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THE MUST OF MONSTRUOSITY

Why read Sade ? To cleanse our mind, foremost, and see clearly again. Because minds, like all machines, need cleaning, and in our days of widespread culture perhaps even more than ever - not that we should condemn “culture” either, at least not *en masse* (even though mass culture does have many drawbacks), but it is true that while culture entertains (and such is its function), it also often contributes to hamper thinking about larger and more important issues. Its wonderful creations much too often result in a fouling up of the mind¹ – would it only be from the fact that it adds to what is already here, the given. It is Ali Baba’s cave, may be, overflowing with riches, but many are those who also remain caught in it, *while thieves gallop freely through the plains...* It is in that sense that culture is always somewhat, or even a bit more our *enemy*, and all the more so from the moment that we forget its secret : that there can’t be any creation without a previous destruction, and that it is always necessary to begin with destroying (would it be only time) in order to create (would it be only *a thought*).²

Let us take for instance the famous example of Oedipus (*Oedipus King*), who could not recover from having killed his father, by accident, or replaced him in his mother’s bed quite by mistake – meanwhile that nothing, of course, could have happened without the initial destruction – murder of the father – or the later one – destruction of a sacred link. We would have had no story then. Sophocles must necessarily have had in mind a certain idea of destruction, and of the meaning of destruction, when he sat down to write his play, and this meaning, we know, was already determined, and was *political*.³ Which is why he couldn’t afford to imagine Oedipus sleeping with his brothers and sisters after killing his parents, for instance, or killing his mother and sleeping with his father, or sleeping with both of them before killing them, even though the options are endless, and we cannot say that Sophocles lacked imagination – in any case, we do not have any proof that he did. All that we can ascertain, is that he wrote for the stage

¹ And most particularly the widespread « popular » culture.

² In the very sense Spinoza could also write that *Omnis determinatio negatio est*. (“Every determination is a negation”).

³ As well noted by Gilles Deleuze, « Œdipe suppose une fantastique répression des machines désirantes ». (*L’Anti-Œdipe*. Paris : Minuit, 1972, p. 8). (« Oedipus supposes an unbelievable repression of the mechanisms (machines) of desire», like all religions, the myth was created to keep people in line.

– professionalism is far from being a recent invention –, and that in the Greece of the Vth-century B.C., to write tragedies also meant to write *for* the state – the Greek city-state, the *polis* (a fancy etymology for *police* : dictatures have invented little...). The idea of individual spiritual liberation was not yet in the air, at least not beyond certain limits, which it was always dangerous to cross as Socrates discovered, even so, as we know today, individual freedom does not necessarily go against the collective. Sophocles could not ignore that the stage of Oedipus' story was foremost in his head all the while that he planned to have it performed outside on stage, before the assembled *polis*, but that knowledge could not change anything to the fact that his role was already determined, that he could not change it. He was to use *catharsis* – fear and pity – in order to reinforce in the assembled public a healthy respect for the rule of law and a likewise healthy fear of the Gods – the Gods, who have such strange ways of using man's own intelligence in order to trick him... by making them see *monsters*, for instance... And so, both Oedipus and the Sphinx are the *ruse* of the poet to such effect – and it is here that lies an ultimate betrayal⁴ : captive imagination, held hostage and handed over to the crowd decked in horror – a horrendous scarecrow : Oedipus, eyes punctured and dripping with blood... And the Sphinx, Sophocles' puppet, becoming through his agency the crowd's own, a crowd assembled to consummate its due portion of “fear and pity”...⁵ Having “eliminated” the monster, Oedipus was punished by fiat, an arbitrary decision, to allay the hidden desire of such punishments in a *polis* come ingest, through poet interposed, the sado-masochistic spectacle of its own mutilation. Oedipus' mad gesture – which also reminds us of the spectacular beginning of *Le Chien andalou* – a screen-wide eye split open by a razor blade – is, at the same time, the staging of the crowd's own *blinding*...

Order first ! The city - the *polis*, the laws at any cost. When anarchy threatens, there is nothing that is to be left out to protect oneself from that worse of all scourges. And such is the way – logically – of history. But can we doubt that Sophocles had also found pleasure in the use of his imagination ? Just as the spectators did, certainly, and more, since they did not derive from it, as he did, the same *divine* pleasure to possess the power to create monsters... *And such is indeed the Sphinx's game : it allows one and every desire*...

It is upon this stage that rose the curtain of Western psyche – Oedipus King...

And it will take twenty-two centuries to see that king dethroned – by Sade, namely.

It is in Sade that we finally discover what has been going on all along backstage, *côté* Sphinx (on the Sphinx's side). And what we discover is that man is indeed that *animal* described by the Sphinx, that monster standing on four legs in the morning, two at noon, three in the evening – nothing but just another monster, like the Sphinx, with its lion body, woman's torso and eagle wings. And from *that* side, it is man that suddenly disappears, as we understand what was its game, and that Oedipe indeed must have had to punish himself for not having understood it – and yet “It blinded him” (“*ça lui crevait les yeux*”), as the saying goes... Sade invites us to follow the Sphinx, and play its game : follow it in its mad rounds of

⁴ Every oedipianization is « a betrayal of desire ». Deleuze, op.cit., p. 132

⁵ There is of course no room for such a use of catharsis in Sade's work. In *Juliette*, for instance, one reads : « ... or, si la pitié naît de la frayeur, elle est donc une faiblesse, dont nous devons nous garantir, nous purger le plus tôt possible. » (« ... hence, if pity is borne from fear, it is therefore a weakness, from which we must protect ourselves, purge ourselves as soon as possible. »). (*Œuvres*. Ed. Michel Delon, Paris : Gallimard/La Pléiade, vol. III, p. 329. (All references are to this edition – except in notes 7 and 11 below). And elsewhere : « ... la pitié [...] est un vice réel, [...] une faiblesse de l'âme, comme une de ses maladies dont il [faut] promptement se guérir », dont « les effets [sont] diamétralement opposés aux lois de la nature. » (« ... pity is [...] a real vice, [...] a weakness of soul, alike one of those illnesses we must promptly heal », and whose « effects [are] diametrically opposed to the laws of nature. »). Ibid., p. 336.

destructions, and especially avoid thinking “man” once again and risk becoming her toy all over (like Justine, for our greater pleasure !). We discover, with Sade, that one could only answer “man” through pride, dumbness, or ignorance – *blindness* in any case. “It is I who got you rid of the Sphinx !”, Oedipus reminded the Thebans... As if one could get rid of *Imagination*...

And so it is that Sade’s works becomes the revenge of the Sphinx. Should we be surprised that it will be bloody ? No trite happenstance crossroad parricides here, or incests by mistaken identity. Twaddle of these, dear Oedipus ! So many fathers are left to be murdered, or so many mothers sexually enjoyed !... Or vice-versa... Or both... Or worse... Cities to be burned... nations to be poisoned, etc... – and without the least embarrassment either. (As it turns out the plague was not spread by Gods, but *by fleas* – fathom the astonishment of the *polis* to hear such news !). And so, the Sadeian Oedipus will kill his mother, sleep with his sister, father, brother... all of them in fact, and others besides... But not for long of course, because it will happen that he gets bored of them and fancies getting rid of them in the end. And he will do so. He will do so *because it is foremost important never to interrupt anywhere the sacred chain linking man to animal, monster, and beyond, to the whole of Nature* – which is also the name of all of them – a sacred chain which, if followed to the end, will also finally reveal *all the marvels of the mind*...⁶

Historically, it is to the advent of the novel that we owe the epoch making revolution found in Sade. It is fiction which allowed for a change of location of the action from the public stage, to an inner stage.⁷ The novel is a device which favors internalization. Every reading is private, and hence also a possible trap for the Oedipus’ “complex”. The rise of the novel parallels in France the decline of classical tragedy, in spite of the efforts of Voltaire or Crébillon to breathe new life into a dying art and the “theatromania” that affected the upper classes (including Sade) during the century – perhaps a sure sign too that their universe was about to collapse. That removal of the stage of the action to what Rousseau and Sade have named the “land of chimeras” (“le pays des chimères”) – the land of Sphinxes, then – is the true realm of the imaginary and of desires. It is where Oedipus can murder and rape in all delight and impunity. And it is easy to see, as Lacan suggested, that Sade was here well ahead of Freud in exploring this new realm.⁸ Yet it could also be argued that Sade remains a great dramatist in this endeavor too, as long as one is willing to accept the fact – as has often been suggested – that is real theater are his novels ; while conversely, the removal and internalization of the stage of the action also explains why his theater remains so trite. It is the novel which offered contemporaries exciting new possibilities, as the theater had done in the previous century – for exploring the psyche and providing a blueprint of the workings and interplays of imagination and desire.⁹ And this is all the more true in the case of Sade, that it is well nigh impossible to conceive of a theatrical rendition of his novelistic universe, rapes, tortures, murders, etc... The only person to have tried it (Pasolini, in *Salò*) only succeeded in betraying Sade, as Annie Le Brun has rightly pointed out.¹⁰ As the basis of ethics changed with the growing importance of the individual, the “I” found itself in a personal, and no longer collective relationship to the self (the *ego* also with the *id*), such as the

⁶ « ... tu ne connaîtras rien si tu n’as pas tout connu, et si tu es assez timide pour t’arrêter avec elle [nature], elle t’échappera pour jamais. » (“... you will know nothing if you have not known everything, and if you are so shy as to stop (hold back) with her [nature], she will [i.e., her knowledge will] escape you forever”). *Juliette*, p. 194.

⁷ « Le pinceau du roman le saisit [l’homme] dans son intérieur... » (“The brush of the novel captures him [man] in his inside”.) Sade, *Oeuvres complètes*. Paris : Editions Pauvert, 1998, vol. 10, p. 74.

⁸ It is Sade and not Freud who first discovered the truth that « la loi et le désir refoulé sont une seule et même chose ». (“law and repressed desire are one and the same thing”). Jacques Lacan, “Kant avec Sade”, *Ecrits*, Paris : Seuil, 1966, p. 782.

⁹ With one notable exception, of course – to confirm the rule : Beaumarchais.

¹⁰ Annie Le Brun, « L’Athéisme, littéralement et dans tous les sens », in *Lire Sade* (Edited by Norbert Sclippa), Paris : L’Harmattan, 2004.

novel and fiction could better account of this transformation. But let us be quite clear on one thing, that is that Sade is also the *only* Western writer to have taken stock of this epoch-making revolution, and to have fully exploited it. Everyone else continued to write AS IF NOTHING AT ALL HAD HAPPENED, their characters going in and out of their novels like the passengers from a stagecoach – Most exemplary of those for Sade is Rétif de la Bretonne : « Si tu n'écris comme R[étif] *que ce que tout le monde sait*, dusses-tu, comme lui, nous donner quatre volumes par mois, ce n'est pas la peine de prendre la plume. » (“If like R[étif] you write only *what everybody knows*, should you, like him, turn out four volumes a month, it is not worth your trouble taking up the pen”.¹¹

This juncture – in which it is customary to see the transition from Classicism to Romanticism – is the true berth of Sade's works, born there as a war machine – a precision tool as the world had never seen before.¹² Hubert Damisch :

« Comprendons bien : l'oeuvre de Sade – et la pensée, la « philosophie » qu'elle emporte –, si elle a cette efficacité démoniaque, c'est qu'elle n'est en aucun cas le *produit* de la solitude, de l'égarément, de la perversion des sens ou du dérèglement de l'imagination, mais *l'instrument* d'un « dérangement » radical, un *instrument délibérément combiné et mis au point avec le plus grand art* ». ¹³ (“Let's understand correctly : Sade's opus – and the thought, the « philosophy » it carries with it –, if it is endowed with such a devilish efficiency, is in no way the product of solitude, aberration, perversion of the senses or dissoluteness of imagination, but *the tool* of a radical “aberration”, *a tool deliberately combined and adjusted with the greatest of art*.”)

Oedipus, having understood the Sphinx's game, decided to play it, and liberate the flux of the *libido* in the imaginary of desire... Knowing that the Sphinx, that so-called “monster” evacuated in the name of “man”, was nothing but a projection of man's fears, he recognized himself in it – and beyond in all the monsters of creation – and also realized that the most effective way to get rid of monsters once and for all was in fact not by defeating them by answering their questions, but by *liberating* them, returning them to the libidinal flux from where they sprang, and where they would go back in this way and disappear, simply by returning to what they had been all along : simply *ideas, figments of imagination*... A process through which *all* answers – and not just “man” – will again become possible : “oyster” as well, for instance, or “steam”, or “leaf”,¹⁴ - or ass, or sperm (mostly sperm : isn't “man” after all only “a bit of matured sperm” ? (« un peu de foutre éclos »).

In this process we see that Sade was also an excellent student of Descartes, inasmuch as man will also “disappear”, and be resorbed in the idea, being replaced by a Cogito that necessarily must agree with absolutely *any* thought/being whatsoever – and necessarily monstrous by this protean dimension, since it then becomes enough simply to *think* in order to exercise a form of monstrosity. The cogito does not discriminate ethically, and every thought is equally moral at its level, would it be that of a Nero, a Hitler,

¹¹ « Idée sur les romans », *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Pauvert, vol. 10, p. 75.

¹² « ...le pareil livre ne se rencontrant ni chez les anciens ni chez les modernes. » (« ... a similar book to be found neither with the ancients nor with the moderns »). *Les Cent Vingt Journées de Sodome*, vol. I, p. 69.

¹³ My emphasis in the last line dans la dernière ligne. Hubert Damisch, « L'écriture sans mesures », dans *Tel Quel*, numéro « La pensée Sade », Hiver 1967, p. 54.

¹⁴ All of these terms are metaphors for « man », humanity, in *Juliette*.

or Mother Teresa... Descartes did indeed try to solve this ethical fallacy, by separating nature and man (the same solution we found in Sophocles in fact), negating any solution of continuity between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, a scheme that enabled him to locate virtue on the side of the cogito. A clever device, but which does not hold to the scrutiny of materialism. If Sade remains unique in Western history, it is because he engaged and exposed better than anyone else the fallacies of any discontinuity between mind and matter, or man and nature, drawing without ambiguity the picture of this continuity, and brought man face to face with an understanding of his own *essential* monstrosity.

« Audacity, still more audacity, always more audacity ! », exclaimed Danton in the midst of revolution. Yet none has had more than Sade, with a single idea, that “philosophy must tell all” (“la philosophie doit tout dire”).¹⁵

Tell all, of course, firstly in that sense meant by the Encyclopedists, as well exemplified in the catalogue of perversion of the *120 Days of Sodom*, but not only in that sense, and also in that of a totality, such as to achieve not only having told all, but also, that there will be nothing left to tell.¹⁶ And it is why the Sadeian machine, “calibrated with the greatest art”, must work with a quasi-mathematical precision,¹⁷ in order to reach the very end of thinking, exhaust all of its existential and biological possibilities.¹⁸

To such effect, the brain will be used to process thoughts, like the stomach is to process food, in a imaginary gargantuan banquet where every possible thought will be consummated.¹⁹ It will become a place of maceration, “disorganizations”, eliminations, and nutrition for both the mind and the body : they are inseparable with Sade.²⁰

And it is here it appears that the « highest of arts » that Mr. Damisch has mentioned becomes obvious, in the result achieved. Because the list is long of those who have tried like him to tell all, but have failed, sinking into despair, madness, or suicide : Artaud, Holderlin, Nietzsche, Rimbaud... Sade is the only one to have reached safe harbor,²¹ and it is so because his motto is to be taken literally, and that he applied it literally : one single hesitation in the flux of libido will jam the machine, the precious precision tool, leading to final and total failure. The machine will then be good only to throw away – and even so it still will remain possible to admire its mechanisms and productions. There is only this motto, this one absolute rule in Sade – who highly recommends to follow as few rules as possible – but it is imperative :

¹⁵ Au audacity of which he is well aware : « ... nous allons, avec une courageuse audace, peindre le crime comme il est. » (« ...we are, with a quiet audacity, going to paint crime just as it is »). *La Nouvelle Justine*, vol. II, p. 396.

¹⁶ « ... son flambeau, comme celui de l'astre du jour, doit dissiper toutes les ténèbres. » (« ... her [philosophie's] light, like that of the sun, must dissipate every darkness »). *Ibid.*, p. 430.

¹⁷ In the sense understood by Spinoza : « Quel moyen de s'affranchir est à la disposition du philosophe ? Sa tâche est de se faire de son être propre, des accidents dont sa vie se compose, une idée comparable à celle qu'un mathématicien a d'une figure qu'il sait construire et des propriétés de cette figure. A la *passion* alors succédera l'*action*, à une nécessité extérieure et contraignante, une nécessité conforme à sa volonté devenue raison. » (“What means of freeing oneself is philosophy's proper ? Its task is to make of its very being, and the accidents that compose its life, an idea similar to that which a mathematician holds of a figure that he knows to be creating and of the properties of that figure. To *passion* then will succeed *action*, and to an exterior and constraining necessity, a necessity conform to its will now become reason”). *Op. cit.*, p. 15.

¹⁸ « Si nous n'avions pas tout dit, tout analysé, comment voudrais-tu que nous eussions pu deviner ce qui te convient ? ». (“If we had not said everything, analyzed everything, how do you think we would have been able to guess what is fitting for you ?”). *Les Cent Vingt Journées*, vol. I, p. 69.

¹⁹ « C'est ici l'histoire d'un magnifique repas où six cents plats divers s'offrent à ton appétit. » *Les Cent Vingt Journées*, vol. I, p. 69. (“It is here the story of a magnificent banquet where six hundred “different dishes are given to your appetite.”)

²⁰ As noted by Spinoza : « Substance pensante et substance étendue, c'est une seule et même substance comprise tantôt sous un attribut, tantôt sous l'autre. » (“Thinking substance and extended substance, is a single and same substance, once understood as an attribute, and another time as a different one”). *Ethique*. Œuvres, 3. Paris : Garnier-Flammarion, 1965, p. 76.

²¹ And in what amazing way : thirty years of imprisonment did not even make a dent in his determination !

philosophy must tell all. It still will have said nothing, until it has said it all. Its “must” is apodictically absolute. And it is with this rule that, with a quiet and deliberate audacity, he transformed the Sphinx’s game, from a cruel game of fear and pity, into a tool of liberation.²² Is it then the Sphinx or Oedipus who can claim : « Quelle jouissance pour moi ! J’étais couvert de malédictions, d’imprécations, je *parricidais*, j’*incestais*, j’*assassinais*, je *prostituais*, je *sodomisais* ; oh ! Juliette, Juliette ! je n’ai jamais été si heureux de ma vie »... ?²³ (“What a jouissance for me ! I was covered with curses, imprecations, I was *parriciding*, *incesting*, *assassinating*, *prostituting*, *sodomazing* ; O, Juliette ! I have never been as happy in my whole life”...). It would be hard to say, they are the same entity, both have become one.

And it is so that Sade’s machine, designed to crush, laminate, dismember, disorganize (no doubt one of Sade’s favorite verbs), digest, recycle, cleanse and clean out... a machine of the highest art, has for its goal to liberate the mind, return it to itself, as pure as the first day, having erased from it everything that culture inscribes – slogans, clichés, values, graffitis : *erased any inscription* ; return it to the *tabula rasa* that it once was, a mirror, *crystal clear*, where everything will once again become fabulous. A dream – but true. A dream where the mind finally cleaned will reconnect with its endless freedom, and a stunned reader, recover the world he had lost :

« Je referme ce livre interminable, antimatière de tous les livres. Je lève les yeux. Tout arbre est plus beau, toute fleur plus éclatante, l’enfance est là, les couleurs, les odeurs, le toucher, les sons, les feuilles, le bois, l’eau, l’air. L’ennui ne pourra venir que de l’usage absurde que les humains font d’eux-mêmes... »²⁴. (“I close this endless book, antimatter of all the books. I lift the eyes. Every tree is more beautiful, every flower brighter, childhood is just at hand, the colors, the smells, the touch, the sounds, the leaves, the woods, the water, the air. Boredom will only be able to come from the absurd usage humans make of themselves...”).

²² « ... tant il est vrai que la vraie volupté ne gît que dans l’imagination, et qu’elle n’est délicieusement nourrie que des monstres qu’enfante ce mode capricieux de notre esprit. » (« ... so true is it that real voluptuousness lies only in the imagination, and that it is deliciously fed only by the monsters created by that capricious mode of our mind.”). *La Nouvelle Justine*, vol. II, p. 602.

²³ *Juliette*, vol. III, p. 411. Saint-Fond *dixit*.

²⁴ Philippe Sollers. *Sade contre l’être suprême*. Paris : Gallimard, 1996 , p. 46.