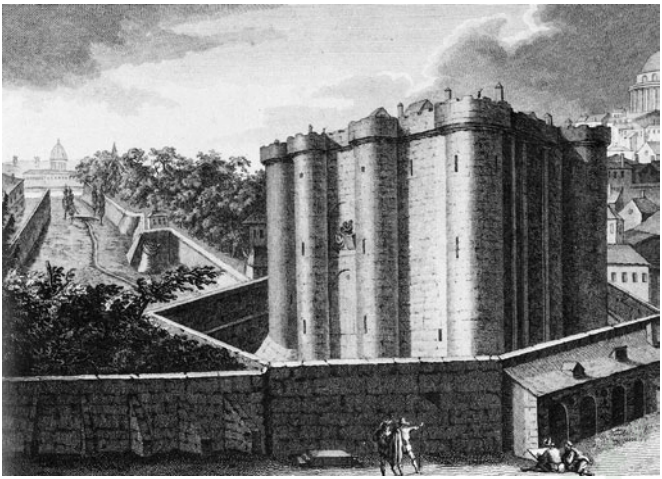
Chapter 4
Sade and the French Revolution

Monarchist or republican?

'What am I?' Sade wrote in 1791 to his lawyer, Gaufridy, 'aristocrat or democrat? Please tell me . . . because I know nothing any more.' This seemingly heartfelt plea suggests a genuine sense of confusion on the part of the now former marquis and citizen of the new French republic, although it has to be said that he was writing to a man whom he knew to be a monarchist. Whichever response to Sade's own question the reader may favour, there are plenty of arguments to be marshalled in support.

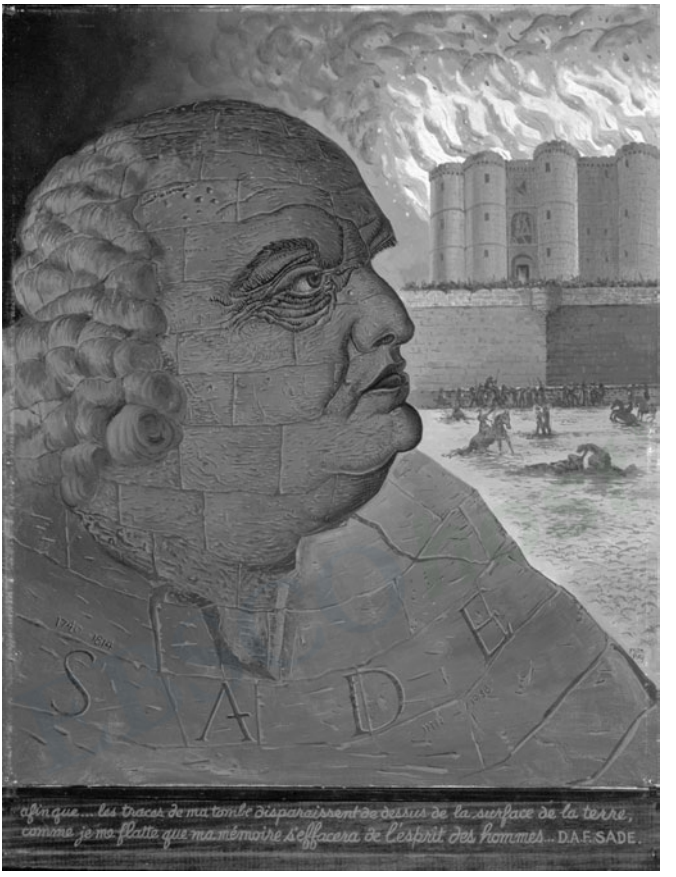
Many have accused Sade of unabashed political opportunism in the Revolution. After all, throughout his life, Sade was capable of behaving like any other feudal lord of the manor, pulling rank when it suited him. Moreover, Sade's tendencies towards self-dramatization are never too far below the surface, and the theatre of revolution certainly provided him with ample opportunities to role-play. Indeed, days before the Bastille was stormed, Sade is said to have harangued the street crowds from his cell, urging them to rise up and revolt – perhaps the most theatrical of all episodes in his very theatrical life. Sade consciously dramatized this event, turning it into a founding moment of the French Revolution for the sake of the Revolutionary Tribunal, casting himself in the lead role of 'liberator' of the Bastille. Later,



8. The Bastille

the chance to deliver rousing speeches before appreciative revolutionary gatherings would have proved especially attractive to the rhetorician and thespian deprived for so long of theatrical activity and an adoring public. On the other hand, as Sade's most recent biographer Neil Shaeffer observes, there was no hypocrisy in these performances, part of his charm being that, at the time, 'he truly felt and truly was what he seemed to be'. And of course, Sade had no love for a monarchy that had kept him in prison without trial for more than thirteen years, and he was certainly carried away by the fast pace of events during the revolutionary period. Moreover, the view that his overtly pro-republican activities at this time were dictated by pure expediency is hard to credit, when one might have expected him to adopt a more discreet profile in view of his aristocratic past.

In the end, Sade's tendency to role-play makes it hard to determine his true political views on specific issues, and virtually impossible to pin a political label on him that would assign him a neat place in



9. Man Ray, *Imaginary Portrait of the Marquis de Sade*, 1938

history, though this has not deterred many from trying. We shall return to this question in the conclusion to this chapter.

Another source of confusion in this area is Sade's fictional works. The mistake is often made of conflating Sade's own views with those of his fictional characters. In particular, the political pamphlet

'Frenchmen, one more effort if you wish to be Republicans', intercalated into *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, is assumed by some critics to be the unmodulated expression of the author's own political views. We shall see presently that such a reading is problematic, to say the least, given the work's parodic and satirical status, as are readings of political dissertations in *Juliette* (those of the arch-libertine Noirceuil, for instance) that take them to be the literal and direct expression of an authorial voice. There is also the violence of Sade's fictional world, which tempts some readers to draw dubious analogies with modern political scenarios. This is exactly what Pier Paolo Pasolini does in his 1975 film *Salò*, in which Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom* is used as the model for fascist atrocities. While Pasolini's film is undoubtedly a work of considerable artistic merit, it has little to do with the work that inspired it, and there is a danger that such adaptations invite audiences to dehistoricize Sade's text, forcing it into an entirely inappropriate context of modern political thinking. Those who have attempted to enlist Sade in the ideological vanguard of 'good' (Marxist) or 'evil' (fascist) political movements of later times are guilty of anachronism and misreading. Taking quite the opposite tack, some scholars have identified a denial of the political itself in the isolation that Sade considers fundamental to the human condition. Far from embracing a particular political credo, the Sadean text consistently exposes politics as a corrupt and empty rhetoric, a means of manipulating the masses. Sade has no optimism about social progress. Indeed, he has no systematic faith in the need for society at all. Individuals must be treated according to their individual make-up, which means that laws that cater for the collective are redundant.

Sade's attitude to the political is, then, deeply cynical, and his total lack of belief in historical progress surprisingly pessimistic – surprising because throughout his life Sade exhibited a great interest in history. His library in both the Bastille and in Charenton contained many historical studies, especially on the Middle Ages,

Sade's anti-politics

Needless to say, we had it printed in the press that such were the frightful abuses the government was perpetrating, and that so long as the royal regime prevailed over the Senate and the law, no fortune would be in safety, no citizen would walk in peace abroad or breathe in peace at home. The people believed what they read and sighed for a revolution. Aye, so it is the poor fools are hoodwinked, so it is the common population is at once made the pretext and the victim of its leaders' wickedness: always weak and always stupid, sometimes it is made to want a king, sometimes a republic, and the prosperity its agitators offer under the one system or the other is never but the phantom created by their interests or by their passions.

(***Juliette*, p. 870**)

and he himself wrote two historical novels set in that period (*Adélaïde de Brunswick* and *Isabelle de Bavière*). Yet, despite his obvious fascination with the historical process, human history seemed to Sade to be utterly nonsensical and any concept of progress wholly unsupported by the evidence.

Revolutionary pamphlets

Despite the political cynicism expressed in Sade's fictional works of the time, it is undeniable that Sade threw himself into the French Revolution with an enthusiasm astonishing for one with no belief in human progress, fast becoming one of the rising stars of his local section in Paris. This was the Section des Piques, one of the most radical of all the revolutionary sections and of which Robespierre himself was a member. Sade's appointment as a magistrate in April

1793 and his promotion to president of the section by July of that year were in part due to the success of a handful of political essays and speeches. These writings reveal Sade's exceptional rhetorical gifts, but rhetoric and truth do not always coincide. They also provided the consummate actor in Sade with rare opportunities to perform before large and appreciative audiences.

The most important of these essays are the 'On the Method for Approving Laws' of 1792 and the 'Memorial Speech for Marat and Le Peletier' of the following year. Initially delivered as speeches to the Section des Piques, both were highly acclaimed and ordered to be printed and circulated among all the other revolutionary sections.

The first of these essays concerns the passing of laws in the new republic and is strikingly democratic in spirit. Sade proposes that all new laws should be put to the people themselves in their cantonal meetings before being ratified. Rejecting any delegation of power as open to abuse, Sade's argument is that 'Sovereignty is one, indivisible, inalienable, you destroy it by sharing it, you lose it by conferring it on others.' The former marquis expresses here the most radical of republican ideas, commonly associated with Jacobinism and the '*sans-culottes*', the most extreme of all revolutionary factions.

> You now ask which is the best method for sanctioning laws whilst retaining the sovereignty which you have received from nature, which despotism stole from you, and which you have just regained at the cost of your blood? This is what I propose as the quickest and most majestic means of giving the people that indispensable power of sanction without which there is no law for a free nation.
>
> An initial letter will give notice to the mayors of the chief town of each canton of the French territory. As soon as they have received this, they will convene primary assemblies which will meet in the

A parody of Marat?

Scevolus, Brutus, your only merit was to arm yourselves for one moment to end the existence of two despots; your patriotism shone for one hour at most. But you, Marat, by what more difficult road did you lead the life of a free man; how many thorns lay in your path as you pursued your goal; it was among tyrants that you spoke to us of liberty; you adored this goddess whilst we were still ignorant of her sacred name; Machiavelli's daggers hovered above your head from all quarters but your august brow remained unruffled. Scevolus and Brutus each threatened a single tyrant; but your far greater spirit desired the death of all those that overburdened the earth, and slaves accused you of liking blood! Great man, it was theirs that you wished to spill; you were prodigal with their blood, only in order to spare that of the people. With so many enemies, how could you not succumb? While you singled out traitors, you were to be struck down by treachery.

Marquis de Sade

('Memorial Speech for Marat and Le Peletier')

chief town of the canton. Following the wise precautions of our legislators, the proposed law will only then be sent to them in a second mailing. These magistrates of the people will read out the bill to the assembled people. Having been examined, discussed, and carefully studied by the collective mass of individuals that it will serve, this bill will then be accepted or rejected. In the former case, the messenger who has just brought it will immediately take it back, the will of the majority prevailing, and the bill will be promulgated. Should it only secure the support of a minority, your députés must immediately modify, suppress or recast it, and if they succeed in improving it, it should be presented a second time to the whole of

France gathered together in the same way in all cantons of the various départements.

('On the Method for Approving Laws'; author's translation)

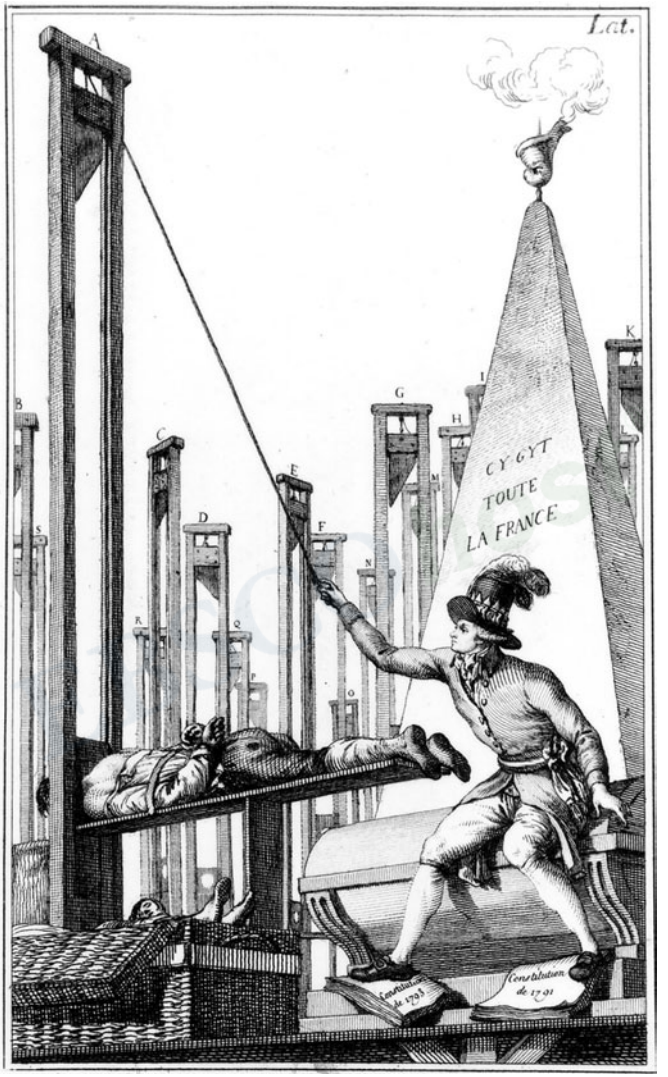
Of other essays by Sade at this time, the eulogy of Marat also appears to express support for Jacobin extremism. Was his praise of the bloodiest of all French revolutionaries sincerely intended or a subtle parody of extremist rhetoric? Similarly, was his apparent espousal of democracy born of sincerely held convictions, or was it a cynical manoeuvre designed to establish his credentials as a bona fide republican? Critics are divided on these questions. In the end, it is perhaps futile to conjecture when no definitive answers are possible.

One more effort

Apart from these essays, the expression of political views can also be found throughout Sade's fictional oeuvre, but critics have paid special attention to the intercalated pamphlet, provocatively entitled 'Frenchmen, one more effort if you wish to become republicans', read out by Dolmancé in *Philosophy in the Boudoir*.

The Dolmancé pamphlet can be read as a pastiche of the many political and philosophical *libelles*, or underground pamphlets, circulating in the revolutionary period. The freedom of the press, announced in August 1789, had led to a veritable explosion of such publications, which had been heavily censored under the *ancien régime*. It may also be read as an ironic attack on Robespierre's 'virtuous republic', founded on repression and murder. In it, Sade provides the theory implied in the bloody atrocities of the French Revolution.

Philosophy in the Boudoir was begun during Sade's imprisonment at Picpus in 1794, following his arrest during the Terror by Robespierre for political moderation and alleged royalist



10. Anonymous engraving, 'Robespierre, finding no more executioners, carries out the office himself', 1793

sympathies. From his cell in this former sanatorium, he had a clear view of the guillotine which had been moved to this new location from the Place de la Concorde because of complaints about the smell of blood. The executed were buried in their thousands in the grounds of the sanatorium. Sade watched this bloody slaughter day after day, and declared in correspondence that it affected him greatly. Against the backdrop of these horrific events in Sade's own life, the cruelties of his fictions take on a highly ironic character.

Philosophy in the Boudoir is set some time between July 1794 and October 1795, immediately after the Terror. It is not implausible, therefore, that the intercalated pamphlet was intended as a commentary on topical events. Its central message that vice and, above all, murder are good for a republic is difficult to read as anything but a swingeing satire on the savagery of Robespierre's regime.

And yet, the detailed exposition of a political and sexual philosophy found in the pamphlet is full of contradictions. On the one hand, it appears to support the Revolution in denouncing 'that cast, so justly despised, of royalists and aristocrats', and yet on the other, it indicts the ten members of the Committee of Public Safety for inflicting the

The Terror

This was the bloodiest period of the Revolution, covering about fifteen months, from March 1793 to July 1794. From the beginning of this period up to 10 June 1794, 1,251 persons were executed in Paris. From 10 June to 27 July, there were 1,376 victims. The Committee of Public Safety, with Robespierre at its head, was largely responsible for ordering these executions. The Terror came to an end with the fall and execution of Robespierre on 28 July 1794.

Terror on the French people from the early 1790s, and in so doing committing acts of violence rivalling any cruelties perpetrated by the *ancien régime*. Robespierre is also roundly condemned as the 'priest of religion'. On 7 May 1794, Robespierre had declared the Republic to be Deist and atheism as 'anti-republican'. Written shortly after this date, the pamphlet voices Sade's contempt for this decree. The deism of 'l'infâme Robespierre' and even of Voltaire (a writer much admired by Sade) must be swept away, the pamphlet argues, to be replaced by the paganism of ancient Rome. Since the monarchy and the church are mutually supportive, the church must be stripped of its power. Since history teaches that religion has always served the interests of tyrants, atheism is that 'one more effort' needed for France to become truly republican.

Sade's attack on Robespierre and religion caught the mood of the times, for only a few months later, the architect of the Terror was executed and the cult of the Supreme Being which he had promoted died with him.

The individual and the state

The pamphlet is certainly a polemic, then, but we must not forget that its author is not Sade but an anonymous, fictional scribbler, perhaps Dolmancé himself. As such, we cannot necessarily assume everything in it to be the true opinions of the author, whose motivations in writing it were no doubt many and varied. The overwritten passages expressing patriotic republicanism, for example, are far too sycophantic to be sincere.

By the same token, the pamphlet's advocacy of the rule of law and the 'social principles' of charity, heroism, humanity, and civic spirit read like hollow sentiments when juxtaposed with the presentation in the second part of the pamphlet of a morality rooted solely in self-interest. This section is subtitled '*Les moeurs*', meaning 'morals' but also 'manners' or 'customs'. While sexual morality is the underlying thread, it binds together every major aspect of the

functioning of a republican state, from its laws, systems of education, and communication, to the rights and responsibilities of individual citizens. In other words, every feature of the new republic in Sade's Utopian vision of it is seen in terms of sex and individual freedom. This conjunction of sex and politics in relation to the individual is one of the most original features of Sade's thought. A number of 20th-century feminists would succinctly express this idea, according to which there is no divorce between the individual and the public sphere, in a phrase that has now become a commonplace: 'the personal is political'.

To ensure this personal freedom, there must be fewer laws in society. In any case, as no sexual activity can be considered criminal since all morality is relative, not universal, there will be less need for the state to punish. Here, Sade points obliquely to the hypocrisies and excesses of the current regime, and in particular exposes the regime's tendency to overlegislate: between 1789 and 1794, no fewer than 3,400 new laws had been passed. It is the legislators themselves, Sade wryly suggests, who create crimes for there is none in nature. In his championing of the individual at the expense of the state, Sade produces a caricature of Thermidorean discourse. We should also remember that, given his experiences of the courts under the *ancien régime*, Sade had his own reasons to view the law and lawyers with cynicism and contempt.

Whereas this discourse privileged liberty above all things, Sade pushes this liberty to its logical and intolerable extreme, arguing for the freedom to rape and to kill. The irony of this ingenuous-sounding defence of anarchy and violence would not have been lost on the contemporary reader. With monarch and deity gone, the pamphlet continues, only four possible crimes remain: calumny, theft, impurity, and murder, all offences against our fellow-men under the monarchy but none of them serious under a republic! The pamphlet dismisses each of these 'crimes' in tones of understated sarcasm. First, calumny:

The Thermidoreans

Named after the month in the revolutionary calendar when they seized power (July 1794), the counter-revolutionary Thermidoreans put an end to Robespierre's regime of Terror in an even more terrible fashion: 71 men were guillotined in a single day, the biggest bloodbath of the entire Revolution. In doing so, they also put an end to the Revolution itself. Yet, the Thermidoreans were in no way admirable, motivated principally by self-preservation. It was more than a year before they attempted to provide the new republic with a constitution, and in doing so were torn between their fear of both democracy and dictatorship. The draft that emerged consequently proposed a limited franchise giving power to the propertied classes alone. These proposals eventually led to a popular rising in Paris on 5 October 1795. Although this revolt was brutally put down, the event marked the end of the Thermidorean period, and the advent of the Directory, new rulers drawn from a new class of *nouveaux riches*.

> It is with utmost candour I confess that I have never considered calumny an evil, and especially in a government like our own, under which all of us, bound closer together, nearer one to the other, obviously have a greater interest in becoming acquainted with one another.
>
> (pp. 311–12)

Given the internecine divisions of the revolutionary period, this can be read as a devastating attack on the ideal of republican brotherhood. In an earlier scene in the main dialogue, Dolmancé had put things rather more directly:

> are we not all born solitary, isolated? [. . .] are we not come into the world all enemies, the one of the other, all in a state of perpetual and reciprocal warfare?
>
> (pp. 283–4)

Theft is perfectly justified since wealth is so unfairly distributed in society – a sentiment scathingly critical of the corruption of the revolutionary years, and, for the modern reader, Marxist *avant la lettre*. As for the 'impure crimes' of prostitution, adultery, incest, rape, and sodomy, how can individuals be expected to behave in a morally correct fashion when the state clearly behaves immorally by conducting wars?

The pamphlet reserves its most biting irony, however, for the 'offence' of murder, the very cornerstone of the Revolution itself:

> Is [murder] a political crime? We must avow, on the contrary, that it is, unhappily, merely one of policy's and politics' greatest instruments. Is it not by dint of murders that France is free today?
>
> (p. 332)

Watching victim upon victim climb the steps to the guillotine from his cell at Picpus and breathing in the stench of blood as he wrote such lines, it is inconceivable that Sade really intended such a lack of regard for human life to be taken seriously.

Juliette

Detailed expositions of views similar to those expressed in 'Frenchmen, one more effort' can be found especially in *Juliette*, where a direct satirical purpose is not always so easy to discern, and where the contradictions are therefore far more blatant.

In *Juliette*, the eponymous heroine meets up with some of the leading political figures in Europe before the Revolution: Catherine the Great, Gustavus of Sweden, Pope Pius VI, Ferdinand of Naples,

Victor-Amédée of Savoy, and Leopold of Tuscany. All of these monarchs are attacked by Juliette, who tells the Pope, for example, that revolutionary change will soon sweep over the whole of Europe. Writing in the 1790s with the hindsight of history, Sade is not averse to pandering to his reader's spirit of revolution and loathing of the French monarchy. Sade's portrayal of the debauchery of Europe's monarchs and princes echoes the lubricious content of those pornographic pamphlets aimed at the French King and Queen that played such a crucial role in preparing the ground for revolution in France. Such pamphlets had circulated throughout the 1780s, mocking Louis XVI's alleged impotence, and accusing Marie-Antoinette of indulging in depraved sexual orgies with her courtiers.

In contrast, there may appear to be numerous counter-revolutionary notes in *Juliette*. All of the libertines praise despotism and terror, some even demanding a return to feudalism. We should remember, however, that it is, precisely, the villainous characters of the novel who express such views, and that they are not to be simplistically equated with those of the author. Sade's own voice is always cloaked in irony, and if we read carefully between the lines, it is not hard to discern a far more subtle politics than that of his libertine anti-heroes. When it is pointed out to the libertine Borchamps that he is himself a tyrant, and yet he detests tyranny, the libertine's response is a telling piece of cynicism and ambiguity:

> If the Senate is ready to rise in arms against Sweden's sovereign, it is not from horror of tyranny but from envy at seeing despotism exercised by another than itself [. . .] *the throne is to everybody's taste, and 'tis not the throne they detest, but him who is seated on it.*
>
> (*Juliette*, pp. 861–2)

Is Sade to be regarded, then, as more of a feudal aristocrat at heart than a true revolutionary? We may have to accept that Sade can be either at different times and in different contexts, as it suits him,

and that, in the end, no single reading of Sade's politics is wholly satisfactory.

After examining his works, one is left with the impression that Sade's chameleon character is, in the political as in so many other domains, ultimately undecidable, which, in an odd way, is more subversive than any fixed political position would be. The ambiguity of both the content of Sade's declarations on politics, as well as the ambiguity of their tone (serious or ironic?), undermines any aim of political alignment, casting doubt on the plausibility, or indeed the desirability, of a polarized set of views. On the one hand, Sade's ambiguous political relativism might be seen as wholly in tune with the increasing moral scepticism of the late Enlightenment, while, on the other, Sade expresses the political cynicism towards the *ancien régime* that was prevalent in the revolutionary period, and most strikingly of all, perhaps, perfectly captures the lure of absolute power that infected political leaders throughout the 1790s, and that culminated in the establishment of a dictatorship by Napoleon in 1799. In this sense, Sade offers his readers an accurate and not uncritical reflection of the unstable political situation in France at the end of the 18th century.