



The ethical night of libertinism: Beauvoir’s reading of Sade

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Abstract

This paper examines Simone de Beauvoir’s reading of the eighteenth century writer and libertine Marquis de Sade, in her essay “Must we Burn Sade?”; a difficult and bewildering text, both in pure linguistic terms and philosophically. In particular, Beauvoir’s insistence on Sade as a “great moralist” seems hard to reconcile with her emphasis, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, on the interdependency of human beings and her exhortation to us to promote other people’s freedom, as well as the aspiration of *The Second Sex* to equal relations between the genders. While earlier scholars addressed the ethico-political implications of Beauvoir’s essay, they insisted that the ambiguity so fundamental in her philosophy is denied by the Sadean hero, and that the Other can never be attained in his system. In this essay, I argue that Sade paradoxically emerges as an ethical model in Beauvoir’s text: as a writer, he assumes the ambiguity of the human condition in the extreme. Further, Sade reveals the potential of sexuality if it is explored in a form of eroticism that largely transgresses behavior constructed as normal: his writings open up new forms of existence, where, contrary to prevailing ideas, woman’s sexual freedom is claimed as equal to man’s, where genders are unstable and heterosexuality no longer the standard. Beauvoir’s fascination with Sade in this essay can be linked with the seemingly unresolvable asymmetry in the relation between men and women in *The Second Sex*: in his writings is revealed sexuality’s potential to subvert patriarchal norms and mystifications, and perhaps, in the end, even gender itself.

Keywords Beauvoir · Sade · Ethics · Literature · Sexuality · Gender · Intersubjectivity

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This paper examines Simone de Beauvoir's reading of the eighteenth century writer and libertine Marquis de Sade, in her essay "Must we Burn Sade?" from 1951–52; it is a difficult and bewildering text, both in pure linguistic terms and philosophically.¹ In particular, Beauvoir's insistence on Sade as a moralist, as a "diabolical," but still, ethicist, seems hard to reconcile with her emphasis, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, on the interdependency of human beings and her exhortation to us to promote other people's freedom, as well as the aspiration of *The Second Sex* to equal and reciprocal relations between men and women, both on the economic and erotic levels.²

Indeed, her essay was for a long time considered something of a disgrace to Beauvoir by feminist theoreticians, who consequently refused to deal with it.³ Beauvoir herself, however, declared that the anthology *Privilèges*, where the essay is clearly the most important text, constituted an introduction to her whole philosophy.⁴ Yet, in what manner can a writer famous for his self-centered and cruel heroes be thought to further her ethical and political goals? Even more intriguingly, the idea that Sade is in fact considered an ethical *model* by Beauvoir is evoked by the essay—as if he was an example of the authentic personality type, at the top of the ladder of characters proposed in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Among the few commentators who have taken the Sade essay seriously, Debra Bergoffen and Judith Butler suggested that Beauvoir's Sade has an ontological significance, in that he reveals the ethical risks of sexual desire and sexuality as the site where freedom can be expressed. Nevertheless, on their readings, the other can never be attained for Sade, and ambiguity must in the end be rejected in his libertine universe. Why, then, does Beauvoir maintain that the marquis is a great moralist? This question remains unanswered by Bergoffen and Butler, but a solution suggests itself when considering that freedom, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, was an inherently ethical concept, while in *The Second Sex*, it is disconnected from morality, as has been shown by Kristana Arp.⁵ This makes it difficult to understand how the asymmetrical relation between men and women, uncovered by Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, can ever be resolved, given that man is described as confident in his flesh as well as in his freedom. In "Must we Burn Sade?" ethics is brought back into focus.

As I will argue in this essay, Beauvoir's Sade has an ethical significance in that the ontological condition revealed lays the foundation for an ethics: the ambiguity of our condition is not disregarded by Sade, but rather assumed in the extreme. In spite of his "isolatism," he is, in his most depraved fantasies, in need of other

¹ Beauvoir (1955/2012). In the following, I provide references (when applicable) first to the French original, then to the existing translation. Occasionally, the translations have been altered.

² Beauvoir (1955, p. 21/2012, p. 50).

³ Deirdre Bair calls it "a hodgepodge of Existential philosophy, faulty Freudian psychoanalysis and ill-considered views about pornography and her own contemporary society [...] It is of interest today only because she wrote it" (Bair 1990, pp. 662–63). In recent years, however, there has been a renewed interest in this essay, as is shown by Vintges's discussion (1996), Debra Bergoffen (1997 and 2001), Kail's chapter on the issue in (2006) and the articles by Green (2000), Butler (2003), Guilmette (2011), Singleton (2011) and Lauwaert (2014).

⁴ Bair (1990, p. 663).

⁵ Arp (2001, p. 143). Arp also distinguishes three forms of freedom in Beauvoir, an interpretation I'm not following here.

people. Furthermore, the Sade essay points to the role that *literature* can play in undermining patriarchal norms, and especially the gendered mystifications handed down through generations. As a writer, Sade reveals the potential of sexuality if it is explored in a form of eroticism that largely transgresses behavior constructed as normal: his writings open up new forms of existence, where, contrary to prevailing ideas, woman's sexual freedom is claimed as equal to man's, genders are unstable and heterosexuality no longer the standard.

In the following, I discuss the imbroglio instilled by the asymmetrical structure of sexual difference in *The Second Sex*, and explore the initially startling suggestion that Sade developed an ethics of authenticity as a possible solution to this quandary. I examine Bergoffen's and Butler's respective readings of the Sade essay, and their attempts to resolve Beauvoir's paradoxical sympathy for Sade. Further, I discuss a recent article by Lode Lauwaert, who provides an insightful analysis of the different levels operating in Beauvoir's reading of Sade as man and author. While these three interpretations emphasize the failure of Sade to attain the Other in an ethical manner, I argue that Beauvoir's conception of Sade's "isolatism" points to the radical dependency of embodied subjectivity on the Other, and that Sade's work can be interpreted as subverting the patriarchal gender norms denounced by *The Second Sex*. Further, I bring Beauvoir's analysis in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* into the picture, and examine the possibility that Sade represent the final, authentic stage of the series of character types in this work. This rather perplexing idea is discussed considering, firstly, the historical context where Sade was active and where his writings get their meaning, and secondly, the manner that they reveal sexuality's potential to transform society. In this way, Beauvoir's essay on Sade can be seen both as a corrective and a supplement to *The Second Sex*.

1 Woman and the body as burden

In *The Second Sex*, written two years before the Sade essay, Beauvoir famously argued that the transcendental, allegedly universal subjectivity of philosophy is in fact gendered: the ego is constituted as a male hegemonic subject, as transcendence, through the relegation of woman into the position of immanence, at the same time as a divergence from the male norm. For this reason, the relationship between men and women are not reciprocal: Woman is riveted to her body, her flesh—she is posited not simply as the other sex, but *the* sex, with only just enough subjectivity so that man can feel that it is a feat to possess her. Man, on the other hand, posits himself as neutral mind and transcendence. Woman thus becomes the *absolute* Other, which means that she doesn't belong to a group whose oppression has a historical origin: there is no point in history where the hegemony of man appeared. Her bonds to men are so deep-rooted that she often becomes their accomplice, and her subordination will appear as biological destiny.⁶ For Beauvoir, this dialectic has its foundation in

⁶ Needless to say, Beauvoir does not consider this positioning of man as the transcending subject and woman as immanent object in terms of individual acts but rather as what we would today call a structural phenomenon upheld in various ways by both men and women. Further, they are structures that we are inclined to occupy, not positions we are fixed in.

the tendency of human beings to escape from their ambiguity between mind and flesh, that she analyzed in the long essay *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté* ("Towards an Ethics of Ambiguity") from 1947.⁷ In *The Second Sex*, sexuality appears as having chief importance in the process that assigns woman to the position of the Other. A woman does not live her body as an existence to take on as an agency in the world, but as a burden⁸: this body is perhaps her most intimate truth, as Beauvoir writes, but this truth is shameful and must be hidden. Man, on the other hand, can be transcendence and sexual desire at the same time; his sex is in fact the very symbol of transcendence.⁹

One of the rare examples in *The Second Sex* of women who manage to acquire a certain sexual liberty, and with that economic independence, are somewhat surprisingly luxury prostitutes. She mentions in particular the seventeenth century courtesan and writer Ninon de Lenclos (1620–1705), who grew up with a mother without resources, but managed to make a small fortune and held a famous Parisian salon. She was known for her libertine and atheist outlook, never got married and had a number of lovers, whom she is said to have classified into "payers," "martyrs," and "favorites."¹⁰ Beauvoir writes:

Paradoxically, those women who exploit their femininity to the extreme create a situation for themselves nearly equal to that of man; coming from this sex that delivers them to men as objects, they become subjects. [...] free in their mores and speech, they can rise to the rarest intellectual freedom—like Ninon de Lenclos.¹¹

Yet for the most part, women do not have this freedom to escape the normative order; not only the prostitute or the courtesan, but also the woman with a more ordinary profession is caught in the need to please men, and is thus continuously at risk. Lenclos remains an exception, while woman in general suffers, if not from a biological destiny, at least from a societal pathology where female desire can only imply a relinquishment of freedom: she relates to herself as to an Other and there can thus be no real exchange between her and the man she loves: "since a woman loves a man in his alterity and transcendence she feels in danger at every moment."¹² Now, while an equal society is in *The Second Sex* largely described as obtained through political and legal change, it is difficult to see how authentic love and desire can be possible between man and woman, given the asymmetrical relation between the sexes. Man is self-sufficient in this framework, as transcending subject he is at one with his sexed body and women are dependent on him. Why would this configuration ever

⁷ Beauvoir (2003/1976c).

⁸ Beauvoir (1976b, p. 511/2011, p. 672).

⁹ Beauvoir (1976a, p. 269).

¹⁰ Duchêne (1984, p. 87).

¹¹ Beauvoir (1976b, p. 447/2011, p. 626).

¹² Beauvoir (1976b, p. 573/2011, p. 719). Beauvoir's views on the biological destiny of women are a difficult issue that has been dealt with elsewhere, and in my view Beauvoir's ideas are not entirely coherent on this point. It is sufficient to point out that the thesis that woman is enslaved to the species is confirmed at the very end of the book. The statement, written in a footnote, that this slavery would concern only "procreation," not sexual desire per se (1976b, p. 610/2011, p. 756), appears rather ad hoc, given the preceding analysis of the relation between procreation and desire.

change? Especially since freedom in this work no longer has an inherently ethical significance?

2 A great, unethical moralist?

On the face of it, Sade gives no solution to this quandary, but appears instead to take the relation between man as one and woman as the Other to its utmost extreme. In public opinion, he is a pornographer of male despots whipping and raping subjugated female victims, and that is why feminist theorists have claimed that “he both embodies and defines male sexual values,” in the words of Andrea Dworkin.¹³ Nevertheless, Beauvoir suggests that this author “made an ethic of his sexuality”; with all his human and literary shortcomings, Sade is portrayed as a “great moralist.”¹⁴ But perhaps if we examine her fascination with Sade, we can find a way to resolve the tension created by the disappearance of the ethical underpinnings from the ontology of *The Second Sex*.

Of course, Beauvoir is aware that Sade had not only written about but also to some extent performed “sadistic” acts; notably his treatment of the poor widow and beggar Rose Keller, whom Sade in 1768 duped into coming to his mansion in Arcueil where he had the habit to take prostitutes. According to her deposition, Keller thought she would be employed as a housekeeper there, but instead the marquis made her take off her clothes, and whipped her, as Beauvoir writes, “with a cat-o-nine-tails and a knotted whipcord, and, apparently, [hacked] her with a pen knife and [poured] hot wax on her wounds.”¹⁵ This event gave rise to a scandal—note, however, that this was not so much because of his alleged treatment of the victim but since it happened on an Easter Sunday, as Chantal Thomas points out.¹⁶ Sade is thrown in prison and afterwards banished. His mother-in-law, Mme de Montreuil, had obtained a *lettre de cachet*, and after another episode of whipping prostitutes and several of “sodomy” (a capital crime at this time), he was incarcerated in the Château de Vincennes, later in the Bastille, for thirteen years. He was released after the revolution, only to be imprisoned again during the Reign of Terror. In 1801, Sade was arrested by order of Napoleon Bonaparte, for his (anonymously published) writings, then transferred to the Bicêtre Asylum and later, on demand of his family, to the Charenton Asylum, where he remained until his death in 1814. Almost all the works of Sade, except a few plays and letters, are written in prison. On Beauvoir's reading, Sade came to understand “that he could not make of this too-real world his theatre,” and was forced to choose the imaginary world: literature.¹⁷ In many

¹³ Dworkin (1981, p. 70).

¹⁴ Beauvoir (1955, p. 15, p. 59/2012, p. 47, p. 75). Of course, Beauvoir was part of a bigger wave of interest in Sade among post-war French intellectuals. For a thorough discussion of the philosophical reception of Sade in France, see the recent book by Lauwaert (2019).

¹⁵ “Apparently,” since the depositions of Keller and of Sade are not coherent on this point. Beauvoir (1955, pp. 32–33/2012, p. 58).

¹⁶ Thomas (1994, p. 232).

¹⁷ Beauvoir (1955, p. 25/2012, p. 53).

of Sade's writings, however, the protagonists wallow in sodomy, adultery, bondage, whipping, scatophilia, rape, incest and even murder. In what sense do we here find, not only a "demonic morality," but even what Beauvoir calls an "ethics of authenticity"?¹⁸

In her important study of Beauvoir's philosophy from 1997, Bergoffen claims to reveal Beauvoir's hidden, "muted" voice, speaking in the margins of her texts of "erotic generosity."¹⁹ Bergoffen is also one of the rare scholars who have analyzed Beauvoir's essay on Sade in some depth.²⁰ In this text she finds Beauvoir's elsewhere muted voice expressed most explicitly: whereas her standard voice, emphasizing transcendence and the project, is at the center of Beauvoir's other works, in the Sade essay the ambiguity of the flesh and *the erotic*—a philosophical category of its own for Beauvoir—are given priority. In this undercurrent of her thought, the disruptive and liberating powers of the erotic is an important theme, that comes to the surface through the reading of Sade. For Bergoffen, Beauvoir has a kinship with Sade in that they both understand "the powers of mystification" and write "to unmask the fictions of patriarchy's gender constructs."²¹ Sade shows that there is a "libertine" form of equality in that women can also desire to objectify the other.²² At the same time, Sade poses a challenge to Beauvoir on Bergoffen's reading: for him, erotic desire "precludes the possibility of reciprocity," whereas for Beauvoir it is through the category of the erotic that an ethic of generosity can be established.²³ To that extent, Sadean desire remains caught within the patriarchal structure, which is inseparable from "the desire to be the absolute subject."²⁴ Through Sade, the risk pertaining to the sexual realm is unveiled: in the erotic encounter, our vulnerability is disclosed, in that our subjectivity might here be confirmed and strengthened but also dismissed and objectified; the ethical other might as well be recognized as annihilated.

In refusing to accept ambiguity and the other, locating itself in an extreme version of Cartesianism, however, Sade's project must be a "failure" on Bergoffen's reading: Sade abstains from exposing himself to the precariousness of confronting the other person and thus ends up in an "unethical project of tyranny."²⁵ However, Bergoffen never explains why Beauvoir in outlining an ethics of generosity insists on calling Sade "a great moralist," if at root she considered his project unethical. In a later text, she touches upon this issue: "Beauvoir sees Sade as a great moralist who endorsed

¹⁸ Beauvoir (1955, p. 21, p. 87/2012, p. 50, p. 93).

¹⁹ Bergoffen (1997, p. 2).

²⁰ Another is Vintges (1996), who fails to grasp the originality of Beauvoir's reading; she judges it from the point of view of an alleged Beauvoirian theory of love as "fusion" (as if the wish of women to fuse or merge with her lover, as a characteristic of female desire under patriarchy, could be raised to a normative theory of love), of which Sade cannot but fall short.

²¹ Bergoffen (1997, p. 119).

²² Angela Carter was perhaps the first to point out that the libertine tyrant and the victim are positions rather than genders (1979, p. 24).

²³ Bergoffen (1997, p. 39).

²⁴ Bergoffen (2001, p. 152).

²⁵ Bergoffen (1997, p. 116, p. 120).

an unsatisfactory ethic,” a statement that doesn't become less puzzling when Bergoffen insists that Beauvoir “rejects his ethics [...] as being false.”²⁶ This claim is difficult to corroborate: in fact, Beauvoir's most explicit criticism of Sade is that his morality, while being authentic, is not “satisfying.”²⁷ The question also remains how the essay can be both a “corrective” to the abstract examples of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and the analysis of an ethical failure.²⁸

3 The ethics of libertinism

More recently, Butler approached this issue. Butler struggles with what she calls Beauvoir's “critical sympathy” with Sade, and the way she seems to sometimes coincide with his perspective and even values.²⁹ The American philosopher remarks that sexual libertinism seems to have little to do with feminism, as it is a practice where women are eroticized as dominated and thus firmly anchored in the heterosexual matrix. For Sade, however, sexuality is not determined by biology but is a “social fact,”³⁰ and can affirm itself against the repressive norms of civilization. Yet, if Beauvoir insists that Sade “made an ethic of his sexuality” that he disclosed in a literary work, it was not only because he established his own values of exuberance against the prohibitions of society. What is important, writes Butler, is the “method in his ‘madness’”; his protagonists strive to attain pain and pleasure in a systematic way: “Although [Sade's] cruelty cannot be said to be ethically good, it becomes part of an ethic because a plethora of justifications arrive to support its practice.”³¹ But the idea that taking pleasure in molesting other people becomes ethical (while not “ethically good”) if only one offers “elaborate justifications” for one's behavior appears too cynical to be Butler's real point.³²

Rather, the idea seems to be that Sade justifies cruelty with respect to the abstract values of bourgeois society, which exerts violence of a wholly different order: during the Reign of Terror, as Beauvoir writes, “murder becomes constitutional.”³³ Against this background, Sade challenges society on several levels, and not only through his eroticism. He puts up other forms of resistance: Beauvoir stresses that Sade doesn't seize the opportunity to torture and kill in the name of the political power he enjoys as a president of one of the revolutionary sections; and when he becomes a juror

²⁶ Bergoffen (2012, p. 40, p. 42).

²⁷ Beauvoir (1955, p. 87/2012, p. 93). Perhaps Bergoffen has in mind Beauvoir's foreword to the anthology *Privilèges*, where she writes that Sade “failed” in “ideologically found[ing]” “the reign of his own pleasure” (Beauvoir 1955, p. 7/2012, p. 95). In fact, Beauvoir's attitude to Sade in the short foreword is strikingly aloof in comparison with the sympathetic reading of the essay.

²⁸ Bergoffen (2012, p. 39; cf. 1997, p. 113).

²⁹ Butler (2003).

³⁰ Beauvoir (1955, p. 46/2012, p. 67).

³¹ Butler (2003, p. 174).

³² Butler (2003, p. 175). She does not account for the distinction between “ethical” and “ethically good.”

³³ Beauvoir (1955, p. 27/2012, p. 55).

for indictment, he renders dismissals of charges in favour of the accused—he even abstains from taking revenge on the Montreuil family, who were mainly responsible for his incarceration.³⁴ As a result, he is imprisoned for “moderantism” in 1793; he is, in Beauvoir’s words, “discredited by his humanity.”³⁵

Further, while Bergoffen claimed that Sade had no “vision of liberation,” Butler suggests that Beauvoir’s *prima facie* counterintuitive assertions about Sade are related to his defense of “sexual freedom.”³⁶ In her interpretation, sexuality is the very expression of freedom for Beauvoir, and this is why Sade can impel us to re-examine the human condition. Our fundamental dependency upon the other is revealed in that even the debauched tyrant lives with the presumption that his victim, just as himself, can experience pain and pleasure. The case of Sade shows that ethical recognition must pass through the body, although for him this body is a limit that must be destroyed through a frenzied sexual act, whereas for Beauvoir it is a means for collective action on Butler’s reading. In the end, on her interpretation, ambiguity is rejected by Sade and, despite the extravagant gestures, the other is never attained.

4 Sade and “*le Trouble*”

On these readings, Sade may well suggest a reversal of sexual norms, but at the expense of an authentic relation to the other. It is true that Beauvoir points to the typical predicament of the Sadean hero: he cannot arrive at a stage where his self is surrendered to the benefit of the other; instead the libertine remains so clear-headed and cerebral that, she writes, “philosophical discourse becomes [...] an aphrodisiac.”³⁷ This is the reason for the ferocity of the sexual behavior described by Sade: ““Dreadful cries, atrocious blasphemies escaped from [Duc de Blangis’s] swollen chest, flames seemed to come from his eyes, he foamed, he whinnied ...”³⁸ For Sade’s heroes, intercourse becomes synonymous with cruelty and orgasm a form of rage: “what well-constituted man would not desire ... to manhandle his pleasure?”³⁹

Further, Beauvoir draws attention to the lack in Sade of an experience that seems crucial to sexuality and erotic love, and that is named, in French, “*trouble*”: a polysemic term that doesn’t have any precise equivalent in English. The translation renders it “emotional intoxication,” which doesn’t seem quite adequate in this context.⁴⁰ To experience *trouble* is, for example, to be moved and excited in a physical way by the presence of the other: The person who is in love and blushes when seeing the loved

³⁴ Thomas (1994, p. 234).

³⁵ Beauvoir (1955, p. 27/2012, p. 54).

³⁶ Bergoffen (1997, p. 136); Butler (2003, p. 172).

³⁷ Beauvoir (1955, p. 34/2012, p. 59).

³⁸ From *The 120 Days in Sodom* (Sade 1990, p. 24), quoted in Beauvoir (1955, p. 33/2012, p. 59).

³⁹ *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (Sade 1998, p. 159), quoted in Beauvoir (1955, p.33/2012, pp. 58–59).

⁴⁰ Bergoffen writes, in reference to the 1966 translation of the essay: “though *le trouble* may, given the context and translator’s poetic license, be rendered emotional intoxication, it is more literally understood to mean a disturbance, a confusion, or an agitation relating to sexual desire” (1997, p. 122). “Given the context,” however, the meaning of “*trouble*” is quite clear, as I describe in the following.

one, or who gets butterflies in their stomach when they graze against the desired body, feels *trouble*. The word connotes confusion, losing one's balance or acuity of vision, and this is why *le trouble* can also mean turmoil, distress or even disorder. Here, however, the framework is clearly that of love and desire and thus the kind of pleasurable worry they can imply, which expresses itself through bodily reactions.

In *The Second Sex*, *le trouble* is described as the origin of sexual desire. For a young man, the disquiet of sexuality is a source of pride, whereas the girl feels ashamed and hides these sensations, to the point where her own flesh becomes alienated.⁴¹ For the woman, it is thus an impediment to her subjectivity. A vivid picture of the birth of *le trouble*, during the passage from childhood to adolescence, is Colette's *Green Wheat* (*Le Blé en herbe*, 1923), censored at its time, that is one of the literary works Beauvoir returns to in *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir writes:

Vinca gets scratched by brambles, fishes for prawns and climbs trees, and yet she quivers when her friend Phil touches her hand; she knows the agitation [*le trouble*] of the body becoming flesh, which is the first revelation of woman as woman; aroused [*troublée*], she begins to want to be pretty [...].⁴²

According to the logic of oppression, woman's "body becoming flesh" implies that she is wholly identified with flesh: she makes herself into a prey, an object of desire even for herself. Whereas man assumes his libido without difficulty, and transcendence for him is confirmed by his desire, woman, for the most part, can affirm her subjectivity only in union with a man—as if she borrowed something of his transcendence.⁴³ A man is needed for a woman's truth to be revealed to herself, and as soon as that union is dissolved, she returns to passivity and immanence.

If we are to experience this "*trouble*," we must be capable of being moved by the other, of letting ourselves be exposed to them. As Beauvoir writes in the Sade essay:

Through this feeling of disturbance [*trouble*], existence is grasped in oneself and in the other as at once subjectivity and passivity; through this ambiguous unity, the two partners merge: each is delivered from its self-presence and attains an immediate communication with the other.⁴⁴

The erotic encounter can reveal who we are: both subjectivity and flesh, and profoundly dependent upon one another. Sade, however, is apparently deprived of that disturbance or vertigo that the flesh of the other can provoke in us. Due to this "isolationism"—using his own neologism—that Beauvoir sees as the key to Sade's eroticism, he must try to reach the other through proxies: feelings that accordingly have to be intense.⁴⁵ Now, if Sade, or rather his libertine hero, discloses the radical dependency of embodied subjectivity upon the Other, is this sufficient for an ethics? In particular if the other remains out of reach for him?

⁴¹ Beauvoir (1976b, p. 82/2011, p. 345).

⁴² Beauvoir (1976b, p. 121/2011, p. 376).

⁴³ Cf. Beauvoir (1976b, p. 183/2011, p. 422).

⁴⁴ Beauvoir (1955, p. 35/2012, pp. 59–60).

⁴⁵ Beauvoir (1955, pp. 34–35/2012, pp. 59–60).

5 The woman who “laughs reputation to scorn”

While Bergoffen argued that Beauvoir’s Sade refused to recognize the other (and ambiguity), Butler emphasized that he was “only disputing the existence of an a priori relationship between oneself and an Other.”⁴⁶ Still, the other is never really attained, and sexual violence is an effort to compensate for this incapacity. On Butler’s interpretation, Beauvoir cannot accept that the Other remains unknowable in the Sadean framework.⁴⁷ These readings are not unfounded, but they do not, to my mind, do full justice to the ambiguous position of this essay. Its title, “Faut-il brûler Sade?,” is a paraphrase of the heading of a survey made a few years earlier, in 1946, by the communist newsweekly *Action*: “Faut-il brûler Kafka?” This inquiry was intended as an attack upon the pessimistic, “noire” literature, judged counterproductive to the socialist cause, but it got an almost unanimous response in the negative by French intellectuals. The title was taken up, ironically, in the beginning of the 1950s by some of Sartre’s friends in the newspaper *Combat*, as “Faut-il brûler Sartre?,” in defense of the philosopher against the pernicious attacks he was subject to at the time. Thus, the title of Beauvoir’s essay incontestably connotes the support of a controversial author.

Although Bergoffen is aware of the title’s history, she puts a lot of weight on Beauvoir’s qualification of Sade as a sexual “pervert” and thus someone whose sexuality should be “condemned.”⁴⁸ But as Butler rightly remarks, it is far from evident that Beauvoir is approving of this description rather than simply citing it—an interpretation that is confirmed both by the square quotes employed by Beauvoir and by a comparison with her style in for example *The Second Sex*, which often ironically repeats the terms commonly used to qualify women.⁴⁹ In this essay, Beauvoir gives the impression that she actually *likes* Sade. There is something about his writings that attracts her (and this is probably why some feminists were outraged by the essay).⁵⁰ One reason for the sympathy of her reading is certainly that she in him sees a symptom of the more general pathology that *The Second Sex* diagnoses: the isolatism is the repercussion of the societal order in a sensitive individual—in a similar way that the female libertine and courtesan resorted to the only option available to a talented woman of a certain epoch, who did not want to live subordinate to the norms of patriarchal society.

⁴⁶ Butler (2003, p. 183).

⁴⁷ For Butler, this doesn’t undermine the importance of the ethical question opened up here (Butler, 2003, p. 187).

⁴⁸ Bergoffen (1997, p. 118). Even the title of the chapter analysing the Sade essay is “Perversions.” Of course, Bergoffen characterizes the perversion in question as a refusal of the ambiguity revealed by sexuality and the erotic, but it is hard to avoid the pejorative connotations of this term, that appears in some inflection at every other page of the chapter (cf. Bergoffen 1997, p. 119, p. 120, p. 123, p. 130, p. 134, p. 137).

⁴⁹ Butler (2003, p. 176).

⁵⁰ Besides the confusions that are often made between Sade’s writings and himself, or, more precisely, between the theses pleaded by his protagonists and his own values. I will come back to this question below.

Yet other reasons may be found on close reading. In *The Second Sex*, for example, Beauvoir presents Sade's Juliette (in *Juliette, or Vice Amply Rewarded*, 1797), or his virgin Eugénie of *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1795), as women who aspire to an affirmation of their sexual desire, who "give themselves to the male in all possible ways, but for their own pleasure."⁵¹ What Sade's detractors seem to miss is that more often than not, woman is presented in his work as equal to man, with freedom and the right to decide over her own body and sexuality. As Mme de Saint-Ange, the sexual educator of young Eugénie, calls out, "Fuck, Eugénie, fuck, my angel; your body is your own, yours alone, and in all the world there is but yourself who have the right to take pleasure in it and make others take pleasure in it as you see fit."⁵² Eugénie screams and faints with pleasure, "discharges" repeatedly, and comes to reject the moral values she has been brought up with: decency, purity, virtue. In openly enjoying the treatment, Sade's heroine protests against the patriarchal logic that Beauvoir denounces in *The Second Sex*: she is not ashamed of her flesh, but affirms it; she is the happiest when, in Dolmancé's words, she "defies every prejudice and [...] laughs reputation to scorn."⁵³

Thus, Sade's women threaten the myth of the eternal feminine, and the heroine who tries the hardest to conform with that ideal, Justine, is punished for her chastity in such multitudinous ways that the effect is comical; perhaps in no other text is Sade's usage of the hyperbole as a rhetorical figure as evident as here. If *Justine, or The Misfortunes of the Virtue* (1791)—a parody of Samuel Richardson's moralistic novel *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*, from 1740—was for Beauvoir a "revelation," this ridiculing of the ideal of chastity for women was doubtless an important motive.⁵⁴ Now, if many of Sade's heroines unquestionably take great pleasure in the libertine activities, the mutuality Beauvoir advocates elsewhere to enable the blooming of female eroticism, is "a reciprocal generosity of body and soul on the basis of an immediate erotic attraction."⁵⁵ Yet, one would be hard-pressed to claim that any of Sade's women or even the most prosperous of concubines had attained a situation where such a reciprocal relationship might be established. So if some of Sade's women manage to transcend their objectification and affirm their freedom as well as their flesh, it seems to be at the expense of an authentic connection with the other.

6 Sade and the "serious man"

In what sense, then, can Sade be an ethical model for Beauvoir? Here we must go back to the argument of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. While the basis of women's subjugation was described in *The Second Sex* as our tendency to flee from the ambiguity of our condition, in identifying, or finding ourselves identified, with either pure

⁵¹ Beauvoir (1976b, pp. 186–187/2011, p. 424).

⁵² Sade (1998, pp. 37–38/1965, p. 221).

⁵³ Sade (1998, p. 168/1965, p. 355).

⁵⁴ Beauvoir (1963, p. 262).

⁵⁵ Beauvoir (1976b, p. 190/2011, p. 427).

transcendence or pure immanence, this idea was formulated in the earlier essay in terms of an ambiguity of meaning and of values. Confronted with our freedom, we can either try to escape from the anxiety it provokes, losing ourselves in the world, or take it upon ourselves that we are free, and that the meaning of our existence must incessantly be conquered.⁵⁶ This implies that every choice I make must find its own justification, rather than rely upon an existing system of values.

Nothing is more difficult, indeed, and for the most part we adopt the position of the serious man (“*l’homme du sérieux*”), presupposing that the principles are given once and for all, that the values of religion, traditional society, or our class are absolute and cannot be questioned. An authentic moral attitude, on the other hand, requires that we face our liberty and the fact that we are the source of all values. However, the source is precisely *we*, that is, “the plurality of concrete, singular human beings,” not my own isolated ego.⁵⁷ In other words, to be ethical in the existentialist sense does not imply to “boldly forg[e one’s] own private ethic,” but quite the reverse: assuming my freedom presupposes the realization that it is conditional upon the freedom of other people.⁵⁸ An ethics can never be private: only together with others am I the source of all values. Yet, how do we attain this attitude? Or—if there can be no end to our struggle, since the idea that an ethics could be accomplished once and for all is precisely the delusion of the serious person—how do we strive for it? Beauvoir gives no definite answer, but she manifestly sees our constantly renewed effort to assume our ambiguity to imply the exhortation to fight for the emancipation of other people. In certain cases, the oppression is so deep-rooted that the subjugated do not even realize that they have another option, and it is necessary to struggle against that mystification as well. In those cases, the slow political work mostly advocated in *The Second Sex* may not be adequate, and instead we must help the oppressed to rise in rebellion.⁵⁹

It is worth mentioning in this context that the existentialist ethics Beauvoir gives an outline to in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, is not normative so much as a *Grundlegung* or groundwork of morals: she elaborates the ontological presuppositions for the very possibility of an ethics.⁶⁰ Against that backdrop, it is clear that Beauvoir’s remarks on Sade concern the bearings of his ideas on understanding the ontological conditions of human existence, as we saw earlier. In other words, in examining forms of eroticism that amply transgress society’s norms, his works reveal the profoundly existential role of sexuality as well as its political possibilities. However, if Sade was further an ethical model of sorts for Beauvoir, could he be inserted as a concrete illustration of the last stage in the progression of moral types that Beauvoir depicts in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*? The ethical fault of the five character types—the

⁵⁶ Beauvoir (2003, p. 160/1976c, p. 129).

⁵⁷ Beauvoir (2003, p. 24/1976c, p. 17).

⁵⁸ Quote from Singleton (2011, p. 468). The misunderstanding that the existentialist sense of authenticity links morality to solipsistic life choices, is successfully dismissed by Cohen Shabot and Menschenfreund (2008).

⁵⁹ A persistent theme of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

⁶⁰ In the title of the English translation (1976c), the important qualification *pour une*, “towards an,” (ethics of ambiguity) has unfortunately been left out.

sub-man, the serious man, the nihilist, the adventurer and the passionate man—consisted at root in their failure to acknowledge others as “genuinely free subjects.”⁶¹ How can someone who believes that we can never know the other rise above these types as an exemplar?

In order to answer this question, we must first ask: which Sade are we referring to? Who is the “Sade” in the title? With Butler's typical aptitude for finding puzzles in the seemingly self-evident, she remarks that it is “an incendiary title in more ways than one” and goes on to evoke not only the historical contexts of book burnings, but also the burning of people.⁶² Is it, then, Sade himself that should be burned—at least in effigy? Strictly speaking there is no real ambiguity in this formula, as the name is used in a standard metonymical way of referring to an author's work. However, Beauvoir professes to be interested in the very relation between Sade the “sexual pervert” and Sade the author, and even if she is aware of the importance not to confuse Sade's fictional fantasies with what we may claim to know of his life, it is not always clear which Sade she refers to.⁶³ This equivocation comes forth in Butler's remark about the title.

In a recent article, Lode Lauwaert has therefore distinguished three perspectives in Beauvoir's essay, with three corresponding forms of sadistic enjoyment: firstly, the biographical, where Sade himself is in focus and enjoyment consists in pleasurable sensations; secondly, the perspective of Sade's literary oeuvre and an important element of his life, his imprisonment, as the motivation behind it; Lauwaert argues that the enjoyment here comes from transgressing the moral law. Then thirdly, the perspective of Sade's work as not fully conditioned by his imprisonment (and thus by his life), where Lauwaert unearths an enjoyment related to the sadist's *apathy*: he enjoys the fact that he acts “independently of any involvement,” and thus “in absolute freedom.”⁶⁴ On Lauwaert's interpretation, this form of enjoyment is a literary projection of a dream that Sade cannot realize in everyday life.

I believe that Lauwaert is on to something important here, not only in the aim to sort out Beauvoir's various perspectives on Sade's life and work but in particular in discerning different ways that she approaches the *relation* between his personal life and work, said to be the focus of her essay. While I disagree that Beauvoir should have thought that life could ever determine a literary work, I think it is important to see that it is Sade as a writer of literary fiction that is mainly at stake here. The “dream” of the apathic sadist is a stage in the dialectic she describes, but, I maintain, not the endpoint. Further, his freedom is not argued to be “absolute”—if it was, the sadist would find no enjoyment in his acts, as Beauvoir points out, quoting Sade: “The libertine ‘would have to be pitied if he acted upon an inert object that felt nothing’.”⁶⁵ Neither is the victim reduced to a pure object—even Justine, as Karen Green justly remarks, “who is used, abused, raped and imprisoned never loses her

⁶¹ Arp (2001, p. 64).

⁶² Butler (2003, p. 168).

⁶³ Beauvoir (1955, p. 12/2012, p. 45).

⁶⁴ Lauwaert (2014, p. 172).

⁶⁵ Beauvoir (1955, p. 36/2012, pp. 69–61).

sense of self [...], she dies at the end of the novel, but she dies having retained her integrity.”⁶⁶

6.1 Crime is good

Beauvoir’s argument starts with the insight that Sade, due to his incapacity to be *touched* (“*troublé*”) by the other—to have that privileged experience where a unity with the other and with oneself as freedom and flesh can be realized—has recourse to cruelty in order to reach for the other. To that end, however, the victim must choose her subjugation freely, and this is a feat that is hard to obtain in the real world.⁶⁷ Therefore, literature becomes the demoniac act that can fulfil Sade’s eroticism, and accomplish his effort at liberation. Sade’s fictional system is no simple solution, however. The Sadean heroes are marked by a “satanic” eroticism given to them by Nature, not God, and this nature does not impose its rules upon them: if they take pleasure out of cruelty, it must also be a matter of choice. And if it is a choice, it cannot be determined by the sensations obtained. Thus, the mature Sadean libertine is no longer in need of those violent emotions in order to “experience the truth of his singular existence”: apathy is the guarantee that the act is free.⁶⁸ Here, I am in agreement with Lauwaert.

Nevertheless, the libertine devoted to cruelty in a thoroughly evil nature hardly seems to be free; he simply follows the natural order: “if nature consents to everything, then the worst devastations [...] fall into indifference.”⁶⁹ For this reason, Beauvoir writes, crime must be *good* in the Sadean system: a virtuous society would lead to stagnation and immobility, so crime serves nature. It also serves the criminal, in his effort to attain the hidden truth of the world, beyond the banality and mystifications of the society he lives in. This leads to the conclusion that the Other is nothing: “The neighbor is nothing to me,” Beauvoir quotes Sade, without being convinced by this position, that contradicts “Sade’s living attitude”—an interesting remark that I will come back to.⁷⁰ She observes: “it is strikingly evident (*il saute aux yeux*)” that, as was argued earlier, the libertine can derive no pleasure from torturing a pure object; the victim and the torturer must have something in common. What Sade rejects, then, is a kind of relation between me and the other that would be given “a priori,” and that would determine my conduct. This was also Butler’s point, although she concluded that the other remained unknowable for Sade. Beauvoir continues:

He does not deny the possibility of establishing [a relation between me and the other]; and if he refuses the other an ethical recognition founded on the false notions

⁶⁶ Green (2000, p. 75).

⁶⁷ For reasons of simplicity, I follow the French in referring to the libertine tyrant as “he” and the victim as “she” (victim, *la victime*, is grammatically of feminine gender in French). As already mentioned (footnote 23), these positions can be occupied by any gender in Sade.

⁶⁸ Beauvoir (1955, p. 78/2012, p. 87).

⁶⁹ Beauvoir (1955, p. 80/2012, p. 89).

⁷⁰ Beauvoir (1955, p. 83/2012, pp. 90–91).

of reciprocity and universality, it is in order to give himself the authority to decisively [*concrètement*] break the carnal barriers that isolate consciousnesses.⁷¹

In other words, it is possible for Sade to establish a relation with the other, and what he denies is the false morality of his contemporaries; he needs to erase this morality in order to break the barriers that isolate us. Those barriers are carnal, they belong to the flesh, and the barriers must be broken in concrete terms (“*concrètement*”), by inflicting pain on the other. But can they be broken, on Beauvoir's interpretation of Sade, without at the same time breaking our very relation to the other's consciousness? This was denied by Bergoffen, Butler and Lauwaerts. I disagree: Beauvoir continues her argument describing how the libertine tyrant tries to penetrate the victim's universe, thrilled by the fact that he is the author of her ordeals; his goal is to make the victim “manifest her freedom in her cries or her prayers.”⁷² This does not always succeed, of course, and the victim might even get killed. But sometimes the tyrant gets what he wants: her recognition of her own destiny in his freedom: “Then she is united with him by the tightest of bonds, they form a veritable couple.”⁷³

Further, the tyrant's ultimate goal is an even stronger union with his victim, the situation where she uses her freedom to convert her suffering to pleasure. Beauvoir writes: “Torturer and victim recognize themselves as fellow creatures in astonishment, esteem and indeed admiration.”⁷⁴ Thus, the other *can* be attained in Sade's universe, in a relation that also involves pleasure (not simply apathy), as in the liaison between Noirceul and Juliette; “both feel confirmed in themselves through the presence of an *alter ego*, it is an absolution and an exaltation.”⁷⁵ This is the dream projected by Sade, rather than the apathic, absolute subject.

7 The ethics of “Sade's living attitude”

Now, if we accept that “Sade” can attain the other through cruelty and pain, how can this become an ethics? Beauvoir gives no clear answer to this question, and it is almost as if she retracts her statement that Sade created “an ethics of authenticity,” when in the following paragraph she points out that for most people his rebellion represents a luxury.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, there are two related replies in the essay. Firstly, to recall the remark about “Sade's living attitude” above: Beauvoir was interested in *the relation* between Sade the flawed individual and Sade the author, whose writings have the potential to reveal fundamental existential structures. When contrasting the system of values expressed by some of Sade's libertine heroes and “Sade's living attitude,” it is possible that Beauvoir refers to Sade's own resistance to societal

⁷¹ Beauvoir (1955, p. 83/2012, p. 91).

⁷² Beauvoir (1955, p. 84/2012, p. 91).

⁷³ Beauvoir (1955, p. 85/2012, p. 91).

⁷⁴ Beauvoir (1955, p. 85/2012, p. 92).

⁷⁵ Beauvoir (1955, p. 85/2012, p. 92).

⁷⁶ Beauvoir (1955, p. 87/2012, p. 93).

values—in refusing to kill and take revenge when he had power to do so, and in composing works that defied the morality of his contemporaries. (This was, I take it, Butler’s view.) However, I believe that her remark has a more general aim, given that it is immediately followed by a discussion of the relation that the libertine can establish to his victim.

In other words, I understand the “living attitude” to refer to the whole that is constituted, on the one hand by Sade’s literary oeuvre in its entirety—whose significance is not reducible to certain theses pronounced there—and on the other Sade the writer.⁷⁷ In fact, Beauvoir is more critical of Sade as a writer than many other commentators, but he fascinates her because he is “passionately attached” to his concrete experiences, and because of the way that he transformed them into literature: putting sexuality at the center of a cruel parody of society.⁷⁸ This implies that his challenge of society’s values in the name of concrete experience, *through literature*, is the ethical moment for Beauvoir. It was precisely in writing that he assumed his deviant sexuality and transformed it into an ethics.

One example of this transformation is found in Sade’s propensity to coprophilia, the craving for ugliness and filth, for the vile [*vilénie*]: “Beauty is too simple” for Sade, we grasp it with the intellect and can peacefully remain within our separate consciousness; vileness on the contrary forces the individual to assume his carnality:

... the man who has commerce with filth, like the one who wounds or is wounded, realizes himself as flesh; it is in its wretchedness and its humiliation that flesh becomes an abyss where the spirit is engulfed and where the separated individuals are re-joined ...⁷⁹

In this description, the eroticism portrayed by Sade is not characterized as a failure as much as a solution to a miserable situation: the disconnected individuals are re-joined in an abyss of flesh. Contrary to Bergoffen’s claim that Beauvoir’s Sade “recoils before” old age, ugliness and stench, they *attract* him in a similar manner as cruelty: they have the capacity to reveal a person as flesh, even “realize him as flesh,” and thus bring him closer to another human being.⁸⁰ In other words, Sade is an ethical model in that he assumes his “anomalies,” he claims responsibility for them, in transforming them into a literary work.⁸¹ Every so often in Beauvoir’s essay, “Sade,” rather than being a simple metonym, stands for this whole where writer and work is integrated.⁸² Secondly, “Sade” outlines an ethics in that the sexuality he portrays is *social*: it is a collective adventure, in his life but especially in his writings; he likes

⁷⁷ An oeuvre that includes not only *The 120 Days in Sodom*, with its extravagant range of depravations, but also the epistolary novel *Aline et Valcour*, including the story of a socialist, egalitarian utopia.

⁷⁸ Thomas, for example, compares reading Sade to listening to Bach or Mozart (1994, p. 12). Beauvoir (1955, p. 87/2012, p. 93).

⁷⁹ Beauvoir (1955, p. 41/2012, pp. 63–64). In the translation, “the man who has commerce with filth” is rendered as the abyss where spirit is engulfed (“in his wretchedness and humiliation *he* becomes an abyss ...,” Beauvoir 2012, p. 63, my emphasis). But the French unambiguously reads, “l’homme qui a commerce avec la saleté [...] se réalise comme chair; *celle-ci* devient un gouffre où s’engloutit l’esprit ...”: *celle-ci* (“the latter”) can only refer to [*la*] *chair* (“flesh”).

⁸⁰ Bergoffen (1997, p. 123).

⁸¹ Beauvoir (1955, p. 12/2012, p. 45).

⁸² The idea that an oeuvre should be interpreted through a combination of textual, psychological and biographical analyses had been advanced by, for example, Beauvoir’s contemporary Merleau-Ponty: “Must we understand a doctrine through its manifest content or through the psychology of the author and

to watch and be watched, and sex is conducted in groups to the extent that, as Beauvoir remarks, “solitary pleasures” are practiced “alone with one partner.”⁸³ She also points out the doubling of sexual scenes in his work, when they are, for example, described both by the narrator and a protagonist retelling the acts to others: “through representations” and contemplation of ourselves in the eyes of others, “the confusion of the for-itself and the for-others” can finally be accomplished.⁸⁴

8 Sade's ethical night

How does “Sade” in this larger sense fit into the analysis of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and how does he relate to the project in *The Second Sex*? In the former work, it is not obvious what character is supposed to follow the dialectically related failures of the adventurer and the passionate man, or if there is one. Towards the end of her discussion, Beauvoir suggests that the artist or writer can attain an authentic level of existence; at least if they do not claim to attain an absolute reality through their art, but manage to articulate the continuous unveiling of being that defines human existence.⁸⁵ Indeed, we know that for Beauvoir philosophy and literature were intimately related, and that philosophical ideas should for her be revealed from the heart of life rather than be constructed as a system, so that the “subjective, singular, and dramatic character” of metaphysics could be accounted for.⁸⁶ A “*moraliste*” in French is an author whose reflections upon morality are descriptive, written in a discontinuous, often aphoristic style, in the fashion of the perhaps most famous one, sixteenth century philosopher Michel de Montaigne. One reason for Beauvoir's labelling Sade a moralist is that he, rather than presenting a moral treatise, incessantly unsettles established moral principles. In that sense, he is closer to Nietzsche or Kierkegaard, who we know influenced Beauvoir. Herself a master of irony, Beauvoir must have felt a certain affinity with the manner that values are turned upside down in Sade's imaginary universe.⁸⁷

This is corroborated towards the end of the essay, where Beauvoir writes:

In the solitude of the dungeons, Sade realized an ethical night analogous to the intellectual night Descartes wrapped himself in; he did not make a self-evident truth burst forth, but at least he contested all the too-easy answers.⁸⁸

Needless to say, Sade was not exactly a feminist, and if his characters preach the emancipation of women, they may contend on the next page that woman is born

Footnote 82 (continued)

the events of his life? We must in fact understand in all of these ways at once; everything has a sense ...” (2012, p. lxxxiii).

⁸³ Beauvoir (1955, p. 46/2012, p. 67).

⁸⁴ Beauvoir (1955, p. 47/2012, p. 67).

⁸⁵ Beauvoir (2003, pp. 87f./1976c, pp. 69f.).

⁸⁶ Beauvoir (2008, pp. 79–80/2004, p. 275).

⁸⁷ Beauvoir's irony is skilfully manifested in, for example, the introduction to *The Second Sex*.

⁸⁸ Beauvoir (1955, p. 89/2012, pp. 94–95).

merely for the pleasure of men. There is always an instability in his discourse, where the irony contains a kernel of sincerity, and wallowing in cruelty takes the form of social criticism.⁸⁹ After all, libertinism was not the invention of Sade, but rather the privilege of aristocracy in a society where ordinary people had few rights: noble birth and wealth served as protection and permitted the use of workers and prostitutes as toys.⁹⁰

Thus, his writings must be put into context (and this that was certainly not unknown by Beauvoir): during the *Ancien Régime*, jurisdiction was arbitrary and the use of *lettres de cachet* a common means for the wealthy to get rid of some importunate or rebellious family member, political adversary or simply an annoying prostitute.⁹¹ This is the society portrayed in Sade's work, where the characters "declare aloud what remained unspoken in the system of elitist permissiveness practiced during the *Ancien Régime*."⁹² Sade's debauchees are people of prominence and power: noblemen, priests and monks, senior officials, chancellors, court clerks, and so on, whereas the men and women they take advantage of are of the people: masons, porters, servants and prostitutes. He brings the glaring inequalities and injustices of this society into the open, but doesn't take side with anyone: the values of the people—religion, virtue—are ridiculed, too.

For this reason, Sade made himself unacceptable to everyone and the grounds for his incarceration were not so much the deeds of actual debauchery that he had had the opportunity to perform outside of prison, but firstly, the dissatisfaction of his mother-in-law, Mme de Montreuil, who took advantage of the *lettres de cachet*; and secondly, Sade's refusal to conform to the rules of society, in revealing the hypocrisy and corruption of the nobility. Moreover, society was changing: the monarchical system was falling apart, and with that the privileges of the higher castes. Yet as an old atheist aristocrat, fiercely opposed to death penalty, Sade is not adapted to the new society either.⁹³ Under those circumstances, Sade becomes a "figure of contestation."⁹⁴ He upsets all societal norms, and, in particular, he does more than "unmask" patriarchal mystifications such as the myth of the eternal feminine that Beauvoir identifies in *The Second Sex*: woman as "the perfect intermediary

⁸⁹ One Beauvoir scholar who has taken notice of Sade as a writer employing techniques of irony and parody, is Guilmette, in her fine essay on Butler's reading of Beauvoir's Sade (2011). Guilmette develops Bergoffen's notion of a Beauvoirian "ethics of reciprocity," and is more focused on a criticism of Butler than I am here.

⁹⁰ Thomas (1994) describes the social context that Sade grew up in, and the aristocratic manners he witnessed as a child: such as the count of Charolais, amusing himself by firing at the workers repairing his roof, or marquis de Chimènes, who as punishment of a lackey's inefficiency stabbed him with his sword. As a matter of course, prostitutes at this time had no rights whatsoever, and were entirely at their protector's mercy.

⁹¹ Michel Foucault (1994) gives an illustrative account of this practice in "La vie des hommes infâmes," from 1977. This also means that the fact of Sade's imprisonment in itself proves nothing at all about his culpability, contrary to what Bergoffen suggests (1997, p. 118).

⁹² Thomas (1994, p. 100), my translation.

⁹³ Thomas, (1994, pp. 170f.).

⁹⁴ To borrow an expression from Éric Marty (2011, p. 132), who refers, however, only to Foucault's position in his early period on Sade.

between nature that is foreign to man and the peer who is too identical to him.”⁹⁵ To uphold that myth, woman is admonished to feign modesty, to pose as a “prestigious object”⁹⁶; she will need a man to be revealed to herself, but can be free only in subordinating herself to his desires. Her own sexual desire, her “trouble,” will against that backdrop become a “shameful abdication.”⁹⁷ Man, on the other hand, seems to have attained the perfect equilibrium between transcendence and flesh, with woman bolstering any potential conflict.

In Sade's universe, by contrast, that myth is crushed to pieces: a virgin is exhorted to enjoy as many men as possible and virtue is punished: “one must expect nothing but calamity when [...] one wishes to be the only virtuous person in a completely corrupt society,” as Mme Dubois tells Justine/Thérèse in *Justine*.⁹⁸ Contrary to established norms, Sade insists time and again that procreation is not the goal of intercourse: a considerable advantage of “sodomy”—the greatest act of pleasure for Sade's heroes—is that it relieves the woman of worries about contraception.⁹⁹ Further, religious values are ridiculed, and no ethical principles pass the scrutiny made in the eyes of nature: “everything is permitted” if we deny the authority of the social institutions that uphold these principles.¹⁰⁰

Butler concluded her article on Beauvoir's Sade essay with a statement on Beauvoir's “ethical question”: As discussed above, Beauvoir is not proposing a normative ethics with standards for action, but rather an inquiry into who we are. In a sense, it is through his shortcomings that Sade reveals our ontological dependency on the other. Butler writes that Sade's “conduct” also reveals—and this is Beauvoir's “ethical question” for her—something important about “how we might come to know the full range of human possibility.”¹⁰¹ This rather enigmatic remark is not elaborated by Butler, but can be related to one of the most interesting passages in Bergoffen's book, which suggests that Sade, in destabilizing the symbolic order through his writings, “may be more radical and more insightful than Beauvoir.”¹⁰² Even though this doesn't prevent Bergoffen from condemning Sade for his “perversion of the erotic,” she touches upon a pivotal aspect of Sade's writings: their transgressive character, their *queerness*. As described above, the typical Sadean heroine is not a passive victim, and, in the words of another writer fascinated by the eighteenth century author, Angela Carter, “Sade declares himself unequivocally for the right of women to fuck.”¹⁰³ Such a reversal of values must take place “in exile” from the human world, where gender norms and finally gender as such start to dissolve. In the Sadean castles, not only do women make love with women and men, and

⁹⁵ Beauvoir (1976a, p. 239/2011, p. 164).

⁹⁶ Beauvoir (1976b, p. 129/2011, p. 381).

⁹⁷ Beauvoir (1976b, p. 166/2011, p. 409).

⁹⁸ Sade (1995, p. 364/1965, p. 713).

⁹⁹ This is one of the lessons that Mme de Saint-Ange gives to Eugénie in *Philosophy in the Bedroom*.

¹⁰⁰ As Dostoyevsky famously wrote one century later.

¹⁰¹ Butler (2003, p. 187).

¹⁰² Bergoffen (1997, p. 125).

¹⁰³ Carter (1979, p. 27).

men with men and women; women also *fuck* men: by means of a giant clitoris or a dildo; or they masturbate with a mummified penis removed from its owner. Nothing stays in its place in this “infertility festival,” where a form of equality is sometimes obtained that disturbs us still today.¹⁰⁴ As Carter suggests, perhaps “the period in which women fuck aggressively, tyrannously and cruelly will be a necessary stage” in the progress towards equality.¹⁰⁵ It was in this respect that Sade was an ethical model for Beauvoir: while the position of man in *The Second Sex* is without flaws, and his freedom disconnected from morality, in the Sade essay we find a male type that is wanting, whose sexuality is considered abnormal, and revolts against society’s norms. He thereby reveals the inherent—while not innocuous—potential of sexuality to transform society. Thus, freedom is brought back in connection with ethics and the possibility is opened up that symmetry between the sexes can be restored.

In this ethical night where all values are contested—just as all beliefs were subjected to doubt in the “intellectual night” of Descartes—the only certainty that remains is that individuals are separated, but from the very depths of their singularity in need of one another to understand themselves. Sade helped Beauvoir to recognize what was but intimated in *The Second Sex*: that sexuality can be a force that is stronger than cultural structures as well as the requisites of the “species,” and that authentic freedom can be fulfilled, not only through a “positive action in the human world,” as she proposes in that work, but also through the upheaval of norms—patriarchal norms included—played out in the imaginary realm of literature.¹⁰⁶

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¹⁰⁴ Carter (1979, p. 145).

¹⁰⁵ Carter (1979, p. 27).

¹⁰⁶ Beauvoir (1976b, p. 593/2011, p. 734).

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