7

De Sade, a pessimistic libertine

Arnold Heumakers

On 20 February 1781 the Marquis de Sade (1740–1814) wrote a letter to his wife, ending with a plaintive passage, in which this short sentence keeps recurring: *Je suis un libertin*. The letter was written in the château of Vincennes, where in 1781 de Sade had already been a prisoner for four years. In the letter he discusses in detail some of the 'affaires' that led to his imprisonment.[1] He does not want to cover anything up: 'Yes, I admit I am a libertine and in that area I have imagined everything that can be imagined. But I have absolutely not acted out everything that I imagined nor do I intend to. I am a libertine, but I am not a criminal or a murderer.'[2]

It was clear to everyone in the eighteenth century what de Sade meant by 'libertine', even without hearing the details of the letter. A libertine was lax in his morals, a debauched man, a gay dog. The 1727 edition of Furetière's *Dictionnaire* associates libertinism with '*débauche, désordre, dérèglement des moeurs*' and Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* speaks of '*l'habitude de céder à l'instinct qui nous porte aux plaisirs des sens*'.[3] Except perhaps for bigoted extremists, these definitions meant something other than crime or murder: de Sade's confession was meant as an excuse as well as a protest against the injustice to which he had fallen victim – at least, in his own eyes.

The idea of libertinism acquires a completely different meaning in the novels, stories, and treatises written by de Sade in prison, from which he was released only in 1790 thanks to the French Revolution. In *Justine ou les malheurs de la vertu* and *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*, crime, by preference in the shape of murder and destruction, has become the essence of all lust for the libertines,

as is demonstrated by their actions. The pages of these novels are littered with the mutilated and abused bodies of their victims. But that is only one aspect. In his books de Sade not only displayed libertinism as a violent perversion, but he also invented its philosophical justification. In addition to practice, his libertinism becomes an ideology, the expression, in all its horrible sombreness, of an original and fascinating view of the world, unparalleled in the history of libertinism.

In itself, the combination of libertinism and philosophy was nothing new.[4] In the eighteenth century libertinism was above all understood as moral dissoluteness, but in previous centuries the concept implied various meanings and the association with lust and sensuality had not always been its most important characteristic. In origin, the word 'libertine' is derived from the Latin *libertinus*, 'freedman'. In the course of the sixteenth century it was used for the first time, amongst others by Calvin, to denounce a fiercely opposed protestant sect in the Southern Lowlands. Later on, those people were called libertines who deviated from the ruling moral and religious precepts. For example, in the first half of the seventeenth century those scholars were known as libertines who met in Paris in the 'Académie putéane': critical sceptics such as Gassendi, La Mothe le Vayer, and Naudé. No sign of sexual or other dissipations there! These scholars lived modestly, were law-abiding and showed their libertinism only by questioning the current religious and scientific dogmas.

Yet for the opponents, the combination of impiety and debauchery remained self-evident, even though positive proof was missing. Without the force of religion, the maintenance of strict morals was considered unthinkable. Why would people restrain their egoism and passions if no God existed to be answered to in the hereafter? In the eighteenth century, the philosophers of the Enlightenment, who in many ways can be considered as the spiritual heirs of the 'erudite' libertines of the previous century, would think up many answers to this question. Surely, without religion morality was still possible – an insight voiced first by Pierre Bayle, to the horror of the majority of his contemporaries. In his *Pensées diverses sur la comète* (1682) he was principally concerned to distinguish between atheism and immorality. Afterwards, the meaning of libertinism developed more and more exclusively in the direction of dissoluteness, purely moral and sexual candour.

Bayle made his distinction less for the libertines than to expose the hypocrisy of traditional religion, which claimed for itself the monopoly of virtue. For the libertines in his definition he had no appreciation whatsoever. And Bayle knew his subject, as his century had known plenty of libertines of the worst sort, such as the young noblemen around the poet Théophile de Viau, against whom proceedings had been started in 1623 at the instigation of the Jesuits. The second half of the seventeenth century had known worldly minded epicureans, some of whom de Sade mentions in his *Idée sur les romans*, such as Ninon de Lenclos, Marion de Lorme, Sévigné, La Fare, Chaulieu, and Saint-Evremond.[5] Their libertinism expressed itself in an elegant form, connected with *esprit* and a feeling for decorum. The drinking bouts, obscenities, and blasphemies of Théophile and his friends were replaced by an intellectual subtlety, in which, nevertheless, the *voluptas* of epicureanism was unreservedly expressed in a purely physical way.

It was this idea of libertinism that was widely spread in the eighteenth century, especially among the nobility of *la cour et la ville*. The court set the example, the city followed. Admittedly, during the last years of Louis XIV, piety and devotion, at least outwardly, were mandatory, but this changed immediately after the death of the king in 1714. The years of the regency of the Duke of Orleans are still notorious for their loose morals and religious liberality, and this situation hardly changed under Louis XV.[6] Naturally, it was only a small elite which moved in the *monde*, as it was characteristically called. In the memoirs and correspondence of that period we can read what happened, but the best analyses of what was enacted in this 'world' can be found in the novels (often called libertine) of authors such as Crébillon *fils*, Duclos, Dorat, Louvet de Couvray, and Choderlos de Laclos.

The protagonist of these novels usually cares for only two things, success and pleasure. In Crébillon's *Les égarements du coeur et de l'esprit*, love is described as '*une sorte de commerce ou l'on s'engageait*'.[7] In Duclos's *Les confessions du comte xxx* the protagonist observes that the most important aspect of love was '*augmenter la liste*'.[8] Each seduction is literally and figuratively a conquest, which must enlarge self-esteem and prestige in the *monde*. In its most radical and cynical consequences, this idea is elaborated in Laclos's masterpiece *Les liaisons dangereuses*, which, none the less, can also be interpreted as a moral rejection of mundane

libertinism. To a certain extent the same can be said of the novels of Crébillon *fils* and Duclos: their subtle analysis of the *monde* clearly shows the emptiness which the pursuit of pleasure and success diffuses. These novels suggest a strong feeling of disillusion which takes its revenge in the usually virtuous denouements. Laclos also makes known the moralistic intention of his novel by letting his most libertine protagonists, Valmont and the Marchioness de Merteuil, come to a bad end.[9]

In subsequent times, the critique of mundane libertinism has only increased. According to some historians, it even explained the French Revolution: the financial problems which gave rise to the riots in 1789 were, they suggest, caused by the costly dissipations of Louis XV. During the revolution the real or supposed debauchery of nobility and clergy was fully emphasized; better propaganda for the revolution was hardly imaginable. With a little goodwill one could see an echo of this in the view of the frivolity of the past which was developed by some contra-revolutionary authors. For example, Joseph de Maistre saw in the revolution, in addition to all the 'perniciousness' it represented, also a deserved penalty of God for the degeneration of the privileged classes before 1789.[10]

Naturally, these rejections, be they of the revolutionary or the contra-revolutionary side, do not give a trustworthy picture of the nature and scale of libertinism during the *ancien régime*. They do show, however, what was thought of the former elite after the outbreak of the revolution. A similar negative view of nobility, court, and clergy can be found in the numerous pamphlets and *libelles* circulating in the literary underworld of the *ancien régime*. In anonymous treatises, such as *Les fastes de Louis XV* and *Les amours de Charlot et Toinette* (i.e. the later Charles X and Marie-Antoinette) the ruling regime was painted in the most lurid colours.[11] The current refrain of these pamphlets is: king, nobility, and clergy can do what they want, but the common citizen, groaning under a despotic yoke, is powerless, has no rights and, on top of this, has to foot the bill.

The vicissitudes of the Marquis de Sade demonstrate that this picture is in need of some correction, at least regarding the impunity of the elite. Although in his books de Sade shows the same picture of decadence and corruption as the 'underground' pamphlets, he is living proof that the nobility could not always get away with it. On the other hand, we may doubt whether he is a

very solid witness for the defence. The story of his (real) libertinism and his contacts with the authorities and the law is complicated, even somewhat bizarre, although certainly not an unusual course of events under the *ancien régime*. After the revolution de Sade pretended to have been locked up in the Bastille for his enlightened ideas or his revolutionary sympathies, but even at that time few people believed him. Already in 1793–4 J. A. Dulaure had published a list of noblemen in which de Sade is pictured as a 'feudal' monster of the calibre of Gilles de Retz. Dulaure gets especially worked up about the fact that de Sade now paraded his imprisonment in the Bastille, whereas this really was only a favour; in his view, de Sade had deserved the death penalty. It was only his blue blood that had saved the marquis – convincing proof, according to Dulaure, that in the case of the *privilégiés* the *ancien régime* always measured by two standards.[12]

Dulaure was not completely wrong. In 1772 the parliament of Aix had condemned de Sade to death for sodomy and attempted poisoning – a verdict quashed in 1778 thanks to the activities of his family and in-laws, who had also saved him from the police on earlier occasions. It can therefore hardly be denied that de Sade profited from his social position. On the other hand, he also owed his prolonged confinement to his family. After the death sentence of 1772 de Sade's mother-in-law, the Présidente de Montreuil, decided to take the law into her own hands. She managed to acquire a *lettre de cachet*, which helped to imprison her recalcitrant son-in-law in Vincennes and, finally, in the Bastille after the annulment of his death sentence. In this way Madame de Montreuil hoped to prevent a further injuring of the family reputation – a hope only partially fulfilled, as it was in prison that de Sade wrote the books that render his name so sinister even today.

De Sade started to write in prison to afford a safety valve to his clipped passions. His correspondence suggests that his confinement brought him to the threshold of madness. To his wife he wrote in connection with his enforced sexual abstinence: 'You fired my head, you let me form spectres which I shall have to realize.'[13] On paper these 'spectres' took on the shape of Justine, Juliette, and all the other libertines and victims that populate his literary universe.

There must, however, have been another motive too – revenge. Revenge on the world of the *ancien régime* that had excluded him, although as a nobleman he should have been entitled to all the privileges of the elite in a class society. In his novels de Sade caricatured these privileges. It is hardly chance that in his *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* four wealthy and powerful authorities – a duke, a bishop, a president of a parliament, and a banker – retire to the castle of Silling in order to organize an orgy. It seems as if de Sade wants to say: look at the elite that has expelled me! Of these authorities, de Sade aimed especially at the judiciary. The parliament of Aix, which had sentenced him to death in 1772, is repeatedly attacked and its judges appear invariably to be far greater criminals than the poor devils condemned to the wheel or the gallows. With satisfaction Curval confesses in *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* that as a member of parliament he had voted hundreds of times to have innocent people hanged, and that he felt a lustful tickle deep inside him every time he committed that small injustice.[14]

Yet de Sade's complaint against this kind of injustice cannot be compared with the accusations of despotism and arbitrariness raised by other victims of the ruling system, such as Mirabeau and Linguet.[15] With de Sade there is always so much ambivalence that the whole effect of his protest is already undermined in advance. His exposure of injustice always involves a reversal of values, which perversely legitimates this injustice – by an appeal not to jurisprudence but to nature. To that end de Sade has developed a complete cosmology of evil, a kind of anti-theodicy, with in its centre a 'criminal' nature, to which all actions and events in the universe have been made subservient.

This philosophical dimension of libertinism can be found in the theories, often all too long-winded, which de Sade's heroes are wont to develop in between the more practical demonstrations of their ideas, as his novels are a curious mixture of philosophy and pornography. A similar structure can already be found in a more hidden tradition of libertine literature. Both Crébillon *fils* and Duclos were part of the establishment with their novels: Crébillon even rose to the office of royal censor thanks to the intercession of Madame de Pompadour, and Duclos was secretary of the Académie française from 1775. In their novels not one indecent word is spoken, the eroticism remains hidden under a veil of

elegance, and the behaviour of the heroes is a code only fully understood by the initiates of the *monde*. On the other hand, the libertine tradition to which de Sade reverted is a considerably coarser genre that can in no way be associated with the establishment but, rather, belongs to the literary underworld of the *ancien régime*, like the pamphlets and *libelles* mentioned earlier.

In the *Histoire de Juliette* de Sade gives a few examples of this openly pornographic literature. In the library of the libertine monk Claude, Juliette and Clairwil find Gervaise de la Touche's *Portier des Chartreux*, probably the biggest erotic bestseller of the eighteenth century, Mirabeau's *L'éducation de Laure*, and, finally, the notorious *Thérèse philosophe*, ascribed by de Sade (but probably wrongly) to the Marquis d'Argens. This last, a book which alternates pornographic scenes with philosophical passages, is the most appreciated: it is 'the only one that combines lust and blasphemy in a pleasant way and . . . gives an idea what an immoral book can be'.[16]

The philosophy preached in *Thérèse philosophe*[17] is not de Sade's own, but looks more like naturalism *à la* Spinoza. God and nature are represented as identical, the universe is a mechanistic whole, and man is a being whose every movement is determined by nature. Consequently, the distinction between good and evil is fictitious. From the point of view of God everything is good, but man calls good or evil only what does or does not fit in with his own self-interest. Traditional ethics can be thrown overboard and nobody needs to feel restrained by any precept whatever in the satisfaction of his lusts. Considering the good character of nature, nothing should stand in the way of a free and happy society. Unfortunately, as the Abbé T. (one of the author's mouthpieces in this book) warns, not all people are able to live according to these insights. That is why truth is only suitable for a small elite, which is free to do whatever it wants in secret, as it possesses sufficient brains and 'harmonious' passions. Religion can be left intact for the stupid and brutish masses, as under no circumstances should libertinism endanger the ruling social order – a point repeatedly stressed by the author of *Thérèse philosophe*.

However primitive, this philosophical message is part of the Enlightenment and resembles in a number of ways the views of the more radical *philosophes* such as Lamettrie, Holbach, Helvétius, or Diderot, who have been also consulted by de Sade. In a letter

of 1783 he even offers himself as a 'martyr', if necessary, for Holbach's *Système de la nature*. In a footnote in *Juliette*, Lamettrie, Helvétius, and Montesquieu are mentioned with approval.[18] De Sade's only criticism of these great minds is the lack of consequence in their thinking. The mention of Montesquieu may cause surprise, as his deism cannot possibly have been to the taste of the atheistic marquis, but de Sade probably wanted to honour the cultural relativism of the author of *De l'esprit des lois*. As regards the other *philosophes*, full appreciation is more likely, as is the case with Holbach and Diderot.

All these intellectuals believed in a strictly materialistic cosmology, in which there was no place for a creating God, and in their writings they proved to be fierce combatants of the Christian 'superstition' (in this capacity, Voltaire is quoted more than once with approval by de Sade). Their moral philosophy was, at least in principle, just as naturalistic as the one in *Thérèse philosophe*, and in Lamettrie we can indeed find an egoistic hedonism that treats with indifference all other ethical precepts. All kinds of sexual practices, which tradition considered to be unnatural, were justified by him precisely for this reason. Diderot acted in the same way in some of his most daring texts, which were never published during his lifetime; for example, in *Rêve de d'Alembert* he defended homosexuality and masturbation, whereas in the amusing *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* he warmly recommended promiscuity, incest, and adultery.[19]

Nevertheless, there are clear limits set to the relationship of de Sade with the *philosophes*, as Lamettrie and Diderot undoubtedly would have rejected his ideas. Admittedly, in their boldest writings they explored a number of highly unorthodox consequences of their philosophy, but they certainly did not want to replace the prevailing moral system by such extremism. With the exception of Lamettrie, they were often highly rigid, if not outright puritanical, regarding the social significance of the moral system. The latter attitude is even typical for Holbach, who preached the ethics of social utility, in which the individual had to adapt his self-interest to the interest of society in every respect. He shows the ultimate consequence of this idea in his *Morale universelle*, where he anathematizes all sexual eccentricities. Finally, it looks as if in his *Système de la nature* Holbach wanted beforehand to deny any identification of his own ideas with de Sade's oeuvre: 'What

would be the fate of a book that nowadays mentioned that the sun is not luminous at all, that parricide is legitimate, that theft is permitted, that adultery is no crime at all? It would need little thought to realize the error of these ideas, and the whole of mankind would turn out against them; people would laugh at the madness of the author, and his book and his name would soon be known only for their ridiculous nonsense.'[20] This passage must have momentarily escaped de Sade, when he so generously offered to be a martyr for Holbach's *Système*.

De Sade's cosmology is stamped by a radical anti-morality without compromises, in which evil is good and good evil. This reversal of traditional values originates in nature itself. De Sade represents the universe as a gigantic mechanism of moving particles, that continues to exist by the grace of destruction. One could say that the doubting of the benignant intentions of nature, which the 1775 earthquake of Lisbon caused for some *philosophes*, is running away to the other extreme in de Sade: earthquakes, eruptions of volcanoes, floods, epidemics, and other catastrophes are the means *par excellence* by which nature pursues its ends. Destruction is the universal law of nature and this law is also valid for mankind, as man is also a natural phenomenon. Destruction is man's natural imperative, as his passions teach him abundantly clearly: de Sade describes sexual passion in a mechanistic terminology as an affection which reaches its maximal effect only when the partner is destroyed, preferably in the most horrible manner. De Sade defends his eroticism of destruction with the argument that it is not really ruination: in his materialistic universe death is not an irreparable rupture, only a change of shape. In the *Dialogue entre un prêtre et un moribond*, as far as is known the first text written in prison by de Sade, we can read: 'Today man, tomorrow worm, the day after tomorrow a fly – surely, this still is life?'[21]

To keep the movement going, nature needs a balance between good and evil: 'a completely virtuous universe could not exist for a minute; the wise hand of nature lets order be born from disorder and, without disorder, it would come to nothing: that is the way of the profound balance that keeps the stars in their course, that suspends them in the immense plains of space, that makes them move in a regular way. Only because of evil does it succeed in performing good; only because of crimes can it exist, and

everything would break down if only virtue ruled on earth.'[22] The criminality of de Sade's libertines, then, finds its *raison d'être* in what we could call a cosmic Malthusianism, to which de Sade was inspired by Holbach and eighteenth-century biologists, such as Buffon and Robinet.[23]

In de Sade's work, the theory of natural balance between good and evil (which led Buffon to defend the utility of hunting and Robinet even that of human murderousness) leads to a rigorous dichotomy of mankind into victims and libertines. The first category betrays itself by its devotion to traditional values. De Sade considered Christianity with its altruistic morals an obvious device of the poor and weak to manipulate the rich and strong. In his view virtue was based on simple self-interest, although this is not realized by virtuous people: they sincerely believe in their own morality and religion – a belief that automatically marks them as victims. On the other hand, the libertine has shaken off all prejudice and superstition. Due to the *flambeau de la philosophie* he has acquired an understanding of the true – criminal – nature of the universe and he lives accordingly: without any scruples he satisfies all his lusts and he finds the highest satisfaction in crimes.

Together de Sade's libertines constitute an elite defined by philosophy and conduct, a new aristocracy. This aristocracy is not necessarily identical with the nobility of the *ancien régime*, even though we have seen that in de Sade's novels many aristocrats and authorities form part of the libertine elite. But a similar libertinism can be found among highwaymen and counterfeiters: libertines can exist *outside* and *above* orderly society. The libertine elite cannot be defined in social terms: in principle anyone can become part of the elite, even those who in the first instance belong to the victims: those who are willing to accept the libertine principles prove *ipso facto* that they have transcended the status of victim.

De Sade's ideas are well illustrated by the dialogues of *La philosophie dans le boudoir* which constitute a complete course in libertinism, showing how a young, complaisant girl is incited by a few advanced libertines to assault her virtuous mother. But the best-known pupil in de Sade's oeuvre is of course Juliette, who – in the more than a thousand pages of her life story – succeeds in working her way up from being a poor orphan to becoming a powerful and wealthy woman, who knows herself assured of a secure position in the corrupt *ancien régime*. She owes everything to

carefully following the advice of those libertines who cross her path. Saint-Fond tells her what libertinism is. First of all, one has to forswear religion, as a libertine is by definition an atheist. Then one has to despise the '*conventions sociales*'. And finally and most important, one has to contract the '*habitude du crime*', a habit acquired only by practising the libertine tenets: what good works are for pious Christians crime is for the authentic libertine.[24]

It is of course absolutely necessary to look respectable in order to be able to commit crimes with impunity. The necessity for a double standard of morals, which we already saw in *Thérèse philosophe*, is even more urgent in de Sade's novels. Not for nothing do libertines choose remote estates, inaccessible castles, and subterranean vaults for their most uninhibited orgies. In addition, they love to indulge in Utopian fantasies, in which they as the elite openly and without the façade of virtue and convention can practise their sexual regime; preferably they would expand their secret practice to the whole of society, as the various blueprints for a perverted class society in *Juliette* show.

In his *La philosophie dans le boudoir* de Sade also sketched a programme for an egalitarian state ruled by lust, in which everybody has become a libertine, forced by the government if necessary. In the Utopia of this book de Sade addresses his compatriots who had just liberated themselves from the old monarchical regime by a bloody revolution (the book appeared in 1795). But according to de Sade something else needs to be done before France will be really free. The libertinism that he recommends to the French is explicitly defined by the concept of liberation. Seemingly, this applies to all the kinds of libertinism that occur in his novels. Irrespective of the number of victims, for the libertine elite libertinism constitutes a philosophy of freedom and liberation – liberation from the shackles of a tyrannical religion and an unnatural morality, and by this means nature's original rights can be restored. De Sade's heroes usually make it clear that they think in the same way. They feel themselves to be like gods on earth in their orgies and wallow in their power and the blood of their victims.

In this respect de Sade continues a tendency already present in earlier forms of libertinism, which also concentrated on emancipation and autonomy in spiritual and ethical respects. De Sade simply shows the most radical consequences of this tendency: man

changes into god on earth. Later, the apologists for the marquis also put his oeuvre in this context. In 1909 Apollinaire called de Sade '*cet esprit le plus libre qui ait encore existé*', Robert Desnos considered him the first manifestation in philosophy and literature of the '*esprit moderne*', and the surrealists worshipped de Sade as one of their most eminent predecessors because of his rebellious qualities, his aggressive atheism, his literary extremism, and his apologetics for sexuality.[25]

However, this emphasis on the 'liberating' character of de Sade's work does not do his philosophy full justice, as liberation is only one side of the picture. The other side, unexpectedly, shows a tragic dimension to the cosmology that de Sade has constructed with so much pent-up rage. The liberation that has made the libertines gods in their own eyes appears to be an illusion, as de Sade has not refused to face the extreme consequences of his own philosophy. Already in his very first texts, libertines realize the limited nature of their crimes: their imagination always leads them to expect many more possibilities than they can fulfil. In *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*, Curval regrets that he cannot attack the sun in order to put the world on fire. 'That would really be a crime', he exclaims, 'something completely different from those small excesses which only cause a few people to be changed into lumps of earth at the end of the year.'[26] In his later work, de Sade assigned a very special meaning within the context of his philosophy to this desire for excessive, in reality unfeasible, crimes. The restriction that vexes the libertine now acquires a theoretical basis, which originates from nature, like criminality itself. Just as they are physically unable to abuse the sun, so they cannot go against the intentions of nature whatever crimes they may think up. The libertine suddenly realizes his imprisonment in nature; he is a will-less part of the great mechanism that entirely transcends his individual powers.

In the libertine we notice here a curious distinction between, on the one hand, reason and imagination and, on the other, his (sexual) passions. With the latter he is chained to nature, as his reason shows him. In order to escape these chains, the libertine tries to rationalize his lust. It is not the sexual act, but the *idea* of crime that gives him his most intense orgasm. The *apatheia* is now seen as the highest ideal: apathy regarding every ethical impulse and also regarding purely physical affections. The most

experienced libertines in de Sade's universe prove to be fanatical believers in a perverted 'stoicism' that guarantees them the highest pleasures.[27]

In the end, though, these are all subterfuges: every crime, be it committed from blind lust or stoical distance, conforms to the order of nature, to whom every destruction is of use. Even a return to virtue would be of no avail, since it leaves nature indifferent whether someone sacrifices or is sacrificed himself: it is only interested in the sheer fact of destruction. In this process the role of the individual is totally unimportant. It is therefore hardly surprising that in *La nouvelle Justine* and *Juliette* de Sade inspires his libertines with the desire to strike at nature itself as the ultimate crime. At this point, however, the libertine encounters a border impossible to be crossed. 'The impossibility to hurt nature is the biggest vexation of man', is the contention of the monk Jerôme. And Madame d'Esterval laments: 'I would like to disturb its plans, obstruct its course, arrest the course of the stars, overturn the globes that are floating in space, destroy what serves it, elevate what impedes it, in short I would like to strike at all its works by interrupting all its great effects – but I am without power to do it.' For that reason Bressac concludes: 'Let us revenge ourselves on what is offered to us, and let us multiply our atrocities, as we cannot improve upon them.[28] In their impotence the libertines prefer quantity above quality and they curse the almighty nature no less than they did the Christian God for the limits that are set to them.

In this way de Sade has made clear that his libertinism ultimately does not constitute a road to freedom but a circular course without any prospects: hardly by chance the only route a prisoner can cover in his cell.

NOTES

All quotations of de Sade himself derive from the *Oeuvres complêtes*, cited as *O.C.*, published in sixteen volumes in Paris by Editions Têtes de Feuilles, 1973; this edition is identical with that of the Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1962–4.

1 For more detailed biographical data see Gilbert Lely, *Vie du marquis de Sade*, *O.C.*, I–II.
2 *O.C.*, XII, 276.

3 Quoted in Andrzej Siemek, *La recherche morale et esthétique dans le roman de Crébillon fils*, Oxford, 1981, 34–5.
4 On the history of libertinage see, for example, J. S. Spink, *French Free-thought from Gassendi to Voltaire*, London, 1960; Antoine Adam, *Les Libertins au XVII siècle*, Paris, 1964; Gerhard Schneider, *Der Libertin. Zur Geistes- und Sozialgeschichte des Buergertums im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart, 1970; Peter Nagy, *Libertinage et révolution*, Paris, 1975.
5 *O.C.*, X, 10.
6 Cf. G. Chaussinand-Nogaret, *La noblesse au XVIIIe siècle. De la féodalite aux lumières*, Paris, 1976; Jean Mayer, *La vie quotidienne en France au temps de la Régence*, Paris, 1979.
7 *Romanciers du XVIIIe siècle*, t. II, Bibliothèque de la Pleiade, Paris, 1965, 15.
8 Ibid., 240.
9 Cf. Roger Vailland, *Laclos par lui-meme*, Paris, 1958; Peter Brooks, *The Novel of Worldliness*, Princeton, NJ, 1969; Marie-Hélène Huet, 'Roman libertin et réaction aristocratique', *Dix-huitième Siècle*, 1972, 4: 129–42.
10 Joseph de Maistre, *Considérations sur la France*, Brussels, 1844, 128–30 (originally published in 1796).
11 Cf. Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime*, Cambridge, Mass., 1982.
12 Françoise Laugaa-Traut, *Lectures de Sade*, Paris, 1973, 22–6.
13 *O.C.*, XII, 397.
14 *O.C.*, XIII, 164.
15 Mirabeau, *Essai sur les lettres de cachet et les prisons d'état* (1782); Linguet, *Mémoires sur la Bastille* (1783).
16 *O.C.*, VIII, 442 f. See also Barry Ivker, 'Towards a definition of libertinism in 18th-century French fiction', *Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century*, 1970, 73: 199–218; Barry Ivker, 'On the darker side of the Enlightenment: a comparison of the literary techniques of Sade and Restif', *Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century*, 1971, 79: 219–39.
17 The original edition probably appeared in 1748, but there are many reprints, most recently in the series *Les classiques interdites*, Paris, 1979.
18 *O.C.*, XII, 418; VIII, 171.
19 Cf. Jean Leduc, 'Les sources de l'athéisme et de l'immoralisme du marquis de Sade', *Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century*, 1969, 68: 9–65.
20 Ibid., 19.
21 *O.C.*, XIV, 62 f.
22 *O.C.*, VIII, 168 f.
23 Jean Deprun, 'Sade et la philosophie biologique de son temps', in *Le Marquis de Sade*, Centre Aixois d'études et de recherches sur le dix-huitième siècle, Paris, 1968, 189–205.
24 *O.C.*, VIII, 329 f.
25 Laugaa-Traut, *Lectures*, 179–208; Maurice Nadeau, *Histoire du surréalisme*, Paris, 1964, 34.

26 *O.C.*, XIII, 165.
27 *O.C.*, VIII, 271, 173, 463 f.
28 *O.C.*, VI, 339; VII, 229.