out derisions against God at the point of orgasm, as if this is the only way to convince Sade of his own (God-obsessed) atheism. The affronts to God and the crimes the libertines indulge in are meant to be provocations aimed at an inattentive God, or even a distant cry into the void. Needless to say, Sade persists, as if his defamatory incitements would vex God so much as to force him into existence:

“In fine, decide for yourselves: were there a God and were this God to have any power, would he permit the virtue which honors him, and which you profess, to be sacrificed to vice and libertinage as it is going to be? Would this all-powerful God permit a feeble creature like myself, who would, face to face with him, be as a mite in the eyes of an elephant, would he, I say, permit this feeble creature to insult him, to flout him, to defy him, to challenge him, to offend him as I do, wantonly, at my own sweet will, at every instant of the day?”66

This is a small segment from the first speech that the Duc de Blangis, one of the four libertines, made in front of all his prisoners outlining all the rules and procedures they have to abide by if they wish to survive. The Duc stresses that few crimes will be more severely punished than those of piety. Yet, what is interesting to consider is

64 Ibid., p. 65.
65 Sade, 120 Days Of Sodom, p. 531.
66 Ibid., p. 253.
despite the fact that this speech is directed at a large group of prisoners, in which he views to be no more valuable than livestock:

“\[quote]\text{It is not at all as human beings we behold you, but exclusively as animals one feeds in return for their services, and which one withers with blows when they refuse to be put to use.}\].\footnote{\text{Sade, 120 Days Of Sodom, p. 252.}}\]

Despite the fact that their fates have been horribly sealed and every facet of their physical body that can and will be exploited, the Duc gives his prisoners, and perhaps his readers as well, a choice: “decide for yourselves”. Sade’s decision to allow for the possibility of having a choice helps encourage the reader’s active participation within the narrative itself. According to Philippe Roger, “Sade is not satisfied with merely evoking the traditional terms of the contract with the reader” instead, he tries to communicate personally with each individual reader in order to invoke discussion and independent reactions.\footnote{\text{Philippe, “A political minimalist”, p. 79.}} This is where Sade’s authorial voice appears to bleed through the Duc’s: he urges us to think for ourselves, in order to make our own, informed choices, no matter the extent to which we are trapped and broken (like Sade was), we still have the unlimited expanse of our minds.

Peculiarly, not only do these deeply depraved libertines give their slaves some subtle encouragement to think for themselves, they also identify and empathise with their victims.\footnote{\text{Klossowski, “Nature as a Destructive Principle”.}} This rare face of humanity is shown through an intimate conversation shared between the two debauchees, The Duc and Durcet, where they discussed ideas of pleasure and happiness:

“\[quote]\text{Since my arrival here my fuck has not once flowed because of the objects I find about me in this castle. Every time, I have discharged over what is not here, what is absent from this place, and so it is, that, according to my belief, there is only one essential thing missing from our happiness – pleasure through comparison, a pleasure which can only be born from the sight of the unhappy, and we see none of that breed here. It’s at the sight of the man who}\].\footnote{\text{Klossowski, “Nature as a Destructive Principle”.}}\]
isn’t enjoying what I have and who is suffering that I know the charm of being able to say: I am happier than he is. Wherever men may be found equal, and where these differences do not exist, happiness shall never exist either”.  

Sade’s theory of pleasure through comparison, according to Klossowski, is essentially the libertine’s way of acknowledging the suffering of their victim by comparing their situation with that of the accursed. The fortunate man makes a fatal identification with the unfortunate man by “tormenting the object of his lust in order to derive pleasure from his suffering, and by seeing in the suffering of another his own suffering, he will also see his own punishment”. Sade’s libertines play both the role of the executioner and the prisoner, the villain and the victim, the hunter and the game. Sade’s characters are able to assume both sides of a dichotomy, and feel both pleasure and pain, simultaneously. This duality of difference is further explored by George Bataille in his book, *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo*, where he states that “violence is silent and de Sade’s use of language is a contradiction in terms”. The libertines’ violence is inexplicably loud and amorally rational. Usually, the torturer or the executioner does not justify their own actions, but rather points towards an authority making the decision for the torture or execution to go ahead. Paradoxically, Sade’s libertine characters engage differently to their role as the torturer, by trying to justify their actions as serving the dictates of nature. Through this, Sade’s characters do not embrace “the profound silence peculiar to violence, for violence neither declares either its own existence or its right to exist; it simply exists”.

Sade’s ability to write from the literary point of view of both the oppressor and the oppressed serves to individualise and humanise the reading experience, that he believed, the biblical texts failed to do. Noah’s Ark essentially tells the story of a man who strives to be God’s favourite by purporting to save every species, but in saving mankind, he is an accessory to the murder of the overwhelming majority of all

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71 Klossowski, “Nature as a Destructive Principle”.
72 Ibid., p. 69.
74 Ibid., p. 188.
living things. Noah’s ark is a story of destruction and punishment enforced by the powerful, and any glimmer of hope is decided by the powerful, given to the weak, for the benefit of the powerful. Sade’s “pleasure through comparison” is another aspect of his criticism of religion and blind devotion to God. Sade does not explore the obscene for its own sake (though this is reason enough), but rather shines a light on the terror-filled implications of religious ideas. To Sade, religious compassion is, for the powerful, a felicitous façade to facilitate horrors on the weak in the hidden name of self-aggrandisement and self-preservation. The idea of Noah building a boat big enough to save two of every animal on earth, not to mention his ability to corral them all, is no less absurd than Noah building a boat big enough to save everyone alive. Why, then, is the latter story not given? Because the story is not about humanity’s survival, but rather is about God’s power and God’s punishment, and Noah’s demonstration that he is holier than thou.

“Wherever men may be found equal, and where these differences do not exist, happiness shall never exist either”.75

Noah took pleasure in comparing the inequality of mankind’s fate. For God, not only were the ideas of reproduction important in his eyes, but also the life and prosperity of the select few compared to the collective death and destruction of the entire world, which made the punishment even sweeter. At the end of the one hundred and twenty-day ordeal, survivors at the castle of Siling are allowed to return home, but unfortunately, God did not offer the same leniency. To condemn Siling is to condemn the Ark. The massacre in the Ark is incomparable to the events at Siling, but there is a key difference in how these stories are depicted. Sade explores the impact of the libertines’ actions on the prisoners, on the weak. In contrast, the victims of the massacre are simply depicted as being evil, and deserving of their fate. Sade provides a materialist allegory for Noah’s Ark in order to point out that its only saving grace is its connection to Christianity. It is only a moral teaching because it is deemed by the powerful to be so, which echoes the claims of the libertines. The key difference is the cultural and religious acceptance of Noah, whereas the libertines claim no divine right.

75 Sade, 120 Days Of Sodom, p. 362.
It has been argued that the prevailing idea permeating through Sade’s texts is that “there are no real values or religious truths, social life is a veritable hell, and man is, accordingly, a beast by nature”. This is a reflection of his materialistic beliefs, and religion and society exist only to restrict nature, and to repress innate desires. Sade was a literary martyr who set out to abolish values that were highly endorsed in the tradition of religious salvation and the good life, yet “he was not a reformist; he possesses no alternative values”. In contrast to this, some have argued that Sade was an ethical reformer and that there was a rhythm to his madness. For example, Lawrence W. Lynch asserted “In defense of Sade, he seemed genuinely sincere when he claimed that by portraying vice with elans and ‘wrapped in the colours of hell’, he was contributing to the subsequent avoidance of vice”. In Sade’s materialist philosophy, an individual's physical body is all that there is, and nothing exists beyond that. There is no immortal soul or afterlife to look forward to after death. Therefore, Sade’s obsession with bodily destruction and corruption can be seen as subversively adding value upon the physical body, by emphasising the permanence of this destruction, and the impermanence of a life. For Sade, to destroy the body of a living being is to eliminate them completely from the only world there is, which is far worse a crime than to destroy merely a vessel for a soul, that will either be gifted a new body or continue to exist in a spiritual disembodied form. As opposed to reducing the value of life, for Sade, materialism valued life because this world is all that matters, and therefore these lives are all that matter.

In Sade’s fictional worlds, there is no effort to maintain law and order by any of his characters for they, like Sade, possess morals that are the antipode to the conventional standards of moral conduct, and they are forever on the path to retrogression. His characters are governed by nothing more than impulse and violence, as they are the only keys to unlocking, and therefore unleashing their wildest carnal desires. To Sade, the impulsivity of sexual urges and his violent means of satisfying them is his freedom, whilst civility serves only to suppress him. Sade removes the social justifications for actions, and reduces them to instinctual desires, and this is another layer of his materialism. The satisfying of these desires is a form of

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77 Ibid., p. 16.
protest against the institutions that suppress them. That is, the reason his works were, and still are, so horrifying is because they offend all the rules society has put in place.

This protest against the potestas is outlined early in the narrative by the Duc de Blangis:

“I was still very young when I learned to hold religion’s fantasies in contempt, being perfectly convinced that the existence of a creator is a revolting absurdity… I have no need to thwart my inclinations in order to flatter some god; these instincts were given me by Nature, and it would be to irritate her were I to resist them; if she gave me bad ones, that is because they were necessary for her designs. I am in her hands but a machine which she runs as she likes, and not one of my crimes does not serve her: the more she urges me to commit them, the more she needs them; I should be a fool to disobey her. Thus, nothing but the law stands in my way, but I defy the law, my gold and my prestige keep me well beyond reach of those vulgar instruments of repression which should be employed only upon the common sort”.

The libertines explain their ideology not as a position, but as an opposition to religious control. The appearance of objectivity given to this control is also attacked by the Duc:

“[The ideas of just and unjust] have never been anything if not relative, that the stronger has always considered exceedingly just what the weaker regarded as flagrantly unjust, and that it takes no more than the mere reversal of their positions for each to be able to change his way of thinking too… the Duc would conclude that nothing is really just but what makes for pleasure, and what is unjust is the cause of pain”.

The Duc also attacks the Christian virtue of independence that facilitates these rules; rules only matter if they are obeyed, and so the person who obeys these rules is as responsible as those who write them:

79 Sade, 120 Days Of Sodom, p. 198.
80 Ibid., p. 199.
“I trust you have not deluded yourselves into supposing that the equally absolute and ridiculous ascendancy given you in the outside world would be accorded you in this place; a thousand times more subjugated than would be slaves, you must expect naught but humiliation, and obedience is the one virtue whose use I recommend to you.”

The Duc equates the slaves of the Castle of Siling to the general public. If obeying the rules of society is a virtue, then in the society of Siling, the slaves should be eager to be abused and broken. The Duc then explains how piety is used to force obedience; if the next life is for eternity, then why care for any pains in this one?

“Piety is indeed a true disease of the soul. Apply whatever remedies you please, the fever will not subside, the patient never heals; finding readier entry into the souls of the woebegone and downtrodden, because to be devout consoles them for their other ills, it is far more difficult to cure in such persons than in others.”

Sade’s materialist influences permeate throughout his work. This can be seen in the ever-present depiction of Christianity as the key threat throughout Sade’s works. The influence of La Mettrie is most evident in the Dialogue Between a Priest and a Dying Man, and d’Holbach’s vision of materialism as being responsible for the dismantling of religion and the gods is seen in 120 Days of Sodom, in which Sade critiques religious claims to morality by parodying Noah’s Ark. According to Sade, the fear of the gods is so powerful and so debased that it can propose a story as full of horror and destruction as Noah’s Ark and still pass it off as a lesson in morality. Siling is the materialist equivalent of the Ark, only it is more empathetic to the fate of the victims. Any attack on the immorality of the libertines is an attack on God himself. In these texts Sade’s atheism and materialism are only position insomuch as they are in opposition to Christianity. However, this is not always the case in Sade’s texts; he also explores the nature of materialism in and of itself.

81 Sade, 120 Days Of Sodom, p. 199.
82 Ibid., p. 498.
Chapter 2

God is dead!: The Political Implications of Sade’s Materialism

Despotism, with frightful mien, against him waged unending strife;
Under Monarchs, this hateful fiend stole away the rest of his life.
Under the Terror, it lived once more, set Sade on the abyss’s rim.
Under the Consulate it was reborn and still Sade is its victim.

Epitaph of D. A. F. de Sade, prisoner under all regimes.83

The Marquis de Sade was a unique figure before and after the French Revolution, belonging to neither political climate. This is not because Sade was apolitical, but because, despite his reputation, his politics were too mild for either regime. In this chapter, I aim to explore how Sade uses the widely driven vehicle of erotic literature to elaborate his materialistic philosophy and come to terms with what was happening in the violent and chaotic world in which he lived. That is, through erotic literature Sade explores his philosophy of materialism and its implications on his political climate. Philosophy in the Bedroom will be the primary text I analyze as it is one of the most politically charged of Sade’s books.84 I also look at how Sade’s life and upbringing impacted his political and philosophical positions in order to establish how he was stuck between the two extremes of the French Revolution. I argue that Sade not only sought to reveal the wounds and deformities of the world, he also sought to offer a remedy. His materialism as discussed in the first chapter is religiously driven, but in the second I seek to explore its political motivations and

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83 Conrod, “Face-To-Face with the Dying Priest: Dialogue Between a Libertine and a Pope in Histoire De Juliette”, p. 331.
impact. However, first I will begin by assessing Sade’s choice of erotica as his philosophical vehicle.

**Political Pornography**

Erotic literature has, for most of history, been an illicit form of art. Under the French *Ancien Régime*, the publication and circulation of erotic works was underground and this necessitated that the authors remained largely anonymous. Censorship and the stigma attached to erotic material is an essential part of its history, as well as its allure. Erotic literature commonly features elements of satire and irony in order to critique, and Sade uses the vehicle of erotica to expose hypocrisies and portray his perceptions of the political climate in which he lived. Erotic literature empowers the reader to question the value and relevance that decency holds in society, and beyond that, forces them to question the very nature of art. Indeed, many erotic works have not only been rejected as reputable works of art, they have been banned, seized, and destroyed. Yet, it is this response elicited by this illicit fiction that forces the question of what really is civil: the practice of free expression or the suppression of it. This is particularly pertinent to the Sade’s context, as the suppression of freedom of expression was rife both before and after the revolution.

In *The Invention of Pornography*, Lynn Hunt outlines the role that erotic literature played in early modern Europe. Far from being texts designed for sexual gratification, erotic texts were mainly used to “criticize religious and political authorities”.\(^{85}\) This was amplified by its illicit nature, and because of the spread of print culture, pornography emerged as a distinct genre. In the period before the French Revolution, the government banned all books that in any way criticised religion or the state, and were labeled “philosophical books”.\(^{86}\) There was an inherent link between pornographic texts and philosophy, and their danger to the state was explicitly stated.


\(^{86}\) Ibid., p. 18.
And yet, “as many as 200 licentious pamphlets and books were published between 1789 and 1792 alone”.87 This shows the rise of materialist philosophy during this period, as Margaret Jacob explains, “pornography was first naturalist and then profoundly materialist in inspiration”.88 This materialism had its roots in Epicurianism, but it had undergone a significant philosophical transformation: “nature was mechanized”.89 Nature was reduced to dimensions and movement, and materialism was “the logical outcome when nature is abstractly mechanized and bodies in motion are made wholly sufficient, encapsulated by the experimental gaze of the natural philosopher”.90

Sade’s language does more than paint a picture of the body and flesh; it is an instrument for Sade to explore a materialistic philosophy. Sade expanded on this philosophy by painting worlds in which not only was all knowledge derived from the senses, but so was all morality. Sade’s libertines believe that it is their right and duty to obey the laws of nature by pursuing and satisfying their own passions, and nothing else. According to Sade’s libertines, nature creates and destroys her creations to maintain equilibrium, and man as her creations must do the same thing. By eroticising cruelty, Sade shows us the allure of violence and the potential for evil that lies dormant within all of us, because it is only when we confront it, can we begin to understand it. Therefore, as Caroline Warman argues, “sexual sensations, as the most powerful of all, over-rode all others to occupy a determining position with regard to behaviour and knowledge”.91 Sade’s use of the erotic genre is therefore how Sade explores and portrays his version of materialism. Sade’s erotic literature subverts the idea of reading for pleasure, and he offers the reader no comfort or refuge from his dark, twisted world of pain, sexual humiliation and death. The reader is left feeling like road kill, as our values and expectations are laid bare and crushed on the concrete, and the flies and maggots of Sade’s verminous words eat away at our flesh and minds. Through all this he is able to elucidate his views on the natural world and

its disposition for chaos and destruction. This has a novel effect on the reader that very little other works can accomplish, as the reading experience is veiled in ambivalence; the reader can never really tell if they are enjoying the text or not. Sade explores how brutality and conflict are necessary for aggravating and stimulating the imagination, and suffering is the only vehicle in which Sade wants to justify in his materialist philosophy.

Sade came to materialism by way of his politics and his class; he was highly educated and had access to many great and influential political and philosophical texts. His position in society was pivotal in his ability to acquire such a unique place politically. Sade was born into the French aristocracy, and he spent much of his life relishing in luxury, yet he felt perpetually stifled by social rules and expectations of the upper class, declaring that, “social order at the expense of liberty is hardly a bargain”. Sade’s works contain a number of critiques of social inequality and warn of the dangers of the elitism of which he himself was a product. However, many critics argue that he was politically opportunistic and did not hesitate to take advantage of his birth when the situation arouse. In particular, he was left untouched by his early brushes with the law, including charges of blasphemy, sodomy, lacing sweets with a common aphrodisiac, the Spanish fly, and adulterous relations with his sister-in-law. These were mostly ignored because he was a member of the nobility. Despite his active involvement in the Revolution, his excitement soon fizzled in the face of its frenzied barbarism. Even when he was appointed as Grand Juror in the April of 1793, he exercised none of the bloodlust qualities that were evident in his fiction but instead dismissed the charges against all the accused, sparing the lives of many from the guillotine, including the family of Madame de Montreuil, who was responsible for his arrest and lengthy imprisonment in the Bastille. In a letter to Gaufridy, his friend and lawyer, Sade explained his reasons for resigning from his position as President of the Piques Section,

92 Sade, 120 Days Of Sodom, p. 136.
94 Schaeffer, The Marquis De Sade: A Life.
“I considered myself obliged to leave the chair to the vice-president; they wanted me to put a horrible, inhumane act to a vote. I never would”.95

Soon after his resignation, he was arrested for “counter-revolutionary activities” in December 1793 for his inaction and excessive mildness in his political stance and was imprisoned for a little over a year.96 As he put it,

“What am I? ... aristocrat or democrat? Please tell me ... because I know nothing anymore.”97

In a letter to one of his confidants written in 1791, Sade appears to display a growing confusion of his place within the new French republic and the old monarchist roots from which he came. Sade can be seen as sitting on the fence between the classical and the modern epochs, and thus having no complete connection with either. That is, Sade critiques aristocracy and monarchy, as well as the post-revolutionary excess, greed, and thereby oppression. Sade’s acute ability to recognise the deformities of each of these political ideologies led to his imprisonment under “three separate governments of very different ideological platforms: the Ancien Régime, the Revolutionary Convention, and the Empire”.98 Sade symbolized a one-man mutiny against all prevailing ideological systems of his time, and his utter “refusal to submit to physical, religious, legal or literary containment would seem to threaten the notion of ideology as such”.99 However, I believe that within Sade’s work there is a consistent political position based on his life experiences and materialist philosophy, and I will explore this with reference to his literary works later in this chapter.

His cell had a clear view of the guillotine; its sharp blade resembled the scythe of death itself, as the stench of blood became ingrained in every room throughout the prison. These acts of horror surely greatly influenced Sade’s work, as his fictions

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96 Phillips, Sade: The Libertine Novels, p. 15.
99 Ibid.
explore the extremity of these actions and explores the psyches involved. Sade’s works can be seen as a reaction to the things that he witnessed, and Phillips argues that “it is difficult to read as anything but a singeing satire on the savagery of Robespierre’s regime”. Sade explores political attitudes towards death, and asks:

“Is [murder] a political crime? We must avow, on the contrary, that is it, unhappily, merely one of policy’s’ and politics’ greatest instruments. Is it not by dint of murders that France is free today? What study, what science, has greater need of murder’s support than that which tends only to deceive, whose sole end is the expansion of one nation at another’s expense? Are wars, the unique fruit of this political barbarism, anything but the means whereby a nation is nourished, whereby it is strengthened, whereby it is buttressed? … A strange blindness in man, who publicly teaches the art of killing, and rewards the most accomplished killer, and who punishes him who for some particular reason does away with his enemy!”

Sade questioned the value placed on a human life, as tens of thousands were executed during the reign of terror. However, given that Sade wrote this while drowning in the stench of the recently executed, it is difficult to view this as Sade legitimately supporting such disregard for human life. After his release, he confined in Gaufridy once more, in a letter:

“My government imprisonment, with the guillotine before my eyes, did me a hundred times more harm than all the Bastilles imaginable”.

The calculated mass slaughter of people by the body politic devalued the worth of the individual as a sovereign entity, and reduced them to merely a collection of disposable objects. In a world where crime is justified by virtue and carried out with a clear conscience, this in turn constitutes “the most radical negation of Sade’s demonical world”.

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102 Beauvoir, “Must We Burn Sade?”, p. 16.
103 Ibid.
This is seen in the novel *Juliette*, where Sade questions the purpose and sincerity of the revolution. The libertine anti-hero Borchamp shows contempt for tyranny, but when he is accused of being a tyrant himself, he responds by arguing:

“If the Senate is read to rise in arms against Sweden’s sovereign, it is not from horror of tyranny but from envy at seeing despotism exercised by another than itself…the throne is to everybody’s taste, and ‘tis not the throne they detest, but him who is seated on it”.  

This quotation illustrates a complex and dynamic relationship between questionable political motivations and the pursuit of power. That power itself is a game played by the powerful, and that the revolutionary regime is just the same old rigid government disguised as something new to gain the same power. This injection of doubt by Sade suggests his questionable and conflicting stance within the political climate of his time, and makes us question whether he really was a true hot-blooded revolutionary or a secretive aristocrat at heart. Or, perhaps, he was neither, and despised both the aristocracy and the nature of the political revolution. This is seen through his authorial footnote in *Juliette*:

“The equality prescribed by the Revolution is simply the weak man’s revenge upon the strong; it’s just what we saw in the past, but in reverse; that everyone should have his turn is only meet. And it shall be turnabout again tomorrow, for nothing in Nature is stable and the governments men direct are bound to prove as changeable and ephemeral as they.”

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105 Ibid., p. 120.
A Sheep in Wolves’ Clothing: *Philosophy in the Boudoir*

I turn now to one of Sade’s most political novels, *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, which reveals a deep desire for a fairer, less extreme politics. In the Sadean way, he does so in the most extreme way possible. That is, Sade uses extreme rhetoric to support positions that were, for his time, relatively mild. He began writing *Philosophy in the Boudoir* whilst imprisoned at Picpus in 1794, after his arrest during The Terror of Robespierre. Written in the form of a dramatic dialogue, it follows the physical and intellectual transformation of a sexually innocent and guileless fifteen-year-old girl, Eugenie de Mistival, into an extremely violent and morally debauched, nymphomaniac student of true libertinism. Eugenie’s chief “educator” Dolmancé facilitates this transformation, with the help of Madame de Saint-Ange, a libertine woman and her younger brother, Le Chevalier de Mirval. Many descriptive scenes of extreme sexual acts devoid of any emotive or metaphorical language heavily punctuate this dramatised philosophical dialogue. It is, of course, a common feature of erotic literature to emphasise physical body, but Sade takes it further and makes it the theatre of his philosophical treatise. Sade’s language is explicitly direct, and there is no great mystery left unresolved, for these questions are not to be sent to the heavens but to be examined on earth. In placing his philosophy in the boudoir, Sade emphasises its materiality; knowledge is not transferred from god to man, but from man to man through uninhibited exploration.

According to Sade, we have been sedated and induced to think that the most mysterious and difficult thing to understand, almost beyond human comprehension, is also the most essential thing to understand – the nature of God. How have we managed to do this to each other and ourselves?

“It is that mankind has been terrorized; it is that when one is afraid one ceases to reason; it is, above all, that we have been advised to mistrust reason and defy it; and that, when the brain is disturbed, one believes anything and

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examines nothing. Ignorance and fear – those are the twin bases of every religion”.107

The opposites of these bases serve as the foundation of Sade’s materialism: an unbridled ambition for knowledge and unchecked bravery in exploring unwelcome conclusions.

Eugenie, the precocious pupil asks what Madame De Saint-Ange meant when she repeatedly shouted the word “whore” during her sexual climax. Her inquisitiveness is rewarded with a key lesson in libertinage:

“MADAME DE SAINT-ANGE – [Whores] are happy and respectful creatures who are stigmatized by public opinion but crowned by pleasure. More crucial to society than any prudes, they have the courage to serve it and to sacrifice the good reputation that society dares to deprive them of unjustly. Hurray for the women who feel honored by that title! They are truly loveable, the only real philosophers of the Enlightenment!”108

“Whores” according to Sade, “have the courage to serve” society more proactively than the passive and virtuous “prudes”, especially since they flourish within its dark underbellies. The dark place from which their utility lurks and profits shows that the only way society will evolve and progress is through conflict, courage and resistance, with people that have the courage to go against the grain. In declaring whores are “the only real philosophers of the Enlightenment!”, Sade is mocking his contemporary philosophers that lacked the “courage” to stand up for what they truly believed in because they were afraid of punishment. Indeed, even the progressive authors of the Encyclopaedia Diderot and d’Alembert vilified atheism in public, declaring that in the case of atheists, it may be necessary to “put them to death even, if there is no other way of delivering society from it”.109 The whores are the silent revolutionaries, “stigmatized by public opinion but crowned by pleasure”. Sade’s depiction of pleasure is almost, the antithesis of that outlined by Lucretius.

107 Sade, Philosophy in the Boudoir, p. 113.
108 Ibid., p. 22.
109 Phillips, How To Read Sade, p. 29.
The seeking of pleasure in the Lucretius sense was to be one that reverted away from sexual, physical pleasure, but was more focused on the nourishment of the mind through reason and moderation.\textsuperscript{110} Everything was to be enjoyed in moderation, not in excess, and Sade explores the opposite conclusion from the same propositions. The condemnation of the inactive virtuous “prudes” is particularly pertinent in the time of the French Revolution, because it was their senseless adherence to the prevailing societal standards that blinded and oppressed them. It is useful to turn, just for a moment, to Sade’s fictional anti-hero in Juliette, Saint-Font, as he explains the value that vice has in the political world for dominating and controlling the weak, and the weak must remain virtuous to facilitate this domination:

“The mechanism that directs government \textit{cannot} be virtuous, because it is impossible to thwart every crime, to protect oneself from every criminal without being criminal too; that which directs corrupt mankind must be corrupt itself; and it will never be by means of virtue, virtue being inert and passive, that you will maintain control over vice which is never active: the governor must be more energetic than the governed”.\textsuperscript{111}

Rather than espousing a damnation of all forms of government, this reveals the need to be skeptical of political motivations; there is no final solution, just a slow crawl, sometimes forwards, sometimes backwards.

Back to the Boudoir: according to Dolmance there are at least two necessary entities in physical world: “the creative agent and the being created”, and it is matter that is the active agent in Nature’s grand scheme.\textsuperscript{112} The materialistic philosophy that bleeds through all of Sade’s works are never concerned with, and are actually even repelled by the idea of creation and propagation. Rather, they are focused on nature’s destructive side, the side that is necessary for the creative side to exist, and vice versa. The three libertine tutors, Madame De Saint-Ange, Dolmance and Chevalier, all embrace the powers of destruction and wickedness only because

\textsuperscript{110} Lucretius, \textit{On The Nature Of Things}.
\textsuperscript{111} Sade, \textit{Juliette}, p. 412.
\textsuperscript{112} Sade, \textit{Philosophy in the Boudoir}, p. 25.
nature wills it so. They are the victors of destruction, nature’s parallel, while poor Madame De Mistival, Eugenie’s prudish mother, is their victim.

“DOLMANCE - …If it is proven that this God’s existence is impossible, and that Nature, forever in action, forever moving, has of herself what it pleases idiots to award God gratuitously; if it is certain that his inert being existence, once supposed, he would be of all things the most ridiculous, since he would have been useful only one single time and, thereafter and throughout millions of centuries, fixed in a contemptible stillness and inactivity; that, supposing him to exist as religions portray him to us, this would be the most detestable of creatures, since it would be God who permits evil to be on earth while his omnipotence could prevent it”.113

Following on from Madame De Saint-Ange’s categorisation of prudes and whores (those who maintain the unjust societal order, and those who fight against it), Dolmance declares that these whores are carrying out nature’s will. Nature is “forever in action, forever moving” and those who offer nothing but their fixed docility and moralising are acting against nature. In nature, nothing is ever lost: merely reshaped. Nature’s sovereignty allows for perpetual motion, and energy is never lost but instead obeys the laws of transmutation: creation born from destruction and destruction at the hands of creation. Nature sows the seeds of life into the rotting carcass from which she preys; we are all victims of nature. To Sade, nature’s power is something we can feel and observe every single day without skipping a beat, whilst the supposedly immutable God proffered by religion, if he did exist, has not added anything to the world since he created it. The religious inference from this is that the status quo must be maintained, for things will only change when god deems it necessary to do so. To Sade, God’s torpid and disinterested existence and the senseless belief in him represent “contemptible stillness and inactivity”, which is something that goes against Nature’s system and will.

113 Sade, Philosophy in the Boudoir, p. 25.
Later in the novel, Dolmance reads from a political pamphlet, and explores the idea of transmutation further:

“Now, once we observe that destruction is so useful to her that she absolutely cannot dispense with it, and that she cannot achieve her creations without drawing from the store of destruction which death prepares for her, from this moment onward the idea of annihilation which we attach to death ceases to be real; there is no more veritable annihilation; what we call the end of the living animal is no longer a true finis, but a simple transformation, a transmutation of matter…death is hence no more than a change of form, an imperceptible passage from one existence into another”. 114

According to Warman, “Sade’s definition of matter is inseparable from a description of its movement…this movement is both infinite and necessary”. 115 For Sade, the perpetual movement of matter that constitutes existence can never be destroyed or lost, even in death, because death does not exist. Death is not a permanent cessation of life but is rather an altered state of being, an “imperceptible passage from one existence into another”. Therefore, the forces of death and destruction are absolutely necessary for life and creation, and for Sade’s anti-heroes, that is more than enough reason to kill.

“DOLMANCE – Destruction being one of the chief laws of Nature, nothing that destroys can be criminal; how might an action which so well serves Nature ever be outrageous to her? …murder is no destruction; he who commits it does but alter forms, he gives back to Nature the elements whereof the hand of this skilled artisan instantly recreated other beings…the murder thus prepares for Nature a pleasure most agreeable, he furnishes her materials, she employs them without delay”. 116

114 Sade, Philosophy in the Boudoir, p. 140.
116 Sade, Philosophy in the Boudoir, p. 67.
Sade’s wicked libertines make no effort to maintain law and order for they possess morals that are the antipode to the conventional standards of moral conduct, and are forever on the path to retrogression. Sade’s libertines have taken an oath to serve the violent and destructive will of nature, as they are the only keys to unlocking, and therefore unleashing their wildest carnal desires. According to Warman, it is in this acceptance of roles, by nature and the libertines that Sade’s sensationism and materialism begin to fuse into one unique, coherent system. The sensation of pleasure that is derived from their acts of cruelty and violence is nature’s way of encouraging such action, because it is good and beneficial to her: “nature needs matter; they provide it” 117

Dolmance then continues to suggest that our “pride prompts us to elevate murder into crime”, and it is this same pride that also makes us unwilling to accept the impassive power of nature, but rather, readily accept the power of God or any “ambitious sovereign”. 118 Our pride prefers to believe that we are “the foremost of the universe’s creatures…that every hurt this sublime creature must perforce be an enormity; we have believed Nature would perish should our marvelous species chance to be blotted out of existence”. 119 Sade’s fierce opposition to an anthropocentric view challenges the Christian notion of the sanctity of human life. Both the belief in God and the corporeal sovereign necessitates an intrinsic value and preservation of human life, above all else, but nature does not have a human centered purpose, and that hurts man’s ego. Dolmance ironically points out that, despite how much we value individual human life we are also capable of dismissing our sensibilities for compassion and empathy and allow,

“An ambitious sovereign to destroy, at his ease and without the least scruple, the enemies prejudicial to his grandiose designs…Cruel laws, arbitrary, imperious laws can likewise every century assassinate millions of individuals and we, feeble and wretched creatures, we are not allowed to sacrifice a single

117 Warman, Sade: from materialism to pornography, p.79.
118 Sade, Philosophy in the Boudoir, p. 67.
119 Ibid.
Amidst the torture and debauchery resides a critical condemnation of capital punishment, a reminder that even among revolutionary, destructive times there needs to be rules to which we abide. Sade argues that these rules are the rules of nature.

However, French critic Philippe Roger is thoroughly convinced that Sade was a “political minimalist”, because he had no strong connection to the political leanings of his time, arguing that the often ambiguous and paradoxical nature of his fiction makes it difficult to determine whether the political sentiments offered belonged to the character, the author, or both. This claim is arguable as Sade was indeed very politically motivated, a theme I explore throughout this chapter. An interesting point Roger raised in his essay is: how can we know what politics meant for Sade if we do not know what definition of politics he was dealing with? According to Sade’s contemporary, French dramatist and writer, Louis-Sebastien Mercier, there were two different and contrasting interpretations of the word politics at the end of the eighteenth century; the traditional interpretation illustrates a political leader that is calculative and unscrupulous, whilst the Enlightened interpretation prioritises the common good over self-interest. For Mercier, the traditional interpretation requires “a political man who is crafty, who takes covert paths, who deftly has recourse to subterfuge and sham; his ideas are complicated, his hatreds petty”. The Enlightened notion of politics, or what Mercier called, “the more general and reasoned acceptation”, requires “a man who sees things in a wide perspective, who finds remedies where others have failed, who can understand the real disease of empires and its feasibility”. Though Mercier admired and sought to promote the “Rousseauist” Enlightened meaning of politics, he also understood that his views were not widely adopted or generally, well received during his time, as the prevailing viewpoint was “giving a bad name to the political man”.

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120 Sade, Philosophy in the Boudoir, p. 67.
121 Philippe, “A political minimalist”.
122 Ibid.
123 Ibid., p. 86.
124 Ibid.
125 Ibid.
It is clear that Sade did not agree with Mercier’s excessively idealistic and progressive understanding of politics, and was instead heavily influenced by the more traditional post-Machiavellian description. Sade was greatly influenced and inspired by Machiavelli’s political philosophy, as evidenced in a letter he wrote to his wife in 1780 from prison outlining his affection for *The Prince*, as well as the many references he makes to Machiavelli’s ideas throughout his works. This can be seen through a comparison between an extract from Machiavelli’s *The Prince* and a quote of Dolmancé in *Philosophy in the Boudoir*:

“There is so great a distance between the way one lives and the way one ought to live, that he who abandons what is done in favour of what ought to be done will sooner learn the means of his own undoing than his own preservation; for whoever would profess himself entirely a good man cannot avoid destruction, among so many others who are wicked”.127

Compare this appeal to the necessity of a façade by Machiavelli, to the same by Sade:

“A sincere individual will not always founder in the midst of a society of false people…so long as the man who must live amongst other men *appears* virtuous, it matters not in the slightest whether he is so in fact or not. Deceit, furthermore, is almost always an assured means of success”.128

Machiavelli was heavily influenced by the classical materialists Democritus, Epicurus and Lucretius, yet he did not share the same apolitical approach to life and instead focused much of his energy in merging his materialism into the practical realm of politics. Consequentially, his works gave birth to the term “Machiavellian”, which describes the paramount importance of political manipulation and deception, in the pursuit of power and dominance. Though, it is debatable whether Machiavelli truly believed in the political tactics he articulated,

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126 Le Brun, *Sade: A Sudden Abyss*.
political philosopher Leo Strauss believes that Machiavelli was aware that what he was teaching was evil and dubs him “a teacher of evil”. Yet, according to Strauss, this position was purely ironic in order to expose the amoral and corrupt power dynamics within politics. In a recent moral interpretation of Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, Professor Erica Brenner in her book *Machiavelli's Prince: A New Reading*, argues that *The Prince* is a highly ironic piece of work with a strong moral purpose:

“At the Prince’s core is a biting critique of both ruthless realpolitik and amoral pragmatism, not a revolutionary new defence of these positions…he uses irony to exercise readers’ capacities to see through misleading political spin”.

Sade recognised in Machiavelli the power of irony and subversion to expose and challenge the established moral, religious, and political order of their time. The highly influential French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser argued in *Machiavelli and Us*, that though structurally Machiavelli’s *The Prince* appears to pay homage to the classical mirrors for princes genre, it has absolutely no real intentions on educating and instructing the prince to his ascension to power. Instead, it served not the prince, but the people he wished to rule. By disclosing all the secrets of the trade publically, by publishing the treatise, Machiavelli: “… tells everyone one man’s business; and hence that at the very moment it arms the Prince with its methods, it disarms him by making them public”. Powerful kings and rulers have always managed quite well in the past without the help of an external advisor to map out their every step. Especially if one’s position demands duplicity, treachery and exploitation, a record of justifications and implications serves no purpose but to make public their thought processes. Similarly, Sade and the books he wrote have been accused and persecuted for centuries for their extreme perversity and
immorality, yet what is important to consider is that Sade was completely conscious and methodical in his literary and philosophical approach. This can be seen in *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, when Sade interrupts the continuity of the third person narration with his own first person authorial voice:

“Let no one tax me with being a dangerous innovator; let no one say that by my writings I seek to blunt the remorse in evildoer’s hearts, that my humane ethics are wicked because they augment those same evildoer’s penchant for crime…I have none of these perverse intentions…so much the worse for them who fasten upon naught but the harmful in philosophic opinions, who are likely to be corrupted. It is not to them I speak; I address myself only to people capable of hearing me out, and they will read me without any danger”. 135

In the same way, Machiavelli instructs the prince, not to provide guidance, but to make public what usually occurs behind closed doors, Sade forces us to see that which we close our eyes to. Sade sheds light on the atrocities of the Revolution and makes us confront our innate penchant for violence and crime, especially when it is politically motivated. Despite the history of extreme cruelty that humanity relentlessly inflicts on itself in the form of torture, massacre and war, we are always quick and firm to reject any possibility that this predilection for iniquity is a part of our psyche. It is “always more convenient to consider crime as the result of an aberrant ideological choice, rather than an expression of human nature”. 136 This is an essential feature of religion and society that is so ubiquitous it is unquestioned, but Sade forces the reader to consider these phenomena as being beyond simple binary definitions. Frankfurt School philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in *Dialectics of Enlightenment* viewed Sade as the dark side of Enlightenment reason and revelatory of the Holocaust, where the “justification of cruelty for cruelty’s sake, of pleasurable violence born of ethical and aesthetic disinterestedness, was to furnish the rationale for the ultimate killing machine of

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Auschwitz”. If Machiavelli was the “teacher of evil”, then Sade was the headmaster at the school of libertinage.

Yet one might ask, after pulling apart all the threads from the fabric of society, does Sade make any efforts to sew them back together? Philippe Roger argues that Sade makes no such efforts; he provides no ideal alternatives for the readers to rumin ate on:

“In Sade, politics are systematically denigrated, discredited, nullified…Radically deprived of any social optimism…he never refers to a quest for “principles” not to a speculation on the ideal organisation of a city…His invalidation of politics does not stem from an history euphoria; it is rooted in a post-Hobbesian anthropology, in his materialistic metaphysics and in his historical negativism”.138

Though Sade’s fierce hostility towards politics and general misanthropy is grounded in all those things listed above, it does not necessarily follow that they encapsulate all he sought to do. Sade was not satisfied with merely unthreading and tearing apart the fabric of society, or even resewing the torn pieces back together to create his own garment. He saw no use in reusing those tattered pieces that made society before and in the current one that he lived; pieces of censorship, oppression, inequality, violence, tyranny and greed, all tightly stitched together by Christianity, needed to be irreparably destroyed. Perhaps then I might have entitled this thesis ‘Sade the Nudist’. Yet, destruction was not the end for Sade, it was only the beginning. Beneath all his excess and scathing irony are rational and reasonable pieces of advice and directives for a better society. In Philosophy in the Boudoir, there are a number of insightful and hopeful passages that advocate change, and particularly potent are his political advice found in the fabricated political pamphlet aptly entitled “Yet Another Effort, Frenchmen, If You Would Become Republicans”. According to Philips, this pamphlet can be seen as a “pastiche” of the

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many anonymously published political and philosophical pamphlets, or *libelles*, that were covertly distributed during the revolutionary period. After the Law on the Freedom of the Press was declared in August 1789, this lead to an unprecedented outburst of politically charged pamphlets, unabashedly attacking the monarchy, an act which had been cripplingly censored under the *Ancien Régime*.\(^{139}\) Cultural historian Robert Darnton has written extensively on the vital role the *libelles* played in eighteenth century France, arguing for their profound subversive power to attack, undermine and dismantle monarchical authority.\(^{140}\)

At a time when citizens were gradually becoming horrified by the cruel and violent excesses of French Revolution, in the pamphlet Sade satirically encourages his fellow citizens to continue their efforts and push on: to be braver and bolder.\(^{141}\) Yet, this extra revolutionary “effort” was not to be fueled by violence or cruelty, but instead, diplomacy and pacifism. The pamphlet begins with a confession:

> “I confess that I am disturbed by the presentiment that we are on the eve of failing once again to arrive there”.\(^{142}\)

This highlights Sade’s inherent suspicions about the Revolution and how he doesn’t have much faith in the uniqueness of the movement, and believes that the cycle of destruction will continue. Though the tyrants name may have changed, his guillotine is still just as sharp. He continues:

> “Let there be no doubt of it: religion are the cradles of despotism: the foremost amongst all the despots was a priest. I do not, however, propose either massacres or expulsions. Such dreadful things have no place in the enlightened mind. No, do not assassinate at all, do not expel at all; these are royal atrocities, or the brigands’ who imitate kings; it is not at all by acting as they that you will fore men to look with horror upon them who practice those


\(^{141}\) Philippe, “A political minimalist”.

crimes. Let us reserve the employment of force for the idols; ridicule alone will suffice for those who serve them”. 143

The anonymous writer of this pamphlet continues his impassioned plea to be weary of the Revolution, and reminds the supporters to stay true and vigilant to exactly what they’re fighting for, and not to be deceived by religion and be buried deeper under the darkness of Christianity. Religion only seeks to dull the sharp blade of “the republican spirit” 144, a blade that has worked laboriously to break free from the chains that religion would reattach. For someone who is so notorious for the monstrosity of his imagined violence, he urges against it, and encourages the people to adopt a more peacefully resistant approach; vilification over violence. Though there is no evidence that Sade ever read Étienne de La Boetie’s *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude* (1576), the ideas contained within it resonate deeply with *Philosophy in the Boudoir*.

*Discourse on Voluntary Servitude* is arguably the first book of political philosophy written in French, and it reinvigorates and extends Lucretius’ notion of constitutional [*potestas*] and constituted [*potentia*] power, and argued that there is an inherent conflict of interest between the two. To La Boetie, the great mystery of politics is the obedience to rulers and how the common people are willing to give up their freedom. The populace is duped into thinking they need to be controlled and do things entirely out of their own interests that only serve the people in power. Though, to La Boetie, this is a bleak reality, the silver lining he tries to reveal is that our consent is required to be ruled, so therefore our consent can also be non-violently withdrawn. La Boetie writes:

"Resolve no longer to be slaves and you are free! I do not want you to push him or overthrow him, but merely no longer to sustain him and, like a great colossus whose base has been pulled away, you will see him collapse of his own weight and break up". 145

144 Ibid., p. 105.
This is an interesting point in regard to Sade, as in many of his letters he expresses his many suspicions about the Revolution, and about whether it will achieve its moral aims considering its extremely violent means. According to Sade, violence is *beneath* the righteous citizen and has “no place in the enlightened mind”, but that the citizen must fight violence with pacifism and cruelty with comedy. The pamphlet then continues to provide a series of tactful political directions and goals:

> “Prizes will be decreed to the worthiest citizen; heroism, capabilities, humaneness, largeness of spirit, a proven civism…and they will be far greater value than the titles of birth and wealth a fool’s pride used to require”.

146 Sade believed that the future of a society rests upon educating it’s youth:

> “upon a sound ethical basis…let them be instructed in their duties towards society… make them sense that this happiness consists in rendering others as fortunate as we desire to be ourselves”.

147 Sade then urges his readers to abolish religion once and for all,

> “Before ten years are out – utilizing the Christian religion…are sure to reassert their empire over the souls that shall have undermined and captured; they shall restore the monarchy, because the power of kings has always reinforced that of the church…there is never more than a single step from superstition to royalism… that in every age one of the primary concerns of kings has been to maintain the dominant religion as one of the political bases that best sustains the throne”.

148 These policy statements are distinctly materialistic; all offer hope for a future based on rational humanity, and only comment on religion in order to separate it from the state. Sade, therefore, holds political positions that were relatively mild for his time, but argues them in the most extreme way possible. This extremism pushes literary

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147 Ibid.
boundaries, but there is character to them beyond being a literary exercise. Sade unequivocally claimed, “I write to tell the truth”.\textsuperscript{149} So, what is this truth? According to Brun, neither Sade nor Machiavelli were interested in pursuing the metaphysical truth or any abstract ideal, but rather, focused solely on revealing the material truth of things.\textsuperscript{150} That is, what is true is that “there is no truth – or rather, nothing true – other than what is actual, that is to say, borne by its effects, nonexistent outside them; and that the effectivity of the true is always merged with the activity of men; and that, politically speaking, it exists only in the confrontation between forces, the struggle between parties”.\textsuperscript{151} This idea of the materiality of truth is echoed in Justine: “If we can only acquire ideas through material substances, how can we suppose that the cause of our ideas may be immaterial?”\textsuperscript{152}

For Sade, the way we perceive reality depends solely on the physical world and our interactions with it. Even our thoughts and emotions are governed by nothing more than the axon-dendrite synaptic connections working tirelessly in our brains. The same is true for Sade’s politics; governing is simply another exercise in nature; humans conducting life with humans. In this respect, Sade’s Philosophy in the Boudoir attempts to understand the Revolution’s abstract principles of individual freedoms: liberty, equality and fraternity, in more concrete and physical terms.\textsuperscript{153} By putting the body back into the political discourse, this constituted a remarkable reversal of the Revolution’s socio-political thinking, in which Sade put on stage a severe attack and desecration of “the terrors of ideology…just as people were starting to be killed in the name of liberty”.\textsuperscript{154} That is, the ideologies of the Revolution provided the necessary curtain to cover the outrages to individuals in the same way religion had done previously; the curtain closed quickly, and though it had a different colour, it remained as opaque as ever.

\textsuperscript{149} Sade, 120 Days Of Sodom, p. 453.
\textsuperscript{150} Le Brun, Sade: A Sudden Abyss.
\textsuperscript{151} Althusser, Machiavelli And Us, p. 22.
\textsuperscript{153} Le Brun and Phillips, "Sade or the First Theatre of Atheism”.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., p. 48.
Chapter 3

Man is God.: Sade as a Response to Jacobi’s Accusation of Nihilism

“All this virtue of which you make such a fuss is worthless in the world; you may bow continually at the foot of its altars, yet its vain incense will never feed you.”

- Justine, or, The Misfortunes of Virtue

Though there is no evidence to show that Sade was familiar with Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi’s critique of materialism, they were contemporaries and both were born and died just a few years apart. The sister novels Justine and Juliette can be seen as a response to this critique; Justine encapsulates Jacobi’s fears, and Juliette encapsulates Sade’s materialistic optimism. Justine relinquishes all control over her life to God, whereas Juliette becomes her own god, and controls the world around her. The fates of the sisters are revealed in their full titles: Justine, or, The Misfortunes of Virtue; Juliette, or, The Fortunes of Vice. These two characters are clear foils for one another, and in this chapter I will position Sade as the foil for Jacobi; that which Jacobi fears, Sade relishes. I will do so first by giving an account of Jacobi’s critique and comparing it to Sade’s position, and then explore their perspectives through analysis of Sade’s Justine and Juliette.

155 Sade, Justine, p. 20.
Jacobi’s Critique of Materialism: The Choice Between Jacobi and Sade

Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743-1819) is best known for his critique of Enlightenment reason, arguing that it necessarily led to nihilism. This critique appears in Jacobi’s famous letter, *Letter to Fichte*, in which he explicitly uses the term “nihilism” for the first time as well as openly accuses, German philosopher, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, of “nihilism”. According to political philosopher, John Laughland, Jacobi predicted that a philosophy based on pure reason “would open the floodgates to the worst aspects of materialism and scientism, and he demanded that philosophy return to religion instead”. That is, atheism is nihilism; materialism is nihilism; scientism is nihilism; the choice is between god and nihilism. This is because any philosophy based on reason “denies the knowledge of things-in-themselves, including the speculative objects of classical metaphysics, God and the soul.” For Jacobi, the arguments against this heavily rationalistic philosophy lies in its own inability to fully comprehend and tackle the main issues with which it sought to address, such as the nature of human freedom and the possibility of any coherent morality.

A distilled version of this critique is found in Jacobi’s “Letter to Fichte” in 1799:

“But the human being has such a choice, this single one: Nothingness or God. Choosing Nothingness, he makes himself into a God…I repeat: God is, and is outside of me, a living being, existing in itself, or I am God. There is no third.”

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160 Maftei, ““Nothingness or a God”: Nihilism, Enlightenment, and “Natural Reason”, p. 288.
Professor Frederick C. Beiser interprets this attack on reason as an attack on all conclusions and philosophies based upon it:

“The target of Jacobi’s attack on reason is therefore natural science itself. In order to undermine reason, Jacobi is raising some unsettling doubts about the consequences of scientific progress... The more the sciences progress, the more they discover the causes of life, human action, and the origin of the universe; by the more they find these causes, the more they support materialism, determinism, and atheism.”

It seems, therefore, that Jacobi’s critique against pure reason is based upon his feeling that the conclusions brought about by reason are unwelcome. This is reinforced further in Jacobi’s notes on Fichte:

“Since outside the mechanism of nature I encounter nothing but wonders, mysteries and signs; and I feel a terrible horror before the nothing, the absolutely indeterminate, the utterly void (these three are one: the Platonic infinite!), especially as the object of philosophy or aim of wisdom; yet, as I explore the mechanism of nature of the I as well as if the not-I, I attain only to the nothing-in-itself; and I am so assailed, so seized and carried away by it in my transcendental being (personally, so to speak), that, just in order to empty out the infinite, I cannot help wanting to fill it, as an infinite nothing, a pure-and-total-in-and-for-itself (were it not simply impossible!): since, I say, this is the way it is with me and the science of the true, or more precisely, the true science, I therefore do not see why I, as a matter of taste, should not be allowed to prefer my philosophy of non-knowledge to the philosophical knowledge of the nothing, at least in fugam vacui. I have nothing confronting me, after all, except nothingness; and even chimeras are a good match for that.”

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Compare this sentiment to the last thing we read as spoken by Juliette:

“The truth itself, and the truth alone, lays bare the secrets of Nature, however mankind may tremble before those revelations. Philosophy must never shrink from speaking out.”

As touched upon in the previous chapter, Sade does not care for how unwelcome any conclusions may prove to be. He defended atheism even when it may have cost him his life and freedom, for he does not care for feelings associated with conclusions, only whether he believes they are true. *Justine* and *Juliette* show that Sade believed that this ‘unwelcomeness’ is propped up by the prejudices of religion and society that this feeling is based upon. Whereas Jacobi chooses a “philosophy of non-knowledge”165, Sade accepts the “philosophical knowledge of nothing”.166 That is, instead of deferring the nature of our existence to the divine (or rather, men claiming to know the wishes and nature of the divine), Sade chooses to know nothing, and search for what can be known with this accepted. We know nothing, so what are we going to do about it? The novels *Justine* and *Juliette* can be seen as Sade’s understanding of these two positions; Justine relinquishes the control of her life to god (or, those who claim to be god’s representatives on Earth), whereas Juliette becomes god, and uses only reason to guide her life. That is, from Sade’s perspective and within this context, Jacobi is Justine, and Sade is Juliette.

*Justine and Juliette*

Justine’s commitment to virtue results in a myriad of misfortune; she is physically and sexually abused and exploited by nearly every person she encounters, her purity and reputation is irreparably marred by the cruelty of fate and with its final blow, she is struck by a bolt of lightning and dies instantly. In contrast, Juliette’s merciless

165 Jacobi, “Jacobi to Fichte”, p. 519.
166 Ibid.
commitment to vice and to whatever she desires results in nothing but fame, esteem, prosperity and happiness. As Judovitz notes, “They each represent in a caricature-like fashion the obverse of the other”. In giving an account for the misfortunes that fall upon Justine, it cannot be done better than by Justine herself, as she recounts her tale to her sister:

“During my childhood I meet a usurer; he seeks to induce me to commit a theft, I refuse, he becomes rich. I fall amongst a band of thieves, I escape from them with a man whose life I save; by way of thanks, he rapes me. I reach the property of an aristocratic debauchee who has me set upon and devoured by his dogs for not having wanted to poison his aunt. From there I go to the home of a murderous and incestuous surgeon whom I strive to spare from doing a horrible deed: the butcher brands me for a criminal; he doubtless consummates his atrocities, makes his fortune, whilst I am obliged to beg for my bread. I wish to have the sacraments made available to me, I wish fervently to implore the Supreme Being whence howbeit I receive so many ills, and the august tribunal, at which I hope to find purification in our most holy mysteries, becomes the bloody theater of my ignominy: the monster who abuses and plunders me is elevated to his order's highest honors and I fall back into the appalling abyss of misery. I attempt to preserve a woman from her husband's fury, the cruel one wishes to put me to death by draining away my blood drop by drop. I wish to relieve a poor woman, she robs me. I give aid to a man whom adversaries have struck down and left unconscious, the thankless creature makes me turn a wheel like an animal; he hangs me for his pleasure's sake; all fortune's blessings accrue to him, and I come within an ace of dying on the gallows for having been compelled to work for him. An unworthy woman seeks to seduce me for a new crime, a second time I lose the little I own in order to rescue her victim's treasure. A gentleman, a kind spirit wishes to compensate me for all my sufferings by the offer of his hand, he dies in my arms before being able to do anything for me. I risk my life in a fire in order to snatch a child, who does not belong to me, from the flames; the infant's
mother accuses and launches legal proceedings against me. I fall into my most mortal enemy's hands; she wishes to carry me off by force and take me to a man whose passion is to cut off heads: if I avoid that villain's sword it is so that I can trip and fall under Themis'. I implore the protection of a man whose life and fortune I once saved; I dare expect gratitude from him, he lures me to his house, he submits me to horrors, and there I find the iniquitous judge upon whom my case depends; both abuse me, both outrage me, both accelerate my doom; fortune overwhelms them with favors, I hasten on to death.”

In looking at Justine as representative of Jacobi, I will look at one particular scene in which she was wrongfully accused by her master and innkeeper, Monsieur Du Harpin, of stealing his money and priceless jewels. The plan to plot against Justine was devised by Monsieur Du Harpin himself after Justine refused to help him steal his tenant’s valuables. As revenge for not submitting to his demand, the knife was, unknowingly to Justine, redirected to her. Though she admits that she could’ve left if she desired to do so, Justine blames her fate for the events that followed:

“Nevertheless, there had been no middle way; for I had been faced with the choice of actually committing, or of obstinately rejecting the proposal. Had I been a little more experienced I should have left the house at the instant; but it had already been written on the page of my destiny that every honest impulse in my character would have to be paid for by some misfortune. I was therefore obliged to submit to circumstances without any possibility of escape.”

First, Justine admits to the possible options in front of her, then she reflects that only one of them was really possible because of the virtuous life she had chosen. That is, she chooses not to choose. This is similar to Jacobi’s reasoning to abandon his reasoning; according to Sade, he therefore abandons control of his own destiny. This tale continues, and after finding herself incarcerated for a crime she didn’t commit, Justine is fortunate enough to arouse sympathy in her fellow inmate Dubois. This devious convict decides to help Justine, and includes him in his plan to escape from prison:

169 Sade, Justine, p. 32.
“Between midnight and one o’clock in the morning, the prison will be set on fire…thanks to my machinations. Someone may be burned, but what does that matter?”

It would be reasonable to assume that the murder of innocents might appeal to Justine’s moral sense, but nevertheless, Justine follows the plan, and though she and Dubois successfully escape, “ten people were burned alive”. After escaping, the runaways discussed Justine’s virtuous ways:

“‘Now you are free, my dear Sophie (Justine),’ la Dubois said to me, ‘and you can choose whatever kind of life seems to suit you best; but if you listen to me you will renounce your virtuous ways, which, as you see, have never succeeded in helping you. Your misplaced delicacy conducted you right to the foot of the gallows, yet a frightful crime has saved me from a similar fate. Just look at the value which goodness has in the world, and consider whether it is worth dying for’.”

“I am obliged to you for so much, since you have saved my life; yet it fills me with despair when I consider that this was possible only by the way of the commission of a crime. And you may be very sure that had it been necessary for me to participate in it I would rather have died than done so…whatever the thorns of virtue may be I shall always prefer them to the false glow of prosperity and those unreliable advantages which momentarily accompany crime.”

At no point did Dubois hold a knife to Justine’s throat and force her to escape with her; this was clearly a decision she made for herself. And yet, she claims that she would rather have died than done so. This clear hypocrisy on the part of Justine with regard to choice is telling when juxtaposed with Jacobi’s attitude to reason. Justine

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170 Sade, Justine., p. 35.
171 Ibid.
172 Ibid.
173 Ibid., p. 36.
claims to choose not to choose and instead to rely on divine guidance, but chooses against this guidance when an unwelcome situation presents itself. Jacobi reasons against reason, but chooses to apply this reason when it is advantageous. In his essay *Kant, Sade and Libertine Enlightenment*, Corkhill comments on the incompatibility of virtue and the real world in the Sadean world:

“In practice, the titular heroine of Sade’s novel *Justine*, or Good Conduct Well Chastised (1791) constitutes a prime exemplar of how virtue – largely female chastity in this instance – simply does not pay off in terms of common sense and the pragmatics of survival in an exploitative world.”¹⁷⁴

In contrast to Justine and in contrast to virtue, we find Juliette, who capitalises on the perceived misconceptions of a world built upon virtue. As Judovitz points out:

“Juliette is presented as the character who learns that virtue has to no real currency in the social world. She proceeds to sell the physical equivalent of her virtue, many times over, thereby parodying and debasing it as counterfeit money. She considers virtue as a mere sign, a convention that can be traded in the social domain in order to generate power, pleasure, and security.”¹⁷⁵

Justine cares little for facets of life based upon virtue, and only then to the extent that she can calculate an advantageous way to exploit them for her own benefit. This is a reflection of Sade’s approach to his works; he only cares for the beliefs of religion and wider society to the extent that he can exploit them by shocking his audiences by trampling all over these values. The reader of *Juliette* will find themselves witnessing cannibalism, coprophagy (the eating of faeces), gerontophilia (sexual attraction for those significantly older), masochism, necrophilia (sexual attraction to corpses), paedophilia, sadism, transvestism, voyeurism, and bestiality. Sade breaks all moral and societal rules not to endorse or condemn them, but to show the human capacity to break them. If man becomes god, he must decide the rules of society based upon reason. From Sade’s perspective, this isn’t necessarily a particularly remarkable thing;  

¹⁷⁴ Corkhill, “Kant, Sade and the Libertine Enlightenment”, p. 64.  
¹⁷⁵ Judovitz, ““Sex,” or, the misfortunes of literature”, p. 176.
given that he believes religion to be entirely man-made, this is merely doing what
religions have done previously without the pretence of having divine inspiration.

In *The Libertine Novels*, Phillips comments on the symbol of the sun throughout *Juliette*: “To be truly libertine, Juliette must emulate the sun, ancient
symbol of paternal authority and simultaneous of creation and destruction”.¹⁷⁶ Saint-
Fond uses the symbol of the sun when he encourages Juliette to continue in her
libertine ways:

> “Do you not see the star that lights us sometimes give life and sometimes take
> away, now vivifying, now withering to dust? Match the sun in thy conduct as
> thou dost figure it in thy fair eyes”.¹⁷⁷

Juliette soon becomes “more lovely than the very sun itself”, and is the sun around
which her world resolves.¹⁷⁸ That is, she has become god, and created and destroyed
based upon her own reasoning and her own understanding, and is rewarded with an
ideal existence. This is evident of Sade encouraging his readers to reason for
themselves, and not to care for religious and societal expectations. He does not,
however, endorse complete anarchy, and in *Juliette* he writes, “without laws the world
turns into one great volcano belching forth an uninterrupted spew of execrable
crimes”.¹⁷⁹ Phillips argues that the volcano represents the evils side of nature, and “if
the libertine can control its energies, then he has bested Nature”.¹⁸⁰ Given that Sade
views humans to be a part of nature, to best its evil side represents a conquering over
the debase inclinations we may have that Sade explores in such detail. That is, man is
god, and can decide the better or the worst; nihilism is only one option.

Jacobi claims that nihilism must necessarily follow on from materialism, but
Sade disagrees. This is further evidence that Sade does not push boundaries merely
for its own sake, and he has unique perspectives that can be found within his works.

In the previous chapters I have explored first Sade’s materialism in opposition to

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¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 209.
¹⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 732.
religion, and then Sade’s perspective of the political implications of materialism. In this final chapter I have tried to round out an understanding of Sade’s materialism and show that he does not necessarily agree with Jacobi’s assertion regarding the nature of materialism. That is, Sade was not a nihilist, and despite all he had seen (and written), he had optimism for the possibility of a materialist future.
Conclusion

The Marquis de Sade held a precarious position during his time by being neither a revolutionary nor an aristocrat. He despised the status quo of the aristocracy, but believed that the Revolution would not change much; no matter with how much force the waves crash against the shore, sand always settles at the bottom of the ocean. Sade saw this violence and destruction as a part of nature, and though the Revolution would not greatly alter the state of things, it was necessary in the natural cycle of destruction. This does not mean that Sade believed that this cycle is all there is; he did have a vision for the future of humanity. It is clear that religion did not feature as part of this vision:

“We have no use for a dimensionless god who nevertheless fills everything with his immensity, an omnipotent god who never achieves what he wills, a supremely good being who creates malcontents only… and we consign him forever to the oblivion whence the infamous Robespierre wishes to call him forth”.

Sade believed that mankind must control his own destiny, and mustn’t refer these decisions to the skies.

In the first chapter, I tracked the major influences of Sade’s materialism from the most famous materialists during his time: La Mettrie and D’holbach. I track the extent of how much he was inspired by it, through his texts, Dialogue Between a Priest and a Dying Man and 120 Days of Sodom. I argue in the first chapter that Sade’s materialism existed in direct opposition to god and the church, and I went on to compare the castle of Siling to Noah’s Ark itself. Extending the materialist tradition of his time, Sade’s 120 Days of Sodom, aims to create an “encyclopedia of libertinage”. In the second chapter I position Sade against the backdrop of the French Revolution, and argued that he found the philosophy of materialism by way of his education and upbringing. I argue that despite what many critics argue, Sade was

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181 Sade, Philosophy in the Boudoir, p. 110.
182 Warman, Sade: from materialism to pornography, p.72.
very political, and so were his texts, in particular, *Philosophy in the Boudoir*. Then, in the third chapter, I posit Sade’s sister novels *Justine* and *Juliette* as a response to Jacobi’s critique of materialism and autonomous reason brought by the Enlightenment movement. Jacobi’s main critique of the concept of ‘reason’ is that it is unable to justify its own standard of truth outside itself, and as a result, it cannot escape nihilism, but by looking at *Justine* and *Juliette* as a response to this critique, I argue that Sade clearly did not agree with Jacobi’s conclusions.

When it feels as if Sade has ambushed you to the edge of the precipice, and you watch him as he pushes you closer to the edge and you feel small sods of earth crumble and fall into the abyss, you turn around to jump. But, before you jump, you peer into the horizon and at the shadowy depths below. Then you realise: Sade speaks and thinks and navigates through his art only in extremis, to push his readers to their ultimate limits, but not to the point of oblivion. There is no divinity, no godly hand to catch you if you fall, you will perish, because the laws of nature will not work against itself to spare you. He speaks in extremes of death, pain and suffering, but he offers a slither of hope, and that hope lies in your choice, to jump into oblivion or look it in the eyes, and decide to continue living. Sade offers hope, disguised in the extremes of hedonism and anarchy, but he urges you to look beyond that and to see the extreme cruelty and injustice that man suffers under “scepter and censor”.¹⁸³ These sufferings are only fully understood when viewed from a vantage point far away, and it is to this vantage point that Sade leads you. Despite all the death and destruction that plagues his texts, beneath all that, is life. Sade celebrates life; just not an anthropocentric vision of life. He celebrates man as being a part of nature, not outside of it, nor above it. By plucking man and his ego from his anthropocentric throne, and placing him amongst nature, he becomes humble. Despite all the suffering and exploitation that drives his texts, he wanted to reveal and expose the ugly side of political tyranny, even if it cost him his own freedom.

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