

Kant with Sade, Lacan with Adorno: "Enjoying bodies," the Ram and the Law.

Jean-Michel Rabaté

My point of departure will be a passage in Lacan's Encore Seminar in which he unpacks the first "sentence" he had given his audience, or rather written for them on the blackboard, during their first meeting. Lacan had written: "Jouissance of the Other," of the Other with a capital O, "of the body of the Other who symbolizes the Other, the sign of love." A week later, Lacan returned to this dense formula, adding that it suggests the notion of an "enjoying substance". As Nestor Braunstein has shown, Lacan's main concept, his real "signature" is less the invention of the objet petit a than his bifurcated translation of Freud's Lust into plaisir on the one hand and jouissance on the other. Here is the passage:

"Isn't it precisely what psychoanalytic experience presupposes? -- the substance of the body, on the condition that it is defined only as that which enjoys itself (se jouit). That is, no doubt, a property of the living body, but we don't know what it means to be alive except for the following fact, that a body is something that enjoys itself. [or: can be enjoyed, cela se jouit].

It enjoys itself only by "corporizing" the body in a signifying way. That implies something other than the partes extra partes of extended substance. As is emphasized admirably by the kind of Kantian that Sade was, one can only enjoy a part of the Other's body, for the simple reason that one has never seen a body completely wrap itself around the Other's body, to the point of surrounding and phagocytizing it. That is why we must confine ourselves to simply giving it a little squeeze, like that, taking a forearm or anything else -- ouch!

Enjoying (jouir) has the fundamental property that it is, ultimately, one person's body that enjoys a part of the Other's body. //alternative translation offered by Fink in a footnote: "that is the body of the one that enjoys a part of the body of the Other.//" (S XX, 23)

This passage poses several problems, among which the least is not the surprising fact that Lacan seems to use the concept of the Big Other as endowed with a body. As a baffled Fink notes p. 4, there seems to be a typographical error in the writing of the first "sentence" -- unless we understand how one body can symbolize the Other....

Another problem is the tricky reflexive expression of "un corps cela se jouit" meaning both "a body enjoys itself" and "a body is there available for your enjoyment". We have thus moved rapidly from auto-eroticism to the Sadian dogma of the availability of every body for every body's limitless pleasure... It is interesting to see how Lacan demonstrates the ambivalence by squeezing or pinching hard his own forearm. His "ouch!" (ouille!) stands as the only verifiable marker (a real Jakobsonian shifter, analogous to a personal pronoun) that he has a body, a body alive and kicking because it is capable of being enjoyed and of enjoying. It seems that it is crucial to grasp what a paradoxical "Kantian" such as Sade had seen in order to understand the fundamental issue of jouissance in its connection with the body.

1. The Sadism of the Law.

My first aim will thus be to return to Lacan's famous "Kant with Sade" essay with the idea of examining its philosophical genealogy. A number of critics have recently noticed that "Kant with Sade", written in 1963, owed a lot (although the debt was never acknowledged) to Adorno's and Horkheimer's ground breaking parallel between Kant and Sade in their jointly written *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944).

a) *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944).

The thesis of this essay jointly written in America by two refugees from the Frankfurt school is relatively simple. Kantian reason leads ineluctably to the calculating rationality of a totalitarian order. Its counterpart is the systematic mechanization of pleasures in Sade's perverse utopias. The *Critique of Practical Reason* stresses the autonomy and self-determination of the moral subject, and defines thereby the pure form of ethical action. This is how the philosophy of Enlightenment meets global capitalism with a vengeance: any human concern has to be ruled out, what matters is merely the conformity of Reason with its own laws, a Reason that must then appear abstract and devoid of any object. All "human" affects are pushed further away from an independent and all powerful Reason. Juliette is thus more logical than Kant when she draws the conclusions that Kant denies: the bourgeois order of society justifies crime, provided crime be regulated by a rationality that controls all activities and pleasures. The famous Sadean "apathy" functions thus like a good equivalent to Kantian "disinterestedness," both being underpinned by the "brutal efficiency" of the bourgeois conquest of the world.

The "right to enjoyment" includes logically an absolute extension of its field -- up to my right to enjoy the bodies of others, and to do with them as I like.

b) If it is conceivable, nevertheless, that Lacan never read *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), although he asserts in "Kant with Sade" that the link between the two contemporary thinkers had never been "noted, to our knowledge, as such", he might then merely owe his main insight to Freud's analysis of sadism and masochism. Freud's thesis in "The economic problem of masochism" (1924) is well-known. In this essay, in order to address the third type of masochism he calls "moral masochism", Freud presents Kant's "categorical imperative" as the best philosophical expression that can be given to the concept the "cruelty" of the super-ego. Here is the genesis he sketches:

"This super-ego is in fact just as much a representative of the id as of the outer world. It originated through the introjection into the ego of the first objects of the libidinal impulses in the id, namely, the two parents, by which process the relation to them was desexualized, that is underwent a deflection from direct sexual aims. Only in this way was it possible for the child to overcome the Oedipus-complex. Now the super-ego has retained essential features of the introjected persons, namely their power, their severity, their tendency to watch over and to punish. (...) The super-ego, the conscience at work in it, can then become harsh, cruel and inexorable against the ego which is in its charge. The categorical imperative of Kant is thus a direct inheritance from the Oedipus-complex."

A "perverse couple" is thus created: the sadism of the super-ego and the masochism of the ego go hand in hand, as with these "Russian character types" (is Freud thinking of the Wolfman, or of Dostoevsky's characters here?) who multiply "sinful acts" in order to be then punished by the sadistic conscience. Kant is thus clearly designated by Freud as the accomplice of Sade, precisely because their unlikely coupling poses all the problems associated with civilization's way of dealing with aggression. Freud shows that it is the renunciation to instinctual gratification that comes first, and then creates morality, not the reverse as is often assumed.

c) Before Freud, Hegel's critique of Kant's version of morality in "The Spirit of Christianity" (1798–99), provides an early negative appraisal of Kantian morality. For Hegel, Kant appears as the modern successor of Jewish law-givers like Abraham and Moses who "exercised their dominion mercilessly with the most revolting and harshest tyranny, (...) utterly extirpating all life; for it is only over death that unity hovers". A real stranger to everything including love, Abraham takes the whole world as his opposite, and he creates the picture of a terrifying God who is also a merciless stranger and the Master of a people he reduces to religious slavery. Hegel agrees with Freud in that he sees Moses as more Egyptian than the Egyptians, and the founder of an "oriental" system of absolute domination: "Moses sealed his legislation with an oriental beautiful threat of the loss of all pleasure and all fortune. He brought before the slavish spirit the image of itself, namely, the terror of physical force." Hegel's "Spirit of Christianity" thus sketches the theological genesis of the castrating Father, anticipating on Moses and Monotheism by some hundred and fifty years.

Similarly, Kant is accused by Hegel of importing a Jewish formalism or "positivity" of the law into philosophy; For Hegel, Kant's misinterprets the Christian commandment "Love God above everything and thy neighbor as thyself" as a "command requiring respect for a law which commands love". This "reduction" of "love" to a "command" is a great perversion according to Hegel "because in love all thought of duties vanish." In these early texts, Hegel extols Jesus for being able to raise love above any type of morality. Jesus does not praise reverence for the laws but announces a self-annulling love, a love that "exhibits that which fulfills the law but annuls it as law and so is something higher than obedience to law and makes law superfluous." (p. 212)

Lacan systematically echoes this anti-Kantian feeling, and one find traces as late as the "Etourdit" text of 1972, in which he talks of "the inept topology that Kant bodied forth by establishing firmly the bourgeois who cannot imagine anything but transcendence in esthetics and dialectics." He adds that "as soon as meanings are freed... Kant's statements lose theirs", confessing that Sade's critique may not be much funnier than Kant's, but at least more logical!

As soon as one superimposes this critique of an oriental and Jewish slavery of the Spirit with Hegel's subsequent evocation of the Terror during the French Revolution in the Phenomenology of Spirit, the circle linking the universality of an absolute Law with Terror and Death seen as the Absolute Master seems completed. Whether inspired by Kojève's masterful neo-Marxist reconstruction of Hegel's early system, or by Hyppolite's more balanced assessment (Lacan owes Hyppolite's groundbreaking commentary on the Phenomenology of Spirit the idea of Desire as "Desire of the Other"), Lacan remains a Hegelian in his vision of morality. If Sade can express what is hidden behind Kant's law, namely the cruelty of the Other underpinning the Law, then what remains to be understood is the jouissance of the Other when it forces the subject to go beyond pleasure and the limits of the ego. Such a jouissance underlies Sade's works and goes beyond anything Kant may have to say about pleasure and displeasure in his second Critique.

Or, in other words, as this should have become obvious by now, Lacan's 1963 essay cannot be reduced to a psychoanalytic or philosophical critique of Kant's moral philosophy: the introduction of jouissance signals a theoretical excess, that will force us to return once more to Sade's parody of the Law.

2. Sade, sade, çade.

As Lacan recapitulates in Seminar XX, the main point of his article on "Kant with Sade" was to prove that "morality admits that it is Sade" (S XX, 87) -- which should not be heard just as in English ("a sad thing indeed"), but mediated through a variety of French idioms he details:

"You can write Sade however you like: either with a capital S, to render homage to the poor idiot who gave us interminable writings on that subject -- or with a lower-case s, for in the final analysis that's morality's own way of being agreeable (...) -- or, still better, you can write it as çade, since one must, after all, say that morality ends at the level of the id (ça), which doesn't go very far. Stated differently, the point is that love is impossible and the sexual relationship drops into the abyss of nonsense, which doesn't in any way diminish the interest we must have in the Other." (S XX, 87)

Despite the rather off-hand dismissal of the "poor idiot" (a term that ought to be carefully distinguished from *la bêtise* Lacan was addressing at the beginning of his Seminar, since such idiocy sends us back to the absolute "particularity" and insularity of a person, thus to Sade's forced masturbatory isolation), I would now like to try to assess Sade's impact on Lacan -- isn't he indeed too careful to dissociate himself from the "idiot"? couldn't this calculated aloofness be read as a trace of Lacan's own *bêtise* (or blind spots)?

Following upon the suggestion of a writer and thinker Lacan appreciated and quoted -- but to refute categorically his main thesis -- Pierre Klossowski, we could try, once more, to characterize Sade as "our neighbor" . Or we could follow Lacan's qualification: "But that Sade, himself, refuses to be my neighbor, is what needs to be recalled, not in order to refuse it to him in return, but in order to recognize the meaning of this refusal." In his essay, Klossowski stresses a point that tends to disappear too much from Lacan's essay -- that Sade was not merely a "pervert" or a monster but above all a writer. A boring and repetitive writer, for sure, but whose writings allow us to understand the crucial link between fantasy, the perverse imagination and the Law understood as the *jouissance* of the Other.

"The parallelism between the apathetic reiteration of acts and Sade's descriptive reiteration again establishes that the image of the act to be done is re-presented each time not only as though it had never been performed but also as though it had never been described. This reversibility of the same process inscribes the presence of nonlanguage in language; it inscribes a foreclosure of language by language." (SMN, p. 41). Sade's symptom is not "sadism" -- it is his writing, a writing that hesitates between the repetitive fantasy of outrage to a Mother Nature he abhors, and a literal questioning of the function of the big Other's *jouissance*. One should not, however, take Klossowski's concept of fore-closure as identical with Lacan's translation of Freudian *Verwerfung*; Sade is not a psychotic, he is not Schreber, although, like Schreber, he is above all a Schreiber...

The foreclosed language of Sade's fictions opens up onto the space of the outside in a curious and ironical pragmatism of fantasy. Sade's well-known irony, so visible in his letters from the Bastille to his wife, or better, his savage and disturbing humor, would thus ultimately question the position of the super-ego in any type of value-system. His writings cannot be reduced to mere fantasies since they keep examining the way fantasy is determined from the Outside by the Law. And, as a matter of fact, his sarcastic humor testifies to the division of the subject in the name of the super-ego (as Freud has pointed out very clearly in his book on Witz).

More recently, Monique David-Ménard has re-examined Lacan's confrontation of Kant with Sade in a new light, showing how Lacan misreads certain key elements of Kant's philosophy, erasing for instance the difference between knowledge and thought that is central to his Critiques. Lacan appears indeed as too Hegelian when he conflates Kant's notion of the Thing-in-itself (equals X) with the respect for the Law: both become unthinkable entities. She also points out Lacan's difficulties when he needs the Law of desire for Antigone and ultimately for the psychoanalyst. Like Klossowski, she would also suggest that Sade's works are not just a blueprint for male fantasy (the neurotic imagining himself as a pervert). Sade cunningly points out the dark side of humanitarian ethics when he posits the issue of man's universality in his relation to the unconditionality of the Law (even through a caricature of the Law). Respect or blasphemy both address the same underpinning of fantasy by the Law of Desire seen negatively as just the obscene *jouissance* of the Other.

I would like to suggest that one paradoxical consequence of Sade's subversion of the subject is that it ultimately opens up a new realm that can be identified with the domain of Ethics -- at least in the sense given to the term by Levinas. When Levinas discusses the thought of Martin Buber, he provides us with a short-hand recapitulation of the main themes he has been associated with. He stresses the need for an ethical leap out of metaphysics.

"In my own analyses, the approach to others is not originally in my speaking out to the other, but in my responsibility for him or her. That is the ethical relation. That responsibility is elicited, brought about by the face of the other person, described as a breaking of the plastic forms of the phenomenality of appearance; straightforwardness of the exposure to death, and an order issued to me not to abandon the other.... Responsibility for the other person, a responsibility neither conditioned nor measured by any free acts of which it would be the consequence. Gratuitous responsibility resembling that of a hostage, and going as far as taking the other's place, without requiring reciprocity. Foundation of the idea of fraternity and expiation for the other man. Here, then, contrary to Buber's I-Thou, there is no initial equality. (...) Ethical inequality: subordination to the other, original diacony: the "first person accusative" and not "nominative". Hence the profound truth of Dostoyevsky's Brothers Karamazov, often quoted: "We are all guilty of everything and everyone, towards everyone, and I more than all the others."

Levinas had already talked of such an "original diacony" -- in the sense of "being the servant of the other" in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*. We may note that the Greek term of *Diakonos* means both "servant", "attendant" but also "messenger", "ambassador", in fact anyone who "serves" in a public function. Like Sade, but with a radically ethical emphasis, Levinas teaches us that we are all "Hostages of the Other".

Levinas's non-metaphysical system of ethics stresses the primacy of the Other -- a capitalized Other that appears in the world through any "face" I happen to see and address. Isn't this congruent with the first ambiguity I had pointed out in Seminar XX, between the Other and the other, in the name of what the other's body can symbolize of the big Other? If Lacan is indeed collapsing the distinction between the other (as my neighbor) and the big Other (as Levinas does all the time), what repercussions will this have about the issue of the body on the one hand and about Ethics on the other?

Sade could allow us to criticize a certain type of ethical innocence in Levinas; after all, even a face can still be dissociated into teeth and a tongue that can be pulled out, a nose or ears that can be cut away, eyes that can be pierced, and so on! The Levinassian Face cannot blissfully ignore an always recurrent threat of dismemberment and disfiguring. On the other hand, Levinas could help us retrieve Adorno's point and expose in Sadism the perverted epistemophilia it hides. The Sadian libertine pretends to have reached a degree of impassability beyond horror because the subject believes he or she knows the truth about *jouissance*. However, as Levinas would suggest, the issue is not to know but to desire, or any knowledge of *jouissance* merely reproduces the illusions of the "non-dupes" who nevertheless err: *Les non-dupes errent ...* In spite of a vaunted knowledge of *jouissance*, we can now see the Libertine as just another Hostage of the Other. The perverse subject has to give himself or herself up completely in the name of the Other's *jouissance*, and is thus all the more the slave of this absolute *jouissance* -- ironically, just as the moment he or she thinks he is the Absolute Master. Desire seems to provide the only way out by preferring the darker (or more obscure, rather) path of ethical un-knowing as Levinas's Totality and Infinity shows through its "Phenomenology of Eros" and its detailed and compelling analyses of "*jouissance* and representation." These finally lead to the formula: "No knowledge, no power either" ("*Ni savoir, ni pouvoir*"). Is absolute passivity the best access to a truth of desire?

As this is a real question, it will have to remain without an answer. The pre-condition for a provisional answer might indeed be found in Kant's articulation of his three Critiques. Or a last caveat might be useful at this point, provided by a rare moment of humor in Kant, quoted by Freud.

Freud reminds us in his discussion of the Schreber case that Kant remains a good model for any theoretical elaboration. He asserts that only a "genetic" approach capable of understanding Schreber's "feminine attitude towards God" will make sense of Schreber's belief that he has to become a woman who will then be sexually abused by God and become the slave of God's jouissance. Before beginning his "Attempts at Interpretation" Freud concludes his first chapter by quoting Kant's famous Irish bull (a Viennese goat, in fact): "Or else our attempts at elucidating Schreber's delusions will leave us in the absurd position described in Kant's famous simile in the Critique of Pure Reason: -- we shall be like a man holding a sieve under a he-goat (Bock) while some one else milks it."

Freud refers to Kant's "On the Division of General Logic into analytic and dialectic" -- a section that opens with the momentous question: "What is truth?" As Kant shows, such a question is absurd, since it presupposes the universality of criteria of knowledge by which one could answer it. He adds:

"For if the question is in itself absurd and demands answers that are unnecessary, then it not only embarrasses the person raising it, but sometimes has the further disadvantage of misleading the incautious listener: it may prompt him to give absurd answers and to provide us with the ridiculous spectacle where (as the ancients said) one person milks the ram while the other holds a sieve underneath."

If indeed Freud has "succeed(ed) where the paranoiac had failed" by rewriting Schreber's system in a more coherent way, he may have failed where Kant's and Sade's systems have partly succeeded -- in their absurd and irrational praise of rationality. While it might be tempting to over-value Sade's testimony as that of a scape-goat of jouissance, the ancient simile used by Kant could also suggest that we too, post-Freudians that we are, grown all too wise to the universal function of phallic symbols, have milked the same ram or he-goat, while someone else, God, or maybe just our next-door neighbor, has been copulating with him -- but through a different sieve!

1. Jacques Lacan, Seminar XX On Feminine Sexuality. The limits of love

>and Knowledge 1972-1973, tr. Bruce Fink, (New York: Norton, 1998) p. 4.

>Henceforth S.XX followed by the page number.

>2. Nestor Braunstein, La Jouissance: Un Concept lacanien, (Paris: Point

>Hors Ligne, 1992) p. 7-51..

>3. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, tr.

>J. Cumming, (New York: Continuum, 1987).

>4. Jacques Lacan, "Kant with Sade", tr. James Swenson, October n°51, p. 55.

>5. S. Freud "The Economic problem in Masochism" (1924) in General

>Psychological Theory, (New York: Colliers, 1963) p. 197-198.

>6. *ibid*, p. 200-201.

>7. G. W. F. Hegel, "The Spirit of Christianity", in Early Theological

>Writings, tr. Knox, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971)

>p. 188.

- >8. *ibid.*, p. 195.
- >9. *ibid.*, p. 213.
- >10. Jacques Lacan, "L'Etourdit", in *Scilicet* (Paris, 1973) n°4, p. 36.
- >11. *ibid.*, p. 37.
- >12. See Jean Hyppolite, *Genèse et Structure de la Phénoménologie de l'Esprit* (Paris: Aubier, 1945) p. 156–162 about the issue of "Alterity in Desire".
- >13. Pierre Klossowski, *Sade My Neighbor* tr. Alphonse Lingis (Evanston/Northwestern U.P., 1991).
- >14. "Kant with Sade", *October* n°51, p. 74.
- >15. Monique David-Ménard, *La Folie dans la Raison Pure* (Paris: Vrin, 1990), p. 179–245, and Monique David-Ménard, *Les Constructions de l'Universel* (Paris: PUF, 1997).
- >16. Emmanuel Levinas, "Apropos of Buber: Some Notes", in *Outside the Subject* tr. Michael B. Smith, (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1993), p. 43–44.
- >17. Paris: Vrin, 2nd, 1988, p. 194–97.
- >18. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini* (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965) p.254.
- >19. Freud "Psychoanalytic Notes Upon an Autobiographical Account of a case of Paranoia" (Schreber)" in *Three Case Histories*, (New York: Colliers, 1963) p.132. For a good philosophical reading of the question of madness in Kant's Reason, see Monique David-Ménard, *La Folie dans la Raison Pure* (Paris: Vrin, 1990). See also Slavoj Zizek, "Kant and Sade: The Ideal Couple, " in *Lacanina Ink* n° 13, 1998, p. 12–25.
- >20. I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* tr. W. S. Pluhar (Indiannapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1996) p. 112. The usual reference to Kant's original editions is A 58– B 83.