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Revolt! Act II

Summary:

The theater and the psychoanalytic clinic are counterposed in a reading of Peter Weiss's play *Marat/Sade*, casting Lacanian conceptions of repetition, death drive, and the act as potential forms of revolt against the "society of the spectacle" prefigured by Sade.

The Revolution came and went
and unrest was replaced by discontent

Peter Weiss[1]

It's nature I wish to outrage... I would like to violate its plans, reverse its course, vanquish the stars
that float throughout it, ravage whatever serves it... insult it, in sum, in all its manifestations.

Marquis de Sade[2]

All the other faculties remain mute,
but memory, intelligence and will are far
sharper in acting than they were before.

Dante Alighieri[3]

ACT II

'Asylum at Charenton,' 1967: Tableau—

Thrice removed: these are actors playing inmates, performers as lunatics themselves cast dramatically in the roles of the real historical actors who, not twenty years before the time when this play's set, unleashed a bloodbath. What happened? Heads rolled. The troupe, using only their own bodies as instruments and the most elementary of props (a rake, a wooden staff with ribbons), have on the arena of the stage enacted the reiterated mechanical motion of the guillotine's shearing blade (drag the rake, drop the rake; drag, drop...), the sound—scrape-thud, scrape—standing in for the repetitive rise and fall of that axe known during the Revolution as the *scythe of equality*.^[4] Contorting their shapes into a heap, they've represented a jumble of bloodied heads, faces grimacing in a basket. (This tangle triggering a glimmer of recognition: *Heavens, I know it!* I've seen an image like this in a painting from the period—in a museum in some capital somewhere, or reproduced on one of my screens...)

You're looking into a high round room, tiled all in white. Metal fastenings jut from the creamy, nacreous walls—thick restraints, think interrogative or therapeutic regimens. Spaces under the floor, packed tight with breathing bodies, are covered over—for ventilation? for drainage?—in hinged wooden slats. Actors enter and leave the scene of action from these holds or keeps, the slatted floor-doors gaping open, then closing. The audience observes the proceedings through a towering scrim of iron bars. Nuns in starched and quivering wimples, invited guests—sober functionaries in tailcoats, gowned ladies smiling with their fans—watch from the stage.

This is historical melodrama, enacted as a rehabilitative project for the insane, as edifying spectacle for respectable citizens—at once a dialectical discourse on revolution. Thrice removed again: it's a play set in an asylum, a therapeutic institution housed in a former jail. Jail become asylum, asylum become theater, theater cum asylum recreated on the contemporary stage: three removes set the terms for this filmed performance, directed by Peter Brook, of his Royal Shakespeare Company production of Peter Weiss' *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum at Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*, a play which came in short order to be known, in shorthand, as *Marat/Sade*. Thrice removed, as well, what I'm trying to get across here: from the page to the stage, then from act to celluloid, flitting back again then from a film I watched online to these words here. Three moves or removes, three turns or returns, three rings, intervolved, circling something I aim to get at about revolt—

(I've learned from analytic work that the only way to glean the structuring shape—the real form informing the vicissitudes of what we feel, or think, or do—is by tracing an eccentric path, stumbling and circuitous: you have to sniff out the associations, err or digress, follow tasty or nasty leads into blind alleys. As the poet Robert Pinsky notes about his translation of the circles of Dante's *Inferno*, *meaning will come only in irregular pools and flashes... in a setting of uncertainty*. So I ask for your forbearance as we proceed into the dense thicket of this play and its sequellae—a *vivid, yet tangled and dark... fabric... where varying textures of thought or experience shift and slide and recombine unpredictably*.^[5] This is going to be a strange ride.)

What happened? Revolution! *Heads rolled*. By the time of what came to be known as the *Great Terror* of 1793, Citizen Sade had been imprisoned again, held yet again in fetid confinement *without trial* (as he had been, in turn and return, after the whipping incident, the Spanish Fly incident, the corruption of youth incident...), this time for—first among a long string of political faux pas—an ill-timed public declaration of his atheism. A *consummate survival artist*,^[6] the pornographer, aspiring dramaturge and unrepentant royalist had, up through most of the autumn of that year, succeeded at maintaining intact his assiduously cultivated performance as a Republican militant, *growing increasingly duplicitous in his rhetoric*,^[7] wearing the red bonnet of the committed patriot, rising through the ranks of the populist district councils and even giving the funeral oration for *the first two martyrs of the Revolution*, one of whom was Jean-Paul Marat, *publisher of the rabble-rousing "L'Ami du Peuple" (Friend of the People) and one of the Revolution's most*

bloodthirsty vampires.

Marat, suffering from a disfiguring skin disease, had that summer been stabbed to death by Citizen Charlotte Corday in the bathtub from which he rarely ventured (yet another history painting, resurfacing: alabaster skin, heavy drooping cloth-wrapped head, blood-tinted water lapping the propped board on which he wrote his calls to action...), an assassination reenacted in the fictional 1801 play-within-a-play directed, in Weiss' 1964 dramatization, by Sade—who really was imprisoned for the last ten years of his life at Charenton, France's first “modern” mental hospital, and who really did stage amateur theatricals there using the asylum's inmates as actors, with the blessing of the hospital's progressive director François Simonnet de Coulmier.

Prior to his imprisonment at Charenton, Sade had marched in the place of honor at Marat's funeral, bringing up the rear guard in a two-hour procession... attended by tens of thousands, including entire regiments of canoneers, drummers and infantrymen; representatives from all forty-eight sections of Paris; battalions of young women holding salvers of burning incense; numerous delegates from the National Convention; two catafalques surmounted by huge plaster busts of the victims and carried by citizens dressed in antique Roman dress; hundreds of children holding aloft crowns of laurel...[8] The air must have been filled that day with the same dunting which had, earlier the same year, drummed out the deposed monarch's vain attempts to address the assembled mass of his former subjects, in the final moments before the severing blade fell.

Citizen Marat's revolutionary public prescriptions had in their day rivaled the most obscene of Sade's fantasied scenarios; as if he were one of Sade's voluble libertine characters, he had proclaimed that *to preserve himself, a human being has the right to attack the property, the freedom, even the life of his peers. It is his right to oppress, to put in chains, to massacre... rather than die from hunger, it is his—our—prerogative to cut the throats and devour the palpitating flesh of other human beings.*

Following Marat's rhetoric, *history was about to begin to invent perversions that exceeded Sade's fictional fantasies.*[9]

Sade's political apogee coincided with Robespierre's rise to absolute power and the beginning of the Terror. Yet he had badly misjudged the political zeitgeist, publicly proclaiming his atheism—one of his very few professions of public candor—at the very moment when the Revolution, in a hairpin swerve, came to label rejection of the Supreme Being an aristocratic anathema. So Sade was locked up yet again, first in a Paris prison called Les Madelonnettes, where he was confined to a filthy latrine, then in the Prison de Carmes, then in Saint-Lazare and finally in yet another site of detention in Paris, close to the large open space now called Place de la Nation, the Place du Trône Renversé—the words mean “overturned throne.” He would later describe this new jail, Picpus, as an “earthly paradise” compared with his previous lodgings:[10] “beautiful house, splendid garden, select society, admirable women.”[11]

The paradise would be short-lived. Directly *the guillotine's schedule intensified...the Terror would soon reach its height. When citizens complained of the dreadful stench caused by mass executions, it was moved from Place de la Révolution in mid-Paris to Barrière du Trône, just a few hundred yards from the Picpus jail. Since the city's cemeteries were filled to capacity, a huge ditch was dug in the unusually large garden of Sade's prison to accommodate a mass grave. It was the hottest summer of the century. Over the following weeks, more than thirteen hundred corpses would be buried and thousands of containers filled with blood would be dumped in the trench, which lay right under the inmates' cell windows. The great mid-nineteenth-century historian Michelet, who spoke to many survivors of the Terror, described these burial grounds: “The sight of Picpus was intolerable. The clay pushed everything back, refused to hide*

anything. Everything stayed on the surface. The liquid putrefaction floated above all and boiled under the July sun... Whitewash was thrown down, but so maladroitly that it made things still worse.

Now it was the Picpus residents who complained about the vile smell, *which spread for miles around. Their petition to the Committee of Public Safety protested that “the pestilentially decomposing corpses of those aristocrats who, having been enemies of the people during their lifetimes, now continue to kill it after their death.” But the city government merely had a wooden platform built on top of the mass grave and recommended that juniper, thyme and sage be burned to allay the reek. Throughout those summer weeks, the inmates of Picpus, forced to live with these macabre vestiges of Robespierre’s Great Terror, lost much of their former contact with the outside world. In the last half of June, newspapers were forbidden in the jail, visits were banned, the few letters that trickled in were heavily censored....Sade himself escaped the guillotine by a hair’s breath.[12]*

How is it possible that a great historical leap forward, a progressive thrust driven by the radical conviction that human citizens should be treated *equally* under the law (subject to the same dictates, entitled to the same rights), or a mass action fueled by the belief that the cruel hierarchies of caste, class and sex might be replaced, for perhaps the first time in human history, with just, egalitarian principles, should rush headlong into such horror? What elusive structure, once revealed, might demonstrate just how the exercise of liberty drifted directly into carnage, or describe how the collective attempt to realize the most noble potential of democracy—the Revolution, in this particular instance, which Nietzsche described as *aiming at the ‘brotherhood’ of nations and a blooming universal exchange of hearts*[13]—could produce this festival of death, this staging of *hell on earth*?

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By the time of our play the revolution has passed; for the mad detainees confined at Charenton a rehabilitative regime now holds sway. Sade, staging his drama recounting the death of Marat, is himself cast as a character in the happening unfolding before us (Artaud- and Brecht-inspired proceedings which, incidentally, bear little resemblance to the conventional drawing room dramas lavishly staged at the asylum by the actual biographical Marquis, who never once, in fact, produced a play about Marat’s assassination). In the streets and squares outside the asylum the bloody cataclysm has receded, and for the needy things are pretty much as they have always been; satisfaction remains elusive, despite liberally disseminated promises—tantalizing sensations, hopes—insinuating that fulfillment might be right around the corner. After even the most extreme of corrective actions, discontent persists. Sade recounts it drily to Marat:

Their soup’s burnt

They shout for better soup.

A woman finds her husband too short

she wants a taller one

A man finds his wife too skinny

he wants a plumper one

A man’s shoes pinch

but his neighbor's shoes fit comfortably
A poet runs out of poetry
and desperately gropes for new images
For hours an angler casts his line
Why aren't the fish biting
And so they join the revolution
thinking the revolution will give them everything
a fish
a poem
a new pair of shoes
a new wife
a new husband
and the best soup in the world
So they storm all the citadels
and there they are
and everything is just the same
no fish biting
verses botched
shoes pinching
a worn and stinking partner in bed
and the soup burnt
and all that heroism
which drove us down into the sewers
well we can talk about it to our grandchildren
if we have any grandchildren.[14]

These lines are likely to strike a familiar chord in any analyst. They convey the repetitiveness with which the speaking beings speaking from our couches will take aim and grasp, time and time again, for what they imagine to be an item of inestimable value—an, or the, *ultimate* object—only to find that, despite the most strenuous measures taken, the thing will prove in time to have been nothing other than a semblant, the brass

ring snatched on the wheeling carousel just the latest appearance in a seemingly endless series—lures or decoys veiling a persistent absence. From one to the next and then on to the next, something will still be missing. And Sade's lines demonstrate how, reeling around that void, a crowd of particular souls may come to take action, forming a mass and moving, which is to say forming a *mass movement*.

(Shrill whistles in background. A patient begins to run in a circle, a second and third join in. Sade: It's easy to get mass movements going/movements that move in vicious circles[15]...)

With a relentless identity, the same paining situations—the same stock scenarios, the same Grand Guignol plots—will in a person's life unfold time and again, *as if dictated by a malign fate*, engendering bitter complaints which, in their iterations and reiterations, may come to strike the ear of the attentive listener as something akin to a particularly perverse brand of *pleasure*. We remain blind to the stagecraft with which we ourselves have engineered these endless dramas; the precious (. . .) slips away again and again, the sweetbitter story repeats and it's as if we were, blindly, to *crave nothing more fervently* than the very suffering we protest with such vehemence, as if the *crushing weight* of these *innumerable repetitions* were to force an implicit, never-acknowledged question—the *question in each and every thing*, 'Do you desire this *once more and innumerable times more?*—or even as if that enduring, sought for/struggled against pain of losing had come to serve as something like our *ultimate, eternal confirmation and seal*.

Nietzsche's parable in *The Gay Science*, still throbbing today under the Freudian conceptions it came, decades later, to seed—*Pulsion, Repetition Compulsion, Unpleasure, Death Drive*—transmits with an untimely freshness the dramatic stakes involved. It's as if *some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more: and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. And as if you were to turn and answer them, smiling in the most voluptuous way: 'You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.'*[16]

It was only yesterday that one of my patients cried out suddenly, as if in pain: "the same, the same, always the same!" It was a phone session; answering her call I'd heard her hollering to an unseen interlocutor (the husband as a deep muffled voice, near-inaudible, in the background): *I'm in here! I'm on the phone! Just like usual!* She went on to talk about what she called *a typically terrible day* — adding that she knows *it's a cliché to complain about these problems, to repeat these suburban complaints*—describing being passed over, *yet again*, for a professional commission, a project she described as *a typical pork project*. Once again she'd been passed over and others had been favored, the same rivals always chosen over her, *choices which are obvious because they are the same people everyone uses, the same people everyone chooses*(and she has described acutely on more than one occasion the expert ways that she herself, time and time again, manoeuvres to insure that the unhappy outcome will be, in turn, akin to every other). Of the institution where she works she said: *everything is so predictable, so typical. Everything they do is always the same, always about the status quo...I don't want normal, I don't want predictable! I want different, I want new, I want transformational!*

I interjected, parroting her complaint and replicating the vehemence of her tones—the *same, the same, always the same!*—at which she remembered a dream, a fearsome dream about a daughter gone missing. Her girl was eventually returned to her, but with a *horrible thing sticking out of her arm, a kind of thorn, gray in color like the gray color of a worm stuck into her arm* and she had to take it out. I asked for her associations and she said that yesterday she had been *planting thorns* for her husband's birthday. Planting thorns? No, she cried *I meant to say planting flowers! I was planting flowers and one of them had a thorn on it and I accidentally stuck my finger. I must have said planting thorns because I'm conflicted about his birthday... I wanted to plant flowers because I thought it would give him pleasure, because I knew that it would have meaning for him. But I said planting thorns instead.* I almost cut the session there, but felt compelled to ask her what else came to mind about the dream. She said: *the color of the thorn was like a snake, like a*

worm... it reminded me of... the mixing of sex and death. Thanos. There is some of that in the dream.

Something of it evokes the landscape of Sade's fictions. The dream creates a surround where the wish to give pleasure or *generate meaning* cycles into the seeding of thorns which prick. Prick or get pricked: under the crushing weight of the same—the wheel recurring, returning, repeating—suffering inmixes with enjoyment, *sex*(from the Latin *sexus*, signifying the hurtful pleasure or pleasing pain of being subjected to the *seco*, that piercing division or cut which halves the human race) with *death*. *Scent of rot at the heart of love-making*: [17] she calls this mingling or meddling “Thanos,” inexplicably dropping the syllable “at” from the Greek word—the term, *Thanatos*, adopted by Freud in a speculative foray to name that pulse within erotic passion which drifts, drives or pushes towards non-life. Something in our repetitions belies the sentimental distinctions. It seeks always, he famously wrote, to return us to our previous state, which is that of inertia—prior stasis of inorganic material, of the dead matter preceding and succeeding all life. There's something sick and sexy about what repeats, and Freud named it.

(In that speculative venture, which he called *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud even revisited Aristophanes' myth from *The Symposium*. He retold the tale of those ancestral beings Zeus had been moved to *cut as one slices quinces apart for pickling*, and in his retelling he cast the desire their division engendered as something far more mordant, far more biting—etymologically, *split*—than the sort of sweet sentimental *yearning* which might *drive [trieb] the two halves back together, entwined with hands interlaced*. [18] In place of that sort of amatory pining, Freud morbidly envisioned the desire for union (or reunion) as an overriding impulse to *regress*, a ceaseless compulsion to return, to turn again to that prior state which would be both origin and end of all biological forms: state of carbon, state of bone or mineral or inanimate matter—*DEATH, the nonliving which preexists the living*.) [19]

But something doesn't quite add up in Freud's text—as in the dream, or in Sade's ceaseless scrawling, the sixteen volumes of his *Oeuvres Complètes* comprising thousands of pages of graphic exhortation and fantasy (over 250,000 words making up the novel *120 Days of Sodom* alone, transcribed in microscopic handwriting, pasted into a forty-nine foot-long scroll and secreted in a crevice in the wall of his cell in the Bastille). [20] There's a dubious tension there, some enduring, undelineated mismatch running through all the torturous theorization and never fully accounted for, despite Freud's Herculean labors to master it: he tries heroically to reconcile *pleasure's tendency to seek an endpoint*—a *satisfaction* he characterized, variously, as a pacifying reduction in tension, as an effort to maintain arousal at a pleasingly homeostatic minimal level (a kind of Nirvana, a timed-release blow-out) or even as the desire for oblivion, full stop—with the drive to *keep enjoyment going at all costs*, beyond death even. All his efforts prove fruitless.

You can find the same contradiction in Sade (the *Sadian universe* being *riddled*, like the Freudian one, *with philosophical paradox*). [21] Since pleasure is evanescent, disappearing in the very consummation it continually seeks, Sade cleaves to pain. His fictional libertines share an *unquenchable thirst for infinite torments*; [22] they fantasize that by prolonging *their victims' suffering* ad infinitum their stimulations might be indefinitely extended. Their monstrous phalli, perpetually tumescent; their endlessly enumerated, combinatory copulations; their fountains of glistening ejaculate; their *human pyramids* which, in Lacan's words... *fabulously demonstrate the cascading nature of jouissance* all aim, he writes, for *water buffets of desire built to make the Villa d'Este Gardens sparkle with a baroque voluptuousness*; enjoyment *spurting up into the heavens*. [23] In Sade's texts the torturers remain perpetually aroused, their victims fresh and *in the full radiance of their bodily splendor*; [24] *despite the horrendous ordeals to which they are being subjected*, they preserve, unmarred to the very end, *the exquisite delicacy of their physical features*. (There's also a monotony to the clichéd comeliness of these boys and girls, a synthetic vapidness to the style of the writing deployed to describe them, lacking specifics and abounding with vague generalities and platitudes—which, we'll come to see, is not unrelated to this contradiction.)

The problem is that Sade's libertines' longing for annihilation collides with their desire to keep the orgy going. Dany Nobus describes how the *incomparable and unassailable beauty* of their victims *erects for them a last barrier against the satisfaction of their desire for absolute destruction... the unspeakable horror of seeing their criminal will come to full fruition... which would not only require the annihilation of humanity, God and Nature, but also of the libertines themselves.*[25] This logical failure, never fully articulated, encapsulates what Lacan described as *an incoherence in Sade's work.*[26] Beauty takes the place of goodness or morality there; in a universe ruled by murderous nature, it affords a kind of dyke against the unfettered will to destruction bequeathed by the natural state of things to all humanity, a death drive which, according to Sade, only the most monstrous of perverts have the rational rigor and firmness to claim as their unflinching law. They've pledged to live subject to the dictates of its cruelty, seeking nothing less than a full stop, an irrevocable end to the play of pleasure's perpetual extinction and rekindling. They aim for nothing more than to escape its eternal cycling, arousal into consummation, death into burgeoning life. Yet they abjure satisfaction and its concomitant waste, exhaustion, loss; they rush headlong towards the same full stop they seek to prevent at any cost.

In a discussion of Lacan's reading, via Pierre Klossowski, of Sade's *Juliette*, Nobus describes how the novel's eponymous heroine secures *an audience (and a grandiose orgy)* with Pope Pius VI at the Vatican. *Over a post-coital meal, the Pontiff—Count Giovanni Angelo Braschi, the most depraved libertine ever to occupy the Holy See—agrees to share his doctrine with his French companion: his Holiness concludes that whenever a human being is sacrificed on the altar of libertinage, this act only deprives the victim of his 'first life,' and that to do justice to Nature's extreme cruelty, one would also need to be able to wrest away the 'second life,' so that the decaying corpses would be prevented from re-entering a new cycle of regeneration. The ground would have to be poisoned to prevent death from seeding new life, the second life in which matter... renews and reorganizes itself within the entrails of mother earth.*[27]

Pius tells Juliette that "*nature is a great murderess herself and ... her single reason for murdering is to obtain, from the wholesale annihilation of cast creatures, the chance to recast them anew. ... Rend away, hack and hew, torment, break, wreck, massacre, burn, grind to dust, melt... you simply shall have done so many services to this blade of grass, this mite, this maggot, into which the body I slew has latterly metamorphosed.*[28] *To serve her better ... one would have to be able to prevent the regeneration resultant from the corpses we bury.*"[29] (This from the pen of a writer who choked on the stench at Vincennes, at the Bastille—where a moat of raw sewage fouled the air—and at Picpus. He wrote the earliest draft of *Juliette* while held in isolation there, faced with the effluent remains of decapitated nobles like he himself: the French nobility become a real river of putrefying blood, overbrimming *the ditches that had been dug to receive it,*[30] rejected by the soil.)

It is difficult to see how a desire to kill life twice can be combined with a desire for suffering to be prolonged. [31] Nature may endow libertines with the wish for a death so absolute that it would overcome life's incessant, teeming movement—yet even the idea of such a terminus will prove, for Sade, ultimately a ruse. Any *inertia* will always ever be *only apparent; poisoning the soil would only accord Nature greater freedom to form fresh miracles.*[32] Ever true to its mandate, nature seeks destruction only in order to create something new; for Sade, this is its ultimate law. So the murderer can't even enjoy destroying. *The annihilation upon which he flatters himself when in sound health, or at which he shudders when he is sick, is no annihilation at all—that annihilation is unfortunately something he cannot possibly achieve.*[33]

Nature repeats. Its *active principle* is that of perpetual motion. *Acts without interruption; interdependent animal, mineral and vegetable kingdoms* are bound by this endless *movement* into an *invisible chain* by whose laws they *mechanically reproduce, destroy, combine*. This tireless motion, persisting even through death and the dissolution of *bodies, transmutes* them, *twisting* or *torqueing morality*: there's *no moment*

when the body of the animal is at rest... it never dies.[34] What becomes of *crime* within the confines of this vast food chain, what of *virtue*? Within its circling, one bleeds into the other.

Violent transgressions will be upheld as an ideal in Pope Pius' doctrine; *cruelty* leading to torture and murder will be praised as one of our *most natural dispositions* there, as our sweetest *penchant*, *one of the keenest Nature* has bequeathed us. The *most wicked individual on earth*, this depraved Holiness tells Juliette, *the most abominable, the most ferocious, the most barbarous*, will be but *the spokesman of her desires, the vehicle of her will, and the surest agent of her caprices*. *Virtues become crimes from her point of view*, whereas, *contrariwise, if creatures destroy one another, they do well* in her eyes. *The violent throbbings* cruel acts *cause us to feel* in our bodies... *are the invincible proof* of this; *once we lend ourselves to do their bidding, voluptuousness invades us through every pore.*[35] Speaking beings have no hope ever of transgressing this relentless and all-encompassing law, given the capaciousness, the voraciousness of nature's morality; its inexorable mechanism, crude and material, forecloses the possibility of any rebellion. There will be no exiting the circuit.

Across the empty arena, Sade addresses the activist Marat (while the nuns *murmur a short litany*):

I hate nature

this passionless spectator this unbreakable iceberg-face

that can bear everything

this goads us to greater and greater acts

(Breathing heavily.)

Haven't we always beaten down those weaker than ourselves

Haven't we torn at their throats

with continuous villainy and lust

Haven't we experimented in our laboratories

before applying the final solution[36]

Sade revolted. An unrepentant atheist, he put nature in the place of God, who tortures and torments.[37] Nature replaces the deity in Sade as a loathed and venerated *dictator*, a bossy voice from the void bound to human subjects in the place of their very *cause*—as origin or determining potency, as obscure source of dogmatic first principles, as pretext or justification for extreme actions, or as fountainhead of reason and judicial processes—an omniscient power, like God before her, he ragefully defiled.

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How might *a desire to kill life twice be combined with a desire for suffering to be prolonged*? Still we've made no real headway. We're no closer to the Sadian conundrum; *everything may now appear to begin to become clearer, but at this point we also have the sense that everything is beginning to become extremely obscure.*[38] Trying to dig the *reason* out of Sade's corpus, obsessed with rational principles as he was,

resembles nothing more than the foolishness of applying theoretical axioms in a vain attempt to glean meaning from a dream: his *ideology is inseparable from his passions*. (Keats, in a letter of 1883: “axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses.”)

In fact, Blanchot’s characterization of *Sade’s Reason* rings uncannily apt; it could serve just as well as a spot-on description of Freud’s tortured search for elucidation in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. What’s more, Blanchot evokes the tangled woods you enter at the outset of any *talking cure*, the winding paths which confound any operative notion of *progress*: at every step, your *theoretical ideas release the irrational forces that are bound up with them*. *These impulses at once animate and frustrate your thinking, driving or beating at your reasoned arguments with such violence that, although your logic may valiantly hold out for a time, eventually you’ll be bound to give over, voluptuously—as if by yielding to the dark pull you might come to master it*. If that tack by some stroke proves successful, it will serve only to release still *other obscure forces which will then lead, twist and pervert your thought anew*. *The result is that everything said, no matter how clear, seems at the mercy of something unsaid, which will a bit later be revealed and again incorporated by logic only to be compelled, yet again, to obey the movement of the still hidden force*. *In the end, everything will be brought to light, everything will come to be said, but everything will also be once again buried within the obscurity of unreflective thought and unformulatable moments*. Sade’s reason is our reason. There’s a circularity to it. *The reader’s—or speaker’s, or auditor’s—unease... is often very intense*. [39]

You enter dark woods. The quintessential Sadian site is found in the *120 Days of Sodom*; Silling, a château ensconced in the depths of the Black Forest, where a secret society of voluptuaries retreat with a harem of kidnapped slaves. The structure is *hermetically isolated from the world*, Roland Barthes writes, *by a series of obstacles that recall those found in certain fairy tales: a village of woodcutter-smugglers (who allow no one to pass), a steep mountain, a dizzy precipice which can be crossed only by a bridge (which the libertines destroy once they are inside), a thirty-foot wall, a deep moat, a door which is walled up as soon as they have entered, and lastly, a frightful lot of snow*.

Sadian places are hellish. Ensconced in remote, inaccessible locales—châteaux buried deep within impenetrable forests, *fortresses, palaces, monasteries, salons, bed chambers, boudoirs, walled gardens and underground passages*[40]—libertines enact tireless, rigorously choreographed orgies, mathematical in the specificity of their taxonomized, numbered and inventoried doings, subject from all sides to the gaze of titillated voyeurs and dominated by dictatorial “storytellers” who with relentless precision control their every figure, posture, scene and sequence. Sade depicts in limpid, clinical prose this claustrophobic world of pictures brought to life, of ordered assemblies composed of interpenetrating body parts. Framed or cut up, tortured and dismembered figures *compose a whole* there, becoming moving flesh machines. *Everyone creates an immense and subtle mechanism, a meticulous clockwork, whose function is to connect the sexual discharges, to produce a continuous tempo, to bring pleasure to the subject on a conveyor belt (the subject is magnified as the outcome and final point of the entire machinery, and yet denied, reduced to a part of his body)*. [41]

George Steiner describes these fictional encampments as *complete, coherent worlds with their own measure of time*, which is that of *pain... regulated gradations of horror within the total, concentric sphere*. Sade’s bound spaces—generic “non-places” where the names of the victims have been erased—prefigure their real enactment in the history to come, in the rubber plantations of the Belgian Congo and Putumayo, the cotton fields of the American South; in Dachau and Auschwitz and the pyramids of leashed and naked bodies heaped at Abu Ghraib. In these lawless sites, death orgies (etymologically, “doings”) would soon come to actualize Sade’s *methodical industrialization of the human body*. *Representing, with consummate logic, an assembly-line and piece-work model of human relations, Sade’s “tableaux” embodied, often down to*

minutiae... the image and chronicles of Hell in European art and thought from the twelfth to the eighteenth centuries. Over eons these portraits had dragged, harrowed or drawn forth something unspeakable, as if to lend, generations before their enactment, the deranged horrors of Belsen a kind of 'expected logic.'"[42]

Running through the veins of the many brilliant texts about Sade you can discern an anxious sense that what would come to transpire in those *zones of exception*[43]—spaces with *no limits or barriers... beyond civilization, beyond the reach of the law*—had been prefigured in his imagined milieu; his stories are driven by a relentless motor, as if they were subject to the same unspeakable pulsion that history would elaborate in the coming epochs.

In the fortress-château of Silling, for example, at the very peak of a mountain located *in the depths of an uninhabitable fore stand split by a wide crevasse that plunges more than a thousand feet below*, four elderly women expert at the arts of debauchery narrate their autobiographies. The stories told by these jaded, spent procuresses—*anecdotes numbered, ordered and deployed in mounting extremes of vice and complexity, each to be acted out in turn by the assembled libertines*—comprise the very *engine* of the novel, *increasing radically in repulsiveness* and hurtling relentlessly towards the final phase which will, readers have been forewarned, culminate in descriptions that few will be able to stomach. Sade's biographer Neal Schaeffer notes that it is this *dreadful expectation that inexorably drives the narrative forward... each of the six hundred perversions will be a unique part of a progression, forming a great chain of being running from simplest and least offensive to most complex and inexpressibly horrific. The fundamental dynamic of this book... is crescendo. Beginning with snickers (one of the five perversions narrated on the first day concerns a priest whose sole pleasure is to suck the snot out of a girl's nose), the tale will culminate in endless, ineradicable screams.*[44]

(Nothing could be further, Schaeffer notes, from the inexorable forward thrust of this Sadian novel than the circularity of pornography. Its *readily surging gratifications* seek to *allay anxiety*, while Sade's text *seeks to arouse it*; in place of the limited pornographic repertoire of acts repeated *by the same or similar stock characters over and over, as though in a continuous loop, Sade's plot is deliberately progressive. If plot and characterization in pornography are made banal so as to speed the cycle (ostinato of arousal, consummation, rearousal...), Les Cent Vingt Journées succeeds in achieving the opposite effect. Sade promotes anguish. He short-circuits satisfaction. He dares the reader on and on.*[45])

Sade's dreadful progression

its form echoing or bell weathering

the relentless historical search

for an outside

—beyond nature, beyond the law—

will not *soften*. It will not *slow down*.

Yet the onrush recreates

time and tide again

its own limit point

deep *inside*

his constructed enclosures,

pent-places within the story

or the holes of your own body.

SADÉ:

Marat

as I sat there in the Bastille

for thirteen long years

I learned

that this is a world of bodies

each body pulsing with a terrible power

each body alone and racked with its own unrest

In that loneliness

marooned in a stone sea

I heard lips whispering continuously

and felt all the time

in the palms of my hands and in my skin

touching and stroking

shut behind thirteen bolted doors

my feet fettered

I dreamed only of the orifices of the body

put there

so one may hook and twine oneself in them

Continuously I dreamed of this confrontation

and it was a dream of the most savage jealousies

and cruelest imagining

Marat

these cells of the inner self

are worse than the deepest stone dungeon

and as long as they are locked

all your revolution remains

only a prison mutiny

to be put down

by corrupted fellow prisoners

CHORUS

(Repeating with musical accompaniment)

And what's the point of a revolution

Without general copulation

(Music ends.)[46]

•

Barthes describes Sadian enclosures as *relentless*; they *shelter vice* from the prying eyes of the world—from *judgment*. Yet secreted within these hidden places lie embeds still further removed: cells or dungeons or “keeps” where, in a world *deeply penetrated by speech*, the libertine—alone with his object—achieves a *rare paradox: that of a silent act*. ... *The silence of the “solitary” is completely confounded with the blank of the narrative: the story stops, the meaning stops*. This hermeneutic “hole” has as its analogous sign the *very site of the solitaries: these are usually sub-cellars, crypts, tunnels, excavations located deep within or burrowed underneath the châteaux, the gardens, the pits from which one emerges alone, saying nothing*.

Such holds or keeps serve, in the most originary sense, as *asylums*—sanctuaries, *literally*, ‘*inviolable places*’ where, *formerly ... criminals and debtors sought shelter from justice and from which they could not be taken without sacrilege*. Beyond the reach of the law there, over and over, revolt will take form as an *act without words*. Something essentially private—set apart, peculiar or personal, one’s own—is played out in the secret confines of the body, put into play or timelessly expended: the Sadian scenes, in effect, *theatricalize the solitude* of the body. In the holes something unspeakable gets represented, lending the narrative what Agamben would call a *perforated* structure. Barthes calls it *rhapsodic*.

•

I’m struck again (Barthes remarks that *in French, to strike, frapper, applies to medals*, the minting of *counterfeit money, chilled champagne and the blows of young toughs*) by the convergence between the Sadian text and the word-fabrics woven, in psychoanalysis, from the verbal encounters and bodily performances making up its practice: in both discourses *sensation confounds the story*. In both kinds of *sayings*, meaning will be *crushed, ruined, disgraced*—or simply *thrown into disorder*.

Barthes puts it better; describing Sade's writing he could be describing an analysis: *to recount, here, does not consist in developing a story and then untangling it, adhering to an infinitely organic model (to be born, to live, to die), i.e., to subject the series of episodes to a natural (or logical) order... but in purely and simply juxtaposing iterative and mobile fragments: then the continuum is merely a series of bits and pieces, a baroque fabric of odds and ends. The Sadian rhapsody thus unfolds without order: voyages, thefts, murders, philosophical dissertations, libidinous scenes, escapes, secondary narratives, schedules of orgies, descriptions of machines, etc. This construction frustrates the paradigmatic structure of the narrative... it constitutes an outrage of meaning: the rhapsodic (Sadian) novel has no meaning or direction, nothing compels it to progress, to develop, or to end.*[47]

Outrage of meaning: in both Sadian and psychoanalytic fields you're confronted by texts which *surpass all reasonable bounds, which go beyond, exceeding, damaging and insulting* their ostensible subjects; texts which have become *rhapsodic*—akin to epic poems which *turn, which bend or weave, which stitch or string together songs*. Such word-meshes enfold a bodily experience uninformed by cognition. Julia Kristeva figures this somatic zone as a sort of *sensorial cave* at the *extreme limits* of language. *Opaque and nonverbal*, it's the plant-like state you enter, she says, in *deep sleep* or in *the sensations of perverse pleasure*.

(Ann Carson: *Plants do not actually sleep. Nor do they lie or even bluff. They do, however, expose their genitalia.*[48])

Buried deep inside or catapulted light years beyond, you enter the alien space inhering in topological structures like the *Klein bottle* or *Möbius strip*, forms where *exterior and interior in-determine each other*. No @ in it, no place, no name: a kind of *reciprocal extraterritoriality* or *aterritoriality* finds its home there, in an atopia structurally akin, in the most perverse way imaginable, to that of constructed detention sites, the *camps* where law has been suspended as in a *state of emergency*. Beyond understanding; in these non-places the *very state of exception starts to become the rule: anything will be possible*,[49] no act will be forbidden.

The *rhapsodic* verbal meshes enfolding these zones are *perforated*, opening into something fundamentally *untranslatable*, licentious and unmarked, something incoherent which casts *no shadow*; this is the dimension of language which can never be *traced onto an idea*. Encompassing or inhabiting the *gap between feeling and saying*, Kristeva writes, its *chasm*(its breach or gulf, its yawning hollow, its chaos) can be *included in normative discourse only by producing the coalescence of sensations and linguistic strokes* that we call *style*. [50]

Yet style is precisely what Sade lacks.

Barthes, in another text devoted to what he calls the *zero degree of writing*, describes it as a bodily humor. Style, in a person's talk or their writing, would by this gambit be the means through which language transmits *temperaments*—the times or seasons of the body, sanguine, choleric, melancholic or phlegmatic in their turn. Style mobilizes the writer's or speaker's prehistory in a kind of effervescence or pulse driving present gestures and forecasting future possibilities: *imagery, delivery, vocabulary spring from the body and the past of the writer and gradually become the very reflexes of his art*. It's a singular language rooted in the depths of an *author's personal and secret mythology*, a kind of *subnature of expression where the first coition of words and things takes place, where flesh and external reality come together, where*, Barthes writes, *once and for all the great verbal themes of his existence come to be installed*. The form taken by a secret alliance of *intention and carnal structure*, he calls it, with astonishing acuity, *an interim of language*.

The interim space transmitted by style will be nothing other than the form taken by time past, the *recollection ever locked within the body of a writer or speaker*. [51] (It plunges *into the closed recollection of the person, achieving its opacity from a certain experience of matter*.) A re-collection of past happenings on the stage of the present moment, linguistic style torques the law, composing *fragments of a reality entirely alien to language*. It subsists always (*by reason of its biological origin*) *outside* or beyond the reach of that *pact which binds the writer to society*. Transgressing or violating the very grammatical rules and social ties

to which it—nonetheless—remains subject, style elaborates dislocation, disjoint, gap: between things and words, between instances and ideas, between soma and psyche.

Sade's gambit was something else again entirely. He subjected bodily frags to the dictates of a language aspiring to the status of an implacable code, less a *coalescence* or efflorescence of words and somatic sense than a *new chemistry of the text*, a striving for *the fusion (as under a high temperature) of discourse and the body*. [52] In so doing he *perfected another rhetoric, a naked nomenclature* which sought to *articulate everything*, leaving no trace *indecipherable*. He aspired to a discourse devoid of allusion, allowing no play of sense and brooking no misunderstanding, a mode of communication in which *cutup signs* would be *reprised in a combinative, reconstituting a whole*. [53]

No irreducible quality of ejaculation or happiness will remain in this crystal-clear, functional mode of writing; everything will be ordered, planned, used to some end. (His libertines, time and again: *Let's put some order in these revels; measure is required even in the depths of infamy*.) Barthes calls it a *crudity*, an *obscenity*: *Sade's sexual lexicon... sticks to pure denotation (an exploit usually reserved for scientific, algorithmic languages); Sadian discourse seems to be constructed on a bedrock that nothing can penetrate, move, transform... Through the crudity of the language a discourse outside meaning is established, thwarting any 'interpretation' and even any symbolism, a custom-free territory exterior to exchange and to the penal system, a kind of Adamic language stubbornly determined not to signify: we might call it a language without supplement*. [54]

Sade sought what has Steiner described as an *absolute fit between word and world*. He aspired to the age-old dream of creating a *single, truth-functional language* which would allow for an *ontological concurrence with the facts of the world*, a language in which *word and object, thought and articulation*, would, as Steiner puts it, *mesh organically*. At last, a means to supersede the *constant, intractable slippages between signifier and signified, between intention and executive form!* Sade took up the revolutionary vanguard of the quest to regain a mythical *Adamic Esperanto... tautological in respect of truth and the world*, in which *the objects, the conditions of perception and predication met with in reality* would correspond *exactly, point-to-point, as in a soluble equation, with the terms used to describe them*. *No more misprision, no more falsehood; the names given to each living creature would be nothing more or less, in turn, than an exact and total delineation of their essence*. Man would thus *on his own scale, proportionate to that of God, "speak being."* [55]

Sade's texts grasp after a cipher truer to nature's law than nature itself—they long for a formula or algorithm, wrested from nature, which would supersede its repetitive cycling. Aiming to conquer for all time the unspeakable hole lying (in its materiality, in its void or irrecoverable muck) at the source of all rules and moral dictates, Sade stood as the harbinger of a coming revolt against the indeterminacy and cruelty of all symbolic *orders*; he fought to overturn the laws dictating at once the terms of speech and the social bonds predicating human flourishing.

Sade tortured discourse, working it into a code, wrenching it from the root-mesh of natural language (heritage of the dead) and aspiring to something like a pure combinatory; freed from the stink of matter and generation, cleansed of the germinative rot of words and the genealogical-etymological palimpsests informing them, this new discourse—taken up, elaborated and driving future revolutions—would come ultimately to render communication *ecstatic*, displaced, as deathless as the ever-fresh platinum objects of the libertines' enjoyments—human discourse itself cast in the uncanny role of replicant-host for the shining, artificial intelligences animating our devices.

Clothed as a wager on *equity* and fueled by cycles of rebellion, the advancing Sadian régime would in the coming epochs seek to replace the word and its elaborate hierarchies, the harsh sexed and social divisions inhering in the rules of its grammar, with what Barthes calls (describing the *anti-style* of Sade's writing) an *image practice*—an *erotic, fantasmatic fashioning of the social system via imitation, tableau, séance*; or an *imaginary fashioning of politics via the meme, the show or the emission*. The future *historical age and state*

would be ruled by this *spectacle*,[56] a *flow of images* capable of juxtaposing all things *without contradiction*, underwritten by a *binary language*, programmed and passing for the *timeless source of a superior, impartial and total logic*. [57]

Beyond words: there would be *nothing of God* in it, *nothing of the world*, nothing of matter, only, as Agamben tells it, an *extreme nullifying unveiling*, the *state of fully realized nihilism*; *contemporary politics* taking the precise form there of a symbolic voiding, a *disarticulating and emptying*, *all over the planet of traditions and beliefs, ideologies and religious identities and communities*. This evacuation of the word will come, he warns—even more than *economic necessities and technological development*—to drive *the nations of the earth toward a single common destiny*, social ties dissolving even as they trumpet their particular linguistic and national identities, names and places fading fast, even as they champion their blood and soil; they'll come to undergo nothing less than the *alienation of linguistic being itself, the uprooting of all peoples from their vital dwelling in language*.

Do you wonder what revolt might then be possible, within such a vast *phantasmagorical vacuousness*, once *the diversities that had marked the tragicomedy of universal history—the people and generations that had followed one another on the earth; the differences of language, of dialect, of ways of life, of character, ... custom, and even the physical particularities of each person—had lost any meaning*, timbre or body, once *the absurdity of individual existence had been rendered senseless—devoid of the senses, devoid of the capacity for transmission, expression, communication?*[58] I do. Sade pioneered a new “*language*” for the coming non-places, the nameless *exception camps*. This language, Barthes writes, would be *no longer spoken but acted*. [59]

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How might *a desire to kill life twice be combined with a desire for suffering to be prolonged?* At last we've stumbled on, if not a answer to the question, at least an example of how such a conundrum might come to be realized on the global stage—the *Sadian society of the spectacle in which we live having by now spread its dominion over the whole planet*. What Agamben doesn't hesitate to call its *miseries*, its *slavery*, recall Dante's *Inferno*, where the repetitive search for evanescent pleasure plummets headlong into everlasting torment.

Dante even—shades of Sade—calls this hell a “*second death*,” in the *Commedia*'s concentric rings of suffering, eternal damnation is the punishment meted out to those who in life sought mortal enjoyment as the greatest good. In a kind of circling dissolution there, (dying) pleasure cycles into enduring pain. Yet the poem's allegorized ratio (enjoyment to suffering, immortality to oblivion) confounds all logical comprehension. Reckoning suffers.

Once again I find myself up against it; as with my tenuous apprehension of the logic undergirding my own analytic cases (or my vain attempts to master the turns of Freud's torturous theory), my suffering mind can't seem to unravel this conceptual tangle. Beyond the *locus of good and evil*, beyond the limit point of a *beauty* that both *designates and veils* the annihilation that Dante, Sade and Lacan, drawing on Christian doctrine, all referred to as a *second death*, [60] this intractable logical knot—kill life twice/prolong suffering; prolong suffering/extend enjoyment—rhymes uncannily with the terms of the current civilizational distemper.

We might cast our contemporary scene as a kind of *temporal evasion* akin to that of the heretics in Dante's Hell, the present become a *central nothingness expanding with time until it engulfs both past and future*, [61] a historical non-place voided of the *significance* which might be granted by any compensatory future tense, absent any organizing *dogma or genuinely felt metaphoric imperative of progress and perfectibility*. (Dante: *All our knowledge shall be a dead thing from that moment on/When the door of the future is shut*

[62] Today the repetition of past horrors couples perversely with a sense of accelerated unraveling. It's as if history had itself taken on a libertine tone, at once hurtling towards oblivion and extending or *prolonging suffering* in the desperate search for a *forever* of fantasized mastery, perfected algorithms or excellently controlled, cryogenic ecstasy—as if the times themselves had come to manifest an enjoyment confounding any viable distinction between pleasure and pain, or to assume a Sadian glee in the giving and receiving of *sufferance*.

I'm talking of course about the same sick-making *jouissance* veining all those repetitive enactments through which we (our patients, ourselves) engineer our own failures, engender our own suffering or inflame our own private "wound." In case after case we set up scenarios to display it. We rub the salt or nettles in. We *create a scene*; making a spectacle of our anguish. In his seminar of '68, Lacan spoke directly to this perverse brand of pleasure, which he characterized as the *search for a ruinous enjoyment: what is repeated is a loss*, he said, *the lost object delineated by Freud* taking center stage.

It's a voluptuous suffering, this *jouissance*, akin to the whippings Sade got off on, the marking of bodies with welts—etymologically, *overturnings*—and scars, as if we all, all of us, shared in his masochistic fantasy. (He was always begging to be whipped). As if our scabs and scores were to serve as nothing less than the reincisions of an originary trace conveying the very essence of *significance* (our wheals as iterations of a kind of ur-signifier), *the glory of the mark* on the skin, Lacan suggested enigmatically, functions as *a machine already conducting pleasure*. [63]

We struggle to keep our violent *agitation* in check, to maintain its arousal and forward drive "at the lowest possible level of tension." We seek out pleasures in order to bind it. Lacan claimed that pleasure itself, Freud's *pleasure principle*, serves ultimately as a kind of hedge, like the titanium beauty of the Sadian libertines' victims, against the overwhelming tide of this bloodthirsty appetite—though our pleasures may find themselves at any time engulfed by a tidal wave of the enjoyment which, in Lacan's words, *goes against life*. *Beyond cycles of need and satisfaction*, something else reappears: the prospect of the disappearance of life itself, the return to stinking matter—or to pristine minerality. *Jouissance perfectly reveals the inanimate*. It comes back. *Repetition represents the return of jouissance*, he said in '68, *producing a defect or failure*. [64] This enjoyment is forbidden, and *only comes into play through accident, contingency, chance... the living being ordinarily purrs along with pleasure*.

With each repetition, something will be missed again. We will have held some element in abeyance. Some originary trauma or pleasure will yet be detained, a delayed *primal scene* or unspeakable congress (once witnessed, fantasized, *looked to*), a forbidden encounter or banned mode of being in the world pending still. Instead of recalling the realness of it, weaving its intractability into a story or song or otherwise laboring to signify it, we'll have kept it aside—immured or buried. The French term used by Lacan is *en souffrance*, which means both *in suspense* and *in pain*. Pain lasts longer; it keeps that something always *in potentia*.

We just don't want to know it. Hungrily servicing our refusal, our *passion for ignorance*, we'll shed blood to keep it at bay. Mindless, devoid of sense—as if driven by a blind or submerged will—we'll *act*, seizing, manipulating or torturing logic after the fact. This particular pathology of reason may have reached its apogee during the French revolution, when the rigors of Enlightenment oratory underwent rococo torments in the speeches of the 1789 French National Assembly; Kristeva notes that the rhetorical and conceptual *extravagance* staking place there would *elicit peals of laughter today, if the rationalist repression and democratic "right thinking" that they demonstrated were not so monstrous, as much in the speeches delivered as in the acts that followed*. A "*principle of equality*" for death had finally become possible, an efficient *technique* to achieve *democratic equality*—the new, mechanical gadget, the *painless guillotine*. That year, heads fell *like roof tiles*. [65]

The devastation engendered by this particular method of acting realizes, in the starkest possible terms, the radical opposition between *stylish* word-meshes—*perforated* [66] or pitted texts *transforming an imaginary*

intimacy with death ... into representation and thought—and the bloody enactments with which *revolutionary Terror confronts us*. Such acts were, still are, justified by a perverse rationality. Kristeva calls the real carnage witnessed by Sade a *revolting abjection practiced by humanity under the guise of an egalitarian institution of decapitation*. Or, significantly, a *new religiosity lacking in imagination and rudimentary in symbolism, the passage to the act itself taking the place of culture and justice*. [67]

—*Passage-à-l'acte* is a concept with an illustrious history in French psychiatry. It represents an attempt to account for impulsive acts of extreme violence, instances in which destructive drives impel human doings unmediated by metaphor, signifying or thought of any kind. (“The gun just went off,” I might say blankly, as if I had had nothing to do with what transpired.) Lacan described this kind of happening in theatrical terms: *the subject, in search of his elusive thing, falls off the stage into the world, where the real bears down*. Or, alternately: *escape from the scene, stage exit, fugue state*. [68]

Following these threads has led me to a very bad place. The graphs are painful; they hurt to write, and I fear they hurt to read. Lately I wake up each morning under a heavy cloud. The rotten thought keeps coming back, like a bad smell: *I just can't get to the end*. The argument feels interminable or illegible, the lines too much, perhaps, to sustain. This heavy atmosphere brings to mind *Saló*, Pier Paolo Pasolini's last film. An adaptation of Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*, the work was widely described as excessive, as inassimilable or irredeemable—an *unbearable spectacle*.

Saló represented the poet's final, desperate effort to represent the global *post-industrial order* in allegorical form. *An omnivorous new Power*, he called it, *producing unreality*, cannibalizing anything which might yet lie outside the discourse of capitalism. The film spoke out against this spectacular order in which, in the words of Maurizio Viano, *referentiality itself had disappeared*. In *Saló* Pasolini decried the *normalizing and pervertible régime*—Kristeva's term [69]—which promotes *a tolerance as vast as it is false*, colonizing even what he called *the last bulwark of reality... that pulse lying in bodies with the archaic, dark, vital presence of their sexual organs*. [70]

I maintain that psychoanalysis offers the most potent medicine against the concentric rings of this Power—the fenced-in shape of things that post-war French intellectuals called, with reference to the horror of the *camps, concentrational*.

In place of the spherical hell so vividly evoked, after Dante, by Pasolini, Lacan offered the world a method, a practice and an ethos grounded in *another shape*. A topological figure drawn from the coat-of-arms of the noble Borromeo family (and before that, from the Old Norse *Valknut*, representing slain warriors), it takes the form of three rings interinvolved, interimplicated such that to cut one would mean to unlink the other two. You might think of these rings as *actors*, because they perform—they *play*, they *work*—by mimicking each other, such that at any given moment one might appear indistinguishable from another. [71]

One ring takes the form of enjoyment, the jubilation engendered by an imagined “whole.” It's like an arena with a show, a spectacular circle of images, a protean phantasmagoria promising plenitude: fantasy of “nothing missing.” Another trades words, enacts exchanges, and fails time and time again—circling (or falling into) a hole with no apparent bottom. The third encompasses an element which flees, always eluding capture in words or images, burrowing deep inside the body or flying to the far outer reaches of space. Obviating any possible distinction between outside and in, indeed any binary logic whatsoever, it's a register comprising the intimate-alien element that Lacan called the *real*.

His shape turns the Sadian dynamic on its head. The *temporal evasion* of capitalist Power realizes itself, in *reverse*, as the timeless *other scene* of unknown knowing, the unconscious rudiment, essential to psychoanalysis, which Lacan called a *non-temporal locus*. [72] Our practice, native to this locus, casts

repetition in a new light; it treats the timelessness of eternal recurrence as a ground on which something essential is put continually into play—a *playground*.

Lacan once said that *repetition comes back to the real thing that thought avoids*—which is another way of saying that our conscious reckoning in its *avoidance empties out, lays waste, ejects or discharges* something of the real, some real thing to which it remains nonetheless eternally bound. Recurrence, in this light, becomes a kind of *missed encounter* with that inaccessible, traumatic register that we encounter only as if by chance, as if by accident. He said that this realness lying behind our repeated enactments and scenarios, behind the painful markings that called the *insistent return of signs*, was the *primary concern* of Freud[73](and, by extension) of the entire psychoanalytic field. *En souffrance*, you might encounter a mysterious *fourth ring*, a sort of generative void or signifying symptom: between *perception and consciousness*, something is *left hanging*—in suspense, or in *pain*—where understanding runs aground.

Our returns signify. Freud was the first to suggest that in the “controlled” setting of the clinic, by *acting out* on the stage of the transference, the breaching of the dyke of pleasure by the death drive—that forbidden *enjoyment that only comes into play through errors, jokes, dreams, bungled actions, freak occurrences or slips of the tongue*—might come to serve as a *source*: source of discovery, source of understanding, source of ethics or even action. By *freely associating*, by *saying whatever comes to mind* in the presence of an attentive listener, a subject will discover a new form of revolt, a play in which the homeostatic pleasure principle might be disrupted without, as Catherine Millot writes, passing to a violent action.[74]

Lacan pioneered a clinical practice—and revolutionary modes of research, transmission and rhetoric—derived directly from the knots and paradoxes encountered on the couch (a *paradox* being, of course, a *statement that is seemingly self-contradictory yet not illogical or ... untrue*.) In Millot’s words: he *pushed on with his ideas until he came to a dead end and then went off alone along another path that also led to an obstacle; the whole thing circumscribed by a zone in which thought is confronted with an impossible that forms a hole, or a siphon*. In several of Freud’s texts we find a comparable movement, *repeatedly approaching the impasses by which the real is identified*. It is something similar which we find in the process of analytic treatment.[75]

Peter Brook called his 1968 book on the theater *The Empty Space*. The term could serve as well for the clinic as for the stage! Both are non-places with the capacity to become any-places, any-times; both serve as playgrounds where, *acting out* on the topos or in the locus of the Other, a subject might come to be able—in Agamben’s words—to *complicate the relation between potential and actuality*, between *possible and real*, or between *matter and form*. In these playgrounds we take up a mode of *work* capable of *engaging a possible that takes place only in the real, and a real that does not stop becoming possible*. (It is perhaps only this hybrid creature, he adds, *this non-place in which potentiality does not disappear but is preserved and, so to speak, dances in the act, that deserves the name of “work.”*[76]

To get at what’s most essential about *theater work*, Brook introduces three French verbs: *répéter*, *représenter*, *assister*. All three—in English to repeat, to represent, to assist—speak equally to clinical praxis.

Repetition is what leads to all that is meaningless in a tradition. In it lie the seeds of decay.[77] It stands for the “deadly” (rote, conventional, banalized) dimension in theater yet, paradoxically, it is for all that as well a *making possible*: *repetition* is also the French word for *rehearsal*, the training in *absolute obedience* necessary for any *clown, acrobat or dancer* to *gain total freedom* in performance. *As though in one word we see the essential contradiction in the theatre or psychoanalytic form*, repetition evokes a timeless place, a *meaningless* still point or center within all movement, the voluptuous pleasure of cessation, of the obliteration of all sense, re-turning. Brook: *Every cue to action has a call back to inertia within it*. [78] On the stage or within the clinic’s frame of transference, repetition—which Freud called a *demonic compulsion*

—can come to signify. Freud wrote that the *drive* (“*pulsion*”), like an actor *expresses or represents ... all the forces that arise within the body, the excitation associated with the inertia in organic life* (an enjoyment he equated with *traumatic neuroses*) and *transfers* them, along with a whole load of irrepressible feelings, to the *mental apparatus*—from *soma* to *psyche*. [79]

Brook writes that a *représentation* (the French word for show or performance) works as a form of recollection; it is *the occasion... when something from the past is shown again. Something that once was, now is*. Performance is the scene of signifying. *For representation, he writes, is not just an imitation or a description of a past event; a representation denies time. It abolishes that difference between yesterday and today. It takes yesterday’s action and makes it live again in every one of its aspects—including its immediacy. In other words a re-presentation (again! again!) is what it claims to be—a making present... this is the renewal of life that repetition denies.* [80] Acting takes the place of repeating in the playground of the clinic, as in the playground of theater; it becomes a form of recall, something like what Kierkegaard called *recollecting forward: repetition and recollection, he wrote, are the same movement, just in opposite directions, because what is recollected has already been and is thus repeated backwards, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forwards. (He who wants only to recollect, he noted, is a voluptuary.)* [81]

Representation is a form of revolt. Kristeva speaks directly to it: *True revolt, she writes, doesn’t reside... in a particular act targeting a particular object. It lies in the repeated representation of this act, which extracts it from its reality and confers on it the imaginary power of a re-creation. It draws its ultimate political value from its nullity, its impersonal nothingness, the actor’s paradox that thwarts the presentation of identity and opens the way to projections and multiple interpretations.* [82] *The thematics of acting is the optimal way to emerge from the conformism and fixedness of being. The impostor... takes control of the spectacle in order to thwart it.* [83]

The practical study of what exactly this means opens a rich field. It compels us, Brook writes, to see what a living action means, what constitutes a real gesture in the immediate present. Yet for repetition to evolve into a representation—a performance—something further is called for. An audience. Without an audience there is no goal, no sense. Here he introduces a third term, *assistance*. In French you might say *j’assiste à une pièce—I watch a play. An audience who brings an active interest and life to its... role... assists in the actor’s capture, the actor’s making incarnate of something real.* [84] An audience assists, an *auditor* assists: in fact the word *audience* derives from the Latin *audentia*: an act or state of hearing, the action or condition of listening. The psychoanalytic act is a *saying*, and the analyst, the listener assists. *With this assistance, the assistance of eyes and ears and focus and desires and enjoyment and concentration, repetition turns into representation, a performance, a signifying... actor and audience, speaker and interlocutor undergo a change. They have come from a life outside the theater that is essentially repetitive to a special arena in which each moment is lived more clearly and more tensely.*

The philosopher Bernard Steigler, in a book called *Acting Out*, refers to this arena as that of the *extraordinary*: it’s a *form of reminiscence*, he says, which—*at the outer limits of the social—takes flight*. Rememberings here *interrupt the action; they suspend the conditions of ordinary life, manifesting the normally invisible milieu of religious experience, of poetry, of dance—and of listening.*

The same year as Brook’s book and film—watershed of 1968—Lacan in his annual seminar said that ever since his sustained reading of Sade some time before (his *Kant with Sade* of 1963, preceded by his seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* in 1959-60), he had come to understand revolt as a something like a *shift in the structure of experience*, [85] a turn or return within the field of speech. Revolt for him became a structural shift from one discourse to another, each discourse articulating a social bond, locating a position a speaker might occupy in relation to an interlocutor, to unknown knowing and to truth in its various iterations—as

Law, as moral value or property of knowledge, as veiled in the symptoms of a particular case—or as signifying void. He named these discourses. *Master. University. Hysteric. Analyst.*[86]

The rigorous approach that this analyst put forward allows us, today, to grasp the timelessness of revolt—and to work with it on the stage of the present. This is not *theory*, Lacan insists, but *structure*: the discourses are *not extracted from the world, but already in the world and underpinning it*: within the flow of time, they *locate a moment*. At each turn, *a loss emerges from the trajectory*. *Between you and what I am saying, a lost object, a little other, an o.*

Assuming with his very person the place of this little lost thing, this o, this ring[87]—resounding *ring of the voice* or circumference of light cast into the night's blackness by the storyteller's torch;[88]circle traced in village dust that the actor, griot or dancer enters; *true hole* in which *the real lies in abeyance*[89]—the analyst guarantees that something is still at play.

Something is still at play.

The HERALD swings his rattle:

The end comes soon

Before we watch the crime

let's interpose a drinking thinking time

while you recall that what our cast presents

is simply this a series of events

but that our end which might seem prearranged

could be delayed or even changed

We will since its a play not actual history

postpone it with an interval

We guarantee

that after your refreshments and debating

you'll find Marat still in his bathtub waiting."[90]

If this were a theater, now I'd invite you onstage for champagne and snacks.

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