From the opening pages of the Marquis de Sade's *L'Histoire de Juliette*, a book which Maurice Blanchot has called the most scandalous ever written,¹ readers are presented with repeated references to the relation between sensibility, the nerves and the human will. Sade's characters are constantly asserting that they can unlock the secrets of physical and mental bliss by controlling their nervous sensibility and then pushing it into a transcendent realm of experience. In this place anything was possible. But before opening this door, libertines must first grasp the real key: 'the shock imparted by criminal impressions to the nervous system'.²

By means of this 'indispensable shock', libertines could

send 'voluptuous vibrations' through their nervous systems and thus ignite their 'lubricious mood'.  One character, named Noirceuil, testifies: 'How my senses are brought alive, how my organs bestir themselves! ... 'tis a new life surging in me, a new soul animates me; my mind is blended in pleasures, identifies with it'.

Yet this nervous shock delivered more than carnal delight. Rather, when libertines concentrated this shocked sensibility within themselves, they could induce altered states of consciousness: states far removed from what ethnographers today call 'normal' or 'consensual' forms of reality. Georges Bataille has elsewhere called such states the hallmark of 'inner experience': namely, 'les états d'extase, de ravissement, au moins d'émotion meditée' usually associated with mysticism and trance. In Sade's time, at least, these libertine experiences corresponded with the broad fascination for spiritualism, the occult, sombabulism and catalepsy, as seen with notorious movements surrounding Cagliostro, Mesmerism, martinism and Swedenbourianism.

In important ways, Sade suggested that these altered states allowed his libertines to experience more transcendent forms of feeling and knowledge, effectively liberating their creative imaginations. And once they had opened the mind's eye, they could project their inner vision into the outer world, molding reality to the imaginative will. The world at

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5 Sade, Juliette, pp. 119, 123–24.
6 Sade, Juliette, pp. 142–43.
9 On this spiritualist underworld, see the classic study by Robert Darnton, Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).
once became both will and representation. To be sure, Sade had alluded to such states in his earlier writings – striking passages appear in La Philosophie dans le boudoir (1795) – but he only developed them fully in his L'Histoire de Juliette, the first of his pornographic works written entirely during the French Revolution.

In what follows, I explore how Sade narrated these altered states and the meaning and significance he attached to them. For Sade, these inner states could potentially uncover the individual's authentic and creative nature, a nature akin to what Henri Bergson later called the moi profond, the deep self. Yet before plumbing these imaginative states, said Sade, one must first understand the physical apparatus that determined sensation and thought: namely, the nervous system. As a result, Sade's libertines turned to the new biomedical science, then being developed at the Paris clinics, in order to help them in their quest to locate this deep self.8 A key part of Sade's appropriation involved medical reappraisals of human sensibility and the nervous system, especially those ideas associated with Pierre Cabanis and Xavier Bichat (amongst others), who were substantially revising received understanding about the relation between sensibility, the

nervous system, and self-control. 9

Specifically, Sade appropriated this new biomedical knowledge for his libertines to conduct a form of self-experiment. Methodically they overwhelmed their senses so that they might shatter all civilized norms. In so doing, they turned themselves into 'noble savages' - or at least Sade's idea of such - and this newfound primitivism propelled them into a higher state of being. 10

This revelatory process anticipated what philosopher Charles Taylor has called the 'modernist epiphany': 'a manifestation which brings us into the presence of something which is otherwise inaccessible'. 11 And this 'epiphanic' idea, in no small part, explains why Sade influenced later modernist and avant-garde aesthetics to such a degree - examples include Arthur Rimbaud, André Breton and Antonin Artaud - all who imaged the artist setting across a sea of disordered states in order to disembark on a new world of expressivity. 12 In the words of Charles Baudelaire: 'On the vaporisation and centralisation of the self. Every-

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thing is there.'

In all this, Sade was participating in a broader public discourse in post-revolutionary France about the relation between the body, sensibility and morality, a discourse in which public figures debated the social and political consequences of unrestrained feeling. For his part, Sade posited a new 'man of feeling', one predicated not upon affect but rather upon the force of will. To create this new man, said Sade, one must first control and then deaden sensibility. However, by insisting upon this self-control, Sade subverted the epistemological and humanitarian agenda associated with literary sentimentalism, which sought to project feeling into the world of interpersonal relations. Now sentimentalism had always remained a highly moralistic genre, one focused upon feelings and their consequences, but Sade took this literature and drained it of its key element – sympathy – and instead insisted upon the primacy of individual autonomy and control. 'Feeling is everything', declared Goethe's Faust, but for Sade, you had to do something with what you felt and not squander it on other people.

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Between 1799 and 1801, Sade published his multi-volume

La Nouvelle Justine ou les malheurs de la vertu, suivie par l'Histoire de Juliette, sa soeur. Almost unbelievably, this pornographic text ran over 3600 printed pages. The first part, La Nouvelle Justine, constituted the third and longest reworking of Sade's original Les Infortunes de la vertu, which he had first drafted in 1787, whilst still incarcerated at the Bastille. By contrast, L'Histoire de Juliette consumed the entire second half and presented decidedly new material. According to Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, Juliette's tale represented a literary breakthrough for Sade. In essence, he overcame the narrative 'impasse' that had blocked him whilst writing Les 120 journées de Sodom (drafted in 1785), because he finally wove all his psychosexual obsessions into a coherent story, as repulsive and repetitive as it may be.¹⁵

Here as elsewhere in his writing, Sade continued his habit of parodying the eighteenth-century Bildungsroman. As R. F. Brissendon pointed out, Sade's two sisters, Justine and Juliette, personify two radically different qualities of sensibility, something akin to Elinor and Marianne Dashwood in Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility (1811).¹⁶ For her part, Justine embodies moral virtue and embraces sentimental affect but she is rewarded only with suffering and an early death. By contrast, Juliette incarnates moral vice and she embraces evil and instead she is rewarded with fame and fortune. Sade is clear: yes, crime does pay.

In L'Histoire de Juliette, Sade used a basic frame technique. Juliette tells an anonymous scribe how she was first

orphaned and then corrupted as a young nun, rather like Suzanne in Denis Diderot's La Religieuse, but she was tossed out of the convent — the money ran out — and landed in a brothel. From there, she was inducted into high society by the rakish minister Saint-Fond and his English sidekick, the milady Clairwil. Along the way, Juliette marries and murders the hapless Comte de Lorsange, suckering him of his title and all his cash, but she infuriates Saint-Fond when she refuses to join his plot to exterminate all the poor people of France. Fearing for her life, Juliette absconds to Italy.

In her grand tour, Juliette consorts with a panoply of libertine characters (including a giant Russian cannibal named Minski), and she crowns her adventures with an audience with Pope Pius VI, who seduces her with his oration on materialist atheism and buggers her with a consecrated host at the altar of Saint Peter. Juliette repays the favor by robbing the Pope blind and going on to commit even more heinous deeds — for example, she rapes and kills her natural father Bernole — all the while accruing greater worldly rewards. Truly, vice rules the world.

Now whatever the literary status of L'Histoire de Juliette — and there are some serious debates on this issue — it is certainly the text in which Sade treated sensibility, as an aesthetic, scientific and moral question, to the fullest degree.

Indeed, sensibility emerges as a philosophic problem right at the start of the book. In Juliette's opening anecdotes, she explains how as a young nun her mother superior, the Abbess Delbène, corrupted her with her lessons on libertinism, instilling its message about philosophic freethinking.

and sexual free-living. Delbène tells Juliette that libertines must master everything about sensibility so that they can attain all their instinctual desires. Libertines, she says, must never experience things passively. Rather, they must objectively analyze their sensations so that they can control them and push themselves into deeper delight. Crucially, Delbène insists that these sensations must originate in the mind's eye and first take form as either image or word. This fundamentally self-creative act alone determined the value of the sensation. Through this means, the mind could generate experience all by itself. Delbène remarks: 'Sometimes it is as pleasant to discuss [sensations] as to undergo them; and when one has reached the limits of one's physical means, one may then exploit one's intellect'.

With these words, Sade broke with earlier writings in which he insisted upon the materialist determinism usually associated with Julien Offray de La Mettrie and Paul-Henri Thiry d'Holbach. According to this understanding, the physical body utterly ruled mind and morality. But now Sade moved beyond this fatalist causality and instead subjugated the body to the force of the mind—or, to use the jargon of the period, le physique to le moral. To be sure, Sade's new ideas on mind and sensibility were confused and contradictory, but to understand why he changed direction, it is necessary to step back and look at broader public debates at the time about the nature of sensibility, physical qualities, and moral behavior. In many ways, these debates were challenging the key tenets of literary sentimentalism, as usually associated with Samuel Richardson and J.-J. Rousseau, and cast re-

19 Sade, Juliette, p. 60.
relations between feeling, control, and morality in new light.\textsuperscript{21}

For our purposes here, there were three points to this debate. First, intellectual figures generally agreed that sensibility defined life itself. In their view, sensibility animated all living beings and allowed them to experience life in emotional terms. To live was to feel and to feel was to live. There was no other way of making sense of human experience, as the prominent physician Pierre Cabanis had claimed.\textsuperscript{22} Consequently, contemporaries wanted to understand the true 'essence' of sensibility, and they went on to debate its exact nature. For some, sensibility was a vitalistic or even animistic force, one potentially linked to the soul; whilst for others, it was a purely material force, one that undercut traditional ideas about the soul and morality.\textsuperscript{23}

Secondly, intellectual figures posited a strong relation between sensibility and social cohesion and responsibility. Sensibility, it was believed, drew people outside of themselves and into the world of interpersonal relations, thereby allowing them to sympathize with one another and help form communal bonds. Accordingly, sensibility had a universal, if not egalitarian dimension to it. All people were inherently moral beings who deserved dignity and respect, their particular birth and rank notwithstanding. And because sensibility inspired these empathetic feelings, it allowed individuals to

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express their own humanity more fully and to see the inherent humanity in others as well. Sensibility thus offered a providential yet more secular idea of Christian agape: love for one's neighbor. Obviously, Sade found all of this contemptible.²⁴

Lastly, Sade's contemporaries understood sensibility, in almost clinical terms, as a discreet corporeal property usually related to the nervous system.²⁵ In the words of philosopher Destutt de Tracy: 'Sensibility is the faculty of our organs which gives them the power to experience sensations, and sensation is but consciousness of impression'.²⁶ These ideas were initially derived from the earlier sensationist psychology of John Locke and Abbé Condillac, but they were more fully elaborated by Enlightenment doctors and savants who were studying the nervous system. These practitioners explored the ways in which physical impressions were transmitted to the brain by the nerves, and how the mind then combined these sensations to form all 'thought, judgments, and reasoning; in a word, acts of intelligence more admirable than those contained the sensations'.²⁷

However, just when Sade was writing *L'Histoire de Juliette*, a number of prominent thinkers – ranging from the Idéologues to the Kantians, the neo-Christians, and the sentimental pastoralists – challenged the basic tenets of sensationist psychology. Originally, Locke and Condillac had suggested that the mind was a tabula rasa, a blank slate conditioned by sense and experience. But for intellectuals who had lived through the French Revolution, this model rendered the mind too weak, too passive. Rather, they were impressed by the mind's active qualities, chief amongst them desire, instinct, intuition, and, especially, willpower. As a result, they asked whether the mind might contain a preformed apparatus, an active will, which allowed individuals to sort out sensation, ascribe meaning, and then act upon it. Sensibility thus became an independent, perhaps even transcendent force: 'a law, a principle, a cause' from which all others followed.²⁸

Given these beliefs, intellectuals asserted that sentient beings were driven by instincts and appetites that came from within the mind and body. In their eyes, life itself became a struggle to control biological determinants and to transcend them. In different ways, these ideas were explored in Xavier Bichat's *Recherches physiologiques sur la vie et la mort* (1800) and J.-B. Lamarck's *Recherches sur l'organisation des corps vivants* (1802); both authors stressed that organisms must master catastrophic physical forces, both from within and without, in order to survive, to adapt, and to transcend. Sometimes this meant controlling instinct and feeling to the point of death, a point powerfully suggested in J.-L. David's monumental tableau titled *Leonidas at Ther-*

mopylae (1814). Following such ideas, intellectuals radically revised how they understood human volition. In the words of philosopher Maine de Biran, one must now explain 'how far the soul is active, how far it can modify external impressions, augment or diminish their intensity by the attention it gives to them, examine to what extent it is a matter of attention'. The will had become an essential component of the human self.

Let's return to Sade's text. There is little doubt that Sade was swimming in these same cultural waters, but it is important to note that he already had a long and complicated engagement with the culture of sensibility. On the one hand, Sade deeply admired how literary sentimentalism had pioneered a new form of affective language; in particular, he praised Prévost, Richardson and Rousseau for their formal innovations, and he self-consciously imitated their style and achieved some semblance of it in his epistolary novel, Aline et Valcour (1795). On the other hand, Sade detested what he recognized to be the moral didacticism contained in sentimental novels, and this he tried to subvert as best he could, going beyond the conventional satire found in books such as Henry Fielding's Shamela (1741). Given this attitude, Sade wanted to divest sentimentalism of its ethical foundations and to use its formal qualities to feed other hungers. To do so, he wanted to inhabit and parasitize sentimentalism, working within the formal conventions of the genre to achieve his own aims.

To exploit the genre's power, Sade needed to provide an

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31 See Sade's comments in 'Réflexions'.

alternate explanation as to how sensibility animated mind and body, and so he turned to recent biomedical research and plundered its insights. To be sure, Sade had already taught about human anatomy and reproduction in subversive ways in his *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*, but now he used this same strategy in *L'Histoire de Juliette* to deal with the much larger problem of sensibility.

In this book, Sade made his characters Saint-Fond and Clairwil the mouthpieces for his new ideas; Clairwil's monologues, in particular, delivered his most developed thoughts about sensibility. When instructing the young Juliette, Clairwil tells her that she had so thoroughly mastered her sensibility that her brain had become 'sick'; indeed, one of her collaborators boasts that she had 'no equal' when it came to wickedness and debauchery. Regarding sensibility, Clairwil states, 'I am mistress of that soul's movement and affections; of its desires, of its impulsions; with me, everything is under the unchallenged control of mind; and there's worse yet ... for my mind is appalling'.

Sensibility, Clairwil goes on to say, possessed three primary qualities. It was, first, the source of all life; second, it was the source of all feeling and sentiment; and finally, it was the source of all morality. Sensibility made living beings who and what they are and allowed them to feel the things they felt and to do the things that they did.

However, Clairwil further cautioned that sensibility was not equal in all people in all places in all times. And here Sade was rejecting one of sentimentalism's key tenets: namely, that sensibility was a universal quality that gave all individuals human dignity. Instead, Sade argued that people possessed different levels of sensibility, and he then

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assigned social worth based upon these differences. In this regard, Sade departed from his usual materialist sources and was here using recent vitalist physiology, in which medical practitioners claimed that a person's sensibility predisposed them to different levels of feeling, strength, intelligence and health. These ideas were associated with the prestigious physicians of the Montpellier medical school, notably Théophile de Bordeu, Paul-Joseph Barthez and Pierre Roussel.\(^{33}\) These medical figures had classified people according to biological categories of sex, age, race, temperament, geography and occupation. Sometimes they even jumped from the living body to the social body, speculating whether physical determinants betokened a more 'natural' order in society.\(^{34}\)

Yet Sade went farther than the Montpellier vitalists. He believed that not only were there 'superior' people who were endowed with greater sensibility, but there were also people who knew how to use their sensibility and those who did not. This latter group lingered in a homeostatic state and were not moved by strong feelings. Such people were impassive and inert, constituting the common herd; they were human insofar as they possessed a 'human shape'.\(^{35}\) With these words, Sade was likely referring to a scene in Choderlos de Laclos's \textit{Les Liaisons dangereuses}, in which the Vicomte de Valmont tells Madame de Merteuil, 'I speak to someone who understands me, and not those automata around which I have been vegetating all this morning'.\(^{36}\)

For all these reasons, a person with 'deep sensibility'

\(^{33}\) On the Montpellier physicians and their influence upon French science and letters, see especially Williams, \textit{The Physical and the Moral and Cultural History of Vitalism}.

\(^{34}\) This was particularly true with Barthez, who used this idea of differential sensibility to defend African slavery.

\(^{35}\) Sade, \textit{Juliette}, p. 277.

\(^{36}\) 'Je parle à quelqu'un qui m'entend, et non aux automates près de qui je végète depuis ce matin'; \textit{Oeuvres}, p. 299.
felt, thought, and acted with a greater degree of depth and authenticity. The gift was both analytical and expressive, says Clairwil. Like the mother-superior Delbène, Clairwil insists that libertines must experience and analyze their sensations as objectively as possible. At the same time, they must also respond to these sensations in an intuitive manner, and this reflexive quality made them more expressive as individuals. Again, a similar idea had already appeared in scientific and medical circles. By the close of the Enlightenment, as Jessica Riskin has argued, naturalists sometimes cast themselves as 'sentimental empiricists', claiming that their emotional and intuitive qualities allowed them to penetrate Nature's secrets more fully. The rage for feeling had even permeated the new mechanistic philosophy.\textsuperscript{37}

Among doctors and surgeons, this idea was promoted by Théophile Bordeu, a medical figure whose fame earned him a cameo in Denis Diderot's \textit{Le Rêve de d'Alembert}. In an article titled 'Crise', written for Diderot and d'Alembert's \textit{Encyclopédie}, Bordeu explained how the doctor could change himself into a 'super sensible' practitioner: a doctor of feeling, one might say. According to him, the doctor should hover by the bedside and use his sensibility to connect with the patient, intuitively deciphering the body's signs and symptoms. At the same time, however, the doctor should never abandon his objective composure. He must interpret his feelings rationally and never let them carry him away; he must keep his mind as sharp as the blades with which he bled his patients. In short, the doctor needed 'taste, talent, and experience' - the exact qualities, Bordeu added, possessed by

Though these ideas certainly influenced Sade, he differed from the sentimental empiricists in key respects. For their part, the sentimental empiricists wanted to use their sensibility to understand external natural phenomena, say the flow of electrical fluid or the pathogenesis of a particular disease. By contrast, Sade thought people could use sensibility to experiment with psychosexual states and create alternate forms of experiences. But to enter into this inner world, libertines must first had to abandon sentimental platitudes about the soul and moral virtue. Instead, they must examine sensibility with a clinical gaze and treat it like any other material object, just as geologists picked at their rocks or physicists measured force and speed.

When Sade insisted that sensibility was simply a material phenomena, he joined a small group of radical cognoscenti. For Sade, sensibility was neither an animating spirit, as with J.-B. Van Helmont's *archaeus* or Robert Whytt's 'sensitive soul'; nor was it an abstract vivifying force, as with P.-J. Barthez's 'vital principle' or Charles Dumas's 'hyper-organicity'. Following d'Holbach's atheist materialism, which had been recently advocated by the Idéologue doctor and politician Pierre Cabanis, Sade claimed that sensibility lacked transcendent or metaphysical properties. It was, as his characters declared, 'purely physical'. Clairwil explains: 'we notice that in every case sensibility is simply a mechanism, that some degree or other of vice originates with it, that it is the sensibility which is re-

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58 Qtd. in Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology*, pp. 163-64.
59 See Robert Whytt, *Observations on the Nature, Causes, and Cure of Those Disorders which have been commonly called Nervous, Hypochondriac, or Hysteric*, 3d edn (Edinburgh: Becket, Hundt, and Balfour, 1767).
This 'mechanism', as Clairwil calls it, comprised several parts of the body, but assuredly the most important was the nervous system. Here Sade localized all sentiment in the nerves. For him, they caused 'all the affections in man in general', as well as the 'habitual bent for good or for evil'. As he put it, 'Everything resides in the action of the neural fluid and the difference between a scoundrel and an honest man consists in nought but the greater or lesser activity of the animal spirits that compose this fluid'.

The nervous system thus made people into who and what they were and determined that they ever felt and did. 'There is absolutely nothing in all parts of the body as interesting as the nerves', Sade declared in a knowing tone.

Sade's words fell into a larger medico-scientific context. Since the mid-1700s, physicians habitually insisted that the nerves determined mind-body relations; for them, the nerves grounded the 'animal organization', a complex metaphor they invoked to describe total vital phenomena. Accordingly, the nerves affected basic issues governing health and mental function. At the same time, however, doctors found that neurology raised thorny theological issues, since the neural fibers seemed to mediate between mind and body and formed the seat of what was commonly called the soul. Consequently, for them, the nerves constituted 'the principles of the entire machine', 'the ministers of the soul' or 'the es-

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40 Sade, Juliette, p. 278.
41 Sade, Juliette, p. 678.
42 Sade, La Nouvelle Justine, 834 n. 1.
43 See especially Figlio; Jordanova.
When Sade wrote about the nervous system, he drew freely upon a key physiological theory called the 'animal spirits'. For doctors of the time, the animal spirits were a kind of 'medullary juice' or 'caustic fluid' that filled the nerves and circulated within them. This fluid registered sensory stimuli and filtered these impressions within the brain's sensorium. Often, physicians used the animal spirits to uphold metaphysical dualism, and they drew upon Albrecht von Haller's famous distinction between irritability and sensibility: that is, between involuntary muscle contraction and voluntary movement and reflection. For these thinkers, the animal spirits provided the physical substance through which the mind communicated sense and volition, thereby carving out a space in the brain and nerves for an immaterial soul. However, Sade rejected these metaphysical underpinnings and stripped the animal spirits of their dualist function.

According to Sade, the nerves were like little white cords arranged in pairs. Sometimes they were flat and sometimes they were round and within them circulated the animal spirits which carried messages to and fro the brain like it was a pulsating system of Lamson tubes. The animal spirits possessed an extraordinarily 'subtile' property - at one point Sade characterized them as 'electrical atoms' - and they could move from one part of the body to another more or less instantaneously. The underlying quality of the spirits

47 On Haller, see Hubert Steinke, Irritating Experiments: Haller's Concept and the European Controversy on Irritability and Sensibility, 1750–90 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005).
determined how individuals experienced pain and pleasure; in essence, they turned people into hedonistic creatures who were driven by instinct and desire. For these reasons, the nerves constituted 'the only soul admitted by modern philosophers'.

Libertines, however, were different from everyone else because they enjoyed a special relation to their nerves and animal spirits. Ordinary people, said Sade, experienced pleasure when their neural fluids interacted harmoniously with external objects. Sometimes these objects seemed almost drawn to certain people, as though lured by their carnal sensibility. The object acted upon the nerves and the person was drawn to act upon it in turn. In this libidinous interplay, the relation between subject and object was totally reciprocal. If the object pleased, the subject responded positively. But if the object inflamed the nerves in any way, the subject would want to hurt it in return. Traditionally, for most sentimental writers, this dialogic model was vitally important, because it let them explain why their characters were moved by highly charged objects - usually innocent victims - to states of sympathy and virtuous behavior.

But this wasn't at all the case with Sade's libertines. By contrast, his figures were hardwired to experience feelings in a totally obverse manner. For them, sentimental objects provoked neither sympathy nor beneficence, but rather lust, violence and frenzy. Unlike rakes such as Richardson's Mr. B—, who was overcome by Pamela's virtuous sensibility, Sade's characters are driven to greater depravity. 'Beauty', 'innocence' and 'candor' inflamed their nerves and became 'vehicles for their passions'. Ultimately they wanted to destroy the sentimental object. Like vampires, they fed upon

Sade, Aline et Valcour, p. 575 n. 1.
their victims' sensibility and drew strength from it. They thus had no truck with 'an inert, insensible body'.

Hence libertines were drawn not to pleasure but to pain - and pain, as David Morris reminds, was a defining element in Sade's system. Pain, said Sade, was caused by a 'defective relationship' between the animal spirits and outside objects. These objects struck the nerves 'aslant, crookedly, sting them, repulse them, and never fuse with them'. Consequently pain was 'infinitely sharper and more active' than those 'atoms emanating from objects of pleasure'. Not surprisingly, then, more banal 'objects of pleasure' - presumably turn-ons for insipid philistines - bored individuals endowed with a refined sensibility, forcing them to seek out 'poignant sensation'. Saint-Fond says: 'You wish to subject your nerves to a powerful agitation; you rightly suppose that painful commotion will prove stronger than pleasurable: so you employ it with favorable results'.

To enjoy these experiences, libertines must calculate how sensations affected their nerves. And so they had to select objects that excited 'the electrical particles' of the 'nervous humor' so that they could concentrate their sensibility in the 'pleasure zone'. As the 'nervous irritation' became more violent, it intensified the sensory 'ferment', ultimately reaching an 'extremist pitch'. At the 'final limit', the nerves were 'so prodigiously wrought' that were 'smitt[en] into convulsion'. Saint-Fond observes that it is 'only by undergoing the greatest possible upheaval in the nervous system that [the libertine] may procure for himself the drunken transport he must have if is properly to enjoy

50 Sade, Juliette, p. 269.
51 Morris, 'Sade and the Discourse of Pain'.
52 Sade, Juliette, p. 267.
53 Sade, Juliette, pp. 269, 666.
himself'.\textsuperscript{54}

At this point, Sade's ideas about sensibility became paradoxical. According to him, libertines must repeatedly stimulate their nerves by soliciting the most outrageous shocks possible. Only through this means could they release sensibility's full power. Yet at first glance he asked the impossible. Overindulgence, it would seem, would condition the nerves and ultimately diminish sensation. But Sade promised otherwise. Nervous shock, he promised, actually allowed libertines to transcend what is now called reflexive conditioning. Instead, sensibility underwent an ever-expanding and intensifying metamorphosis. In the dialectic between virtue and vice, the negation always prevailed, propelling the libertine into a higher state of being. 'This is no trifling matter', Clairwil says. 'It calls for strength, discipline, and a certain ruthlessness with oneself'.\textsuperscript{55}

For Sade, then, what really mattered was the will. Libertines must never experience anything haphazardly. When mind ruled the body, libertines could harness the 'electrical particles' that circulated in the 'hallows' of the nerve and then perform superhuman feats of physical and mental acumen. Self-discipline thus allowed libertines to free the imagination and go beyond the body's fleshy limits. Juliette attests: 'My ideas had gained such a prise on me, the moral in me so thoroughly overmastered the physical, my indifference such, my self-possession so unshakable'.\textsuperscript{56}

Clairwil, in particular, embodies this preternatural state. She insists that she could indulge in the greatest debaucherries because she could fully control her sensibility. By age thirty, she boast, she had learned to maintain

\textsuperscript{54} Sade, \textit{Juliette}, p. 340.
\textsuperscript{55} Sade, \textit{Juliette}, p. 450.
\textsuperscript{56} Sade, \textit{Juliette}, p. 484.
'tranquility' and 'equanimity' in whatever she did' quite simple, she could 'do anything and endure anything, without batting an eyelash'.'\textsuperscript{57} The key, she says, is to be 'totally self-possessed' and to cultivate stoic control over the passions.'\textsuperscript{58} Through this means, libertines could 'annihilate' moral sensibility. 'The best course is to cultivate in ourselves such a frame of mind as will enable us to look upon ... suffering with indifference and unconcern'.\textsuperscript{59}

But Clairwil articulated a deeper worry. She noted that uncontrolled sensibility might actually incite virtue instead of vice. Emotion could overwhelm the mind's defenses and make individuals amend their lives. Clairwil alludes to this danger when she rebukes Juliette for her passionate exuberance. Juliette, she complains, would commit moral outrages only after she had become sexually aroused (she says this after having observed Juliette rape and kill her own father in a fit of passion). When Juliette let her feelings carry her away, she behaved passively, perhaps like Condillac's sensible statue or one of Vaucauson's automata. Pleasure, Clairwil insists, is always in the planning — a point that is substantiated by the endless lists and regulation that adorn \textit{L'Histoire de Juliette}, notably the bizarre 'Statues of the Sodality of the Friends of Crime'.

So that Juliette might move from passive to active sensibility, Clairwil exhorts her to do evil, to become evil, and in the metaphysical sense of that word, with total awareness of the deed. By controlling sensibility, and by careful calculation, Juliette could inspire desire, even when the flesh was weak or unwilling. Clairwil promises: 'No further

\textsuperscript{57} Sade, \textit{Juliette}, p. 282.
\textsuperscript{58} Sade, \textit{Juliette}, p. 450.
\textsuperscript{59} Sade, \textit{Juliette}, pp. 282-83.
need to lay a finger to cunt in order to perpetrate the wicked deed. ... I find no clearer way of expressing the matter'.

But this control did more than fortify resolve. It also absolved guilt. In theory, sensibility could overwhelm all moral rationalizations, haunting the conscience like an unwanted ghost. Even the toughest rake could fall victim to its power, as Richardson's Lovelace or Laclos's Valmont discovered to their chagrin. For this reason, libertines must inculcate 'doctrinal firmness' in their hearts, lest they regress into virtuous behavior.

Here, Sade took an unexpected turn. In his writings, he habitually insisted that material qualities were amoral and indifferent. Nature, he said, tended not towards the good and harmonious but rather towards nihilism and destruction. Human nature was no exception. And it would seem that Sade should have understood sensibility in the exact same way. After all, in *L'Histoire de Juliette*, Sade clearly said that sensibility was a material faculty, one that was shared by all living beings and lacking any special telos or purpose. But apparently he thought that there was something else at work, too. As he made clear, sensibility was a moral force with which his libertines had to reckon. This was because sensibility inspired 'compassion' and 'soft-heartedness' in the hearts of men and these sympathetic feelings kept libertines from following their true calling down the 'thorny road of vice'. So unlike literary figures who celebrated sensibility's moral potential — notably Shaftesbury and Rousseau — Sade saw it in alarmed terms, and he worried that morality might be recidivist.

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By highlighting this tension in Sade's thinking, I am not claiming to have discovered his lost conscience, nor am I dismissing his atheism, as Pierre Klossowski tried to do. Rather, I want to suggest that Sade believed that sensibility possessed moral inertia, and it was this inertia that made the issue of self-control so important for him. Sensibility, in his eyes, could tend towards virtue, or it could tend towards vice. Consequently, libertines should never let themselves be carried along by its current, lest they find themselves marooned on an island of conventional morality. Instead, libertines must take the rudder in hand and steer themselves towards a port of their own choosing. Free will mattered. Moral virtue was easy, perhaps slothful. Evil took real work. Clairwil opines:

> All of which demonstrates that pity, far from being a virtue, is but a weakness which must be combatted with special severity when one sets about the task of blunting excessive nervous sensibility, this sensibility that is so incompletely incompatible with every tenet of philosophy.

With these words about self-control, Sade was appropriating well-known ideas about the will and ethical behavior, especially those developed by neo-Stoics such as Justus Lipsius and his French disciples Pierre Charron and Guillaume du Vair; similar ideas about rationality and control had been famously established by René Descartes in his *Médiations métaphysiques* (1641–42). Both the neo-Stoics and Cartesians claimed that individuals could contain passion and prejudice by practicing a radical form of self-disengagement and thus

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objectify emotional experience. Through this means, disciples could attain a state of apathy [apatheia], one which allowed them to subordinate human activity and the natural environment to practical pursuit. But Sade took self-disengagement and turned it inside out. Instead of taming the passions to achieve the good or the practical (as Lipsius and Descartes preached), Sade wanted to release their full power. Stoicism here played a perverse role, because it enabled libertines to turn sensibility into something 'truly terrifying and under control of [the] mind'. In a striking passage, Juliette underscores how stoic control could engender pleasure:

Steeling our soul against all that may stir it, by means of libertinage inuring it to crime, paring voluptuousness down to a purely carnal affair and stubbornly denying it any element of decency, the stoical training enervates the soul; and from this state, wherein its native activity does not permit it to remain long, it passes unto one of apathy which soon metamorphoses into pleasures a thousand times diviner than those which frailties could procure it.

To control 'excessive nervous sensibility' by stoical apathy, Sade's libertines begin by examining themselves in a frank and introspective manner. In some ways, Sade advocated an Augustinian 'inward turn' that mirrored his pious Jansenist contemporaries and their convolutionist displays. Of course, Sade's libertines didn't seek God. Rather, they turned inward to discover their authentic nature and to express it. Juliette reflects upon this process: 'All these

things [should be] weighed and arranged in due order, and this methodically, rationally ... now [you must] caste a clear eye upon yourself, see who you are, gauge your forces, your assets, your influence, your station'.\textsuperscript{66}

Sade's inward turn promised intense carnal delight. But this madness first needed a method. To begin with, Juliette counseled that libertines must 'fast' for a fortnight, banishing 'every libertine thought' from the mind. After this Lenten denial, they should retire to their beds and let their imaginations go wild: 'unpent your fancy, let it freely dwell upon aberrations of different sorts and of ascending magnitude'. Libertines should then review this lewd parade, assessing each carnal detail.\textsuperscript{67}

This reverie was but the initial step. Now libertines must subordinate all their fantasies to the power of their will. 'Assure yourself', Juliette declares, 'that you are absolute sovereign in a world groveling at your feet, that yours is the supreme and unchangeable right to change, mutilate, destroy, annihilate any and all the living beings you like'. At this point, sensibility lost all its sympathetic, charitable force. And still Juliette urged her interlocutors on:

abolish every check, let nothing stand in your way; leave everything to your imagination, let it pursue its bent and content yourself to follow in its train, above all avoiding any precipitate gesture: let it be your head and not your temperament that commands.

By combining reason and feeling, the mind could become an independent force of creation. At this point, the imagi-

\textsuperscript{66} Sade, Juliette, p. 637.
\textsuperscript{67} Sade, Juliette, p. 640.
nation could generate its own sensations and experiences all by itself, and on a higher order than those provide by mere natural reality. Juliette insists: 'The idea, acquired by the means I am outlining, will dominate you, captivate you; delirium will invade your sense'. Yet even at this heightened moment libertines must never surrender to their aching desires. Instead they must crystallize them ever more clearly by composing themselves and writing down their fantasies. Here Sade subsumed desire under the sign of the written word. Juliette explains how to do it:

light your bedside lamp and write out a full description of the abomination that has just inflamed you, omitting nothing that could serve to aggravate its details; and then go to sleep thinking about them. Reread your notes the next day and ... add everything that your imagination ... may suggest that could heighten its power to exacerbate. Now turn the definitive shaping of this idea into a scheme and as you put the final touches on it, once again incorporate all fresh episodes, novelties, and ramifications that occur to you.  

Only when libertines had emerged into this waking state - a realm of pure consciousness - could they fully realize all their possible desires. Juliette promises: 'you will find this is the species of viciousness which suits you best and which you will carry out with the greatest delight'.

Like other thinkers in the post-Terror environment, Sade was revising received ideas about sensibility and the will. In his previous writings, Sade himself had always insisted that libertines must follow nature's call and obey her laws.

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But he had never before suggested that libertines ought to use their minds to transcend corporeal experience and objective reality. In this manner, Sade suggested that the creative imagination — that is to say, artifice — outweighed nature itself. Creativity thus moved beyond mimesis. Art was no longer representational but rather expressive. Sade's views, at times, anticipate an anti-natural aesthetic, in the sense usually associated with Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallermé, and J.-K. Huysmans. These literary figures rejected Romantic ideals about nature as a moral source — an idea especially associated with J.-J. Rousseau — because this thinking potentially justified a more egalitarian ethos.70 There is a strong analogy here between Sade's elitist temperament and these later ideas about an aesthetic aristocracy. As Sade put it: 'One great man is enough to subject the world'.71

In a fascinating dialogue, Juliette and the Comte de Belmor discuss how a powerful and disciplined imagination could dominate natural reality. For his part, Belmor insists upon the power of the creative mind. 'Oh, Juliette', he says, 'how delicious are the powers of the imagination, and how voluptuously one follows out the lines of its dazzling constructions!' In his opinion, reality paled when compared to the images conjured by the mind's eye. 'All the earth is ours in these enchanted moments; not a single creature resists us ... we devastate the planet ... and repopulate it with new objects, and immolate these in their turn'.72

Belmor illustrates this claim by reflecting upon his sexual experiences with Juliette. For instance, when he contemplated Juliette's gorgeous body, he was overcome by de-

70 Taylor, Sources of the Self, pp. 428-29, 434-47.
71 Sade, Juliette, p. 832.
72 Sade, Juliette, p. 522.
sire, but once they started having sex, and he was actually possessing the object of his desire, his mind then started wandering and inventing other, more exquisite bodies to ravish. He was thus led to conclude that 'the reality possessed is not worth the images we chase thereof'. Hence the imagination was 'a more inspired architect than Nature, a more cunning artisan than she'. And so he found it better to contemplate desire than to consummate it. The limits were only imposed by the mind itself. Belmor asks Juliette: 'The pleasure I derive from this illusion, is it not preferable to the one which reality is about to have me enjoy?'

Amazingly, Belmor expands upon this point by alluding to an unexpected source: Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). Burke's book was first translated into French in 1765, but his aesthetic ideas apparently exerted new influence in the period proceeding the Reign of Terror. For example, Dr. Moreau de la Sarthe, an Idéologue sympathizer and well-known Parisian physician, used Burke's theories when discussing 'natural' gender roles in his *Histoire naturelle de la femme* (1803).

For his part, Burke had distinguished between the beautiful and the sublime. According to him, beauty signified a more passive and thus *feminine* nature, whilst the sublime, which drew upon feelings of power and horror, signified a more imaginative and thus active and *manly* faculty. In Sade's text, Belmor explicitly ponders Burke's aesthetics as he prepares to sodomize Juliette: 'There is beauty in what you offer me there, but only beauty;

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what I invent is sublime; with you I am going to do nothing that anyone else may not do, whilst this ass my imagination has wrought, I might do things which not even the gods themselves would invent'.

For Sade, then, these imaginative states - as extolled by Belmor and Clairwil - distilled the essence of inner experience. By first controlling and then realizing sensibility, libertines could engender a state of total self-absorption or what Sade elsewhere called 'inconceivable self-centeredness'. This self-centeredness manifested itself in two ways. On the one hand, libertines could concentrate their sensibility into a single part of the body and literally turn that part into the whole: whether the eye, the ear, the head or the genitalia. A similar synecdochal image had also appeared in Denis Diderot's writings. In Le Rêve de d'Alembert, for example, Dr. Bordeu and Madame de l'Espinasse speculate - in what can only be described as an erotically-charged exchange - about concentrating the body's sensibility to such a point one could create 'a whole province populated by the fragments of one individual'. Here, there was a connection between physiological science and aesthetic theory, as these same ideas about self-loss and absorption had also informed Diderot's salon writings, especially in how he appraised the images of feeling and morality in J.-B. Greuze's paintings.

One the other hand, Sade's libertines discovered that by concentrating their sensibility in such a manner they could

75 Sade, Juliette, p. 522.
76 Sade, Juliette, p. 1052.
77 Diderot, Le Rêve de d'Alembert, p. 172.
78 Michael Fried, Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). See also the helpful discussion in Denby, Sentimental Narrative, especially chap. 2, 'Towards a model of the sentimental text'.
overwhelm the conscious mind and thus induce a total loss of self. In this case, Sade promised not just ecstatic bliss but something more, as well. In this orgasmic swoon, libertines abolished all boundaries between themselves and other objects — people included — by carefully manipulating their sensibility and surrounding environment. In this state of heightened sensibility, they could, quite literally, 'melt absolutely into fuck'.\textsuperscript{79} The swooning and convulsive bodies of literature thus offered new possibilities. And in such a condition, libertines could restrain neither desire nor the imagination. Juliette says: 'I see the abyss yawning at my feet, and jubilantly I hurl myself over the brink'.\textsuperscript{80}

In all this, Sade was flagrantly disregarding learned medical opinion. In no uncertain terms, doctors and surgeons characterized hyper-sensibility as pathological or 'contranatural' to the core. In their opinion, these heightened states made people horribly sick; this was particularly true for nervous diseases such as hysteria and hypochondria, or what contemporaries called 'the vapors' or 'spleen'.\textsuperscript{81} Specifically, the vapors could manifest themselves in ecstasies, convulsions and spasms. In severe cases, the provoked seizures in the respiratory and gastric regions, notably in cases of apoplexy, syncope, swoon, orgasm and apparent death. Heightened sensibility thus could produce states of suspended animation, a liminal condition that lingered between life and death. Ultimately, said doctors, the condition could kill the patient. For these reasons, medical authorities urged

\textsuperscript{79} Sade, \textit{Juliette}, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{80} Sade, \textit{Juliette}, p. 664.
people to control their sensibility so that they might pre-
serve their 'physical and moral' health. At the turn of the
century, these views were expressed most clearly in treatises
on mental illness, especially the pioneering works of

Unlike these medical authorities, Sade insisted that
heightened sensibility caused not sickness but instead un-
leashed a 'power of which is not readily to be described'.
Excessive self-control now exploded in an orgiastic loss of
control. Here, libertines abandoned all language and repre-
sentation, spiraling into anarchy, insanity and animal-like
behavior. Juliette describes making love to Clairwil:
'Hugged tight in each other's arms, writhing with joy, frig-
ging each other like frenzied tribades, we seemed bent on ex-
changing souls through the medium of our panted sighs'.
In these frenzied states, Sade's libertines shudder and shake
'like a lunatic', becoming like a 'wild animal rather than a
human being'.

Meaning itself dissolved. For example, the
cannibal Cornaro is so overwhelmed by his sensibility that he
is 'beside himself; incoherent speech declares his extreme
disorder, he stammers, babbles, his words are foul, his
phrases unconnected, his ideas blasphemous, dreadful'.
Sade described another scene: 'Lost in meditation, nothing came
from Albert's mouth but a few unconnected words, occasionally
interspersed with oaths'. Juliette recounts one experience:
'I was like one run amuck, I lost sight of everything, all my
powers of sensation had concentrated in my erotic regions: I
belonged uniquely to joy'.

82 Sade, Juliette, p. 1065.
83 Sade, Juliette, p. 1017.
84 Sade, Juliette, pp. 1041, 1097.
85 Sade, Juliette, p. 1122.
86 Sade, Juliette, p. 1131.
87 Sade, Juliette, p. 1007.
These altered states had two dimensions. On one level, heightened sensibility allowed libertines to abandon all moral restraint and commit the vilest acts of wickedness and debauchery. Sensibility, that force which was suppose to inspire virtuous and altruistic sentiments, instead created total 'self-centeredness': hedonistic narcissism. In this frame of mind, one libertine, named Zeno, assaults his victims. '[S]wearing like one of the damned', writes Sade, Zeno throws himself 'like a madman upon [a] young girl, sodomizes her, and discharges shrieking'.\(^88\) In a different orgy, another libertine, named Sylvia, 'discharges' and, 'swearing like a trooper, the slut goes into an ecstasy, and ferocity brings her to the point where having [a thirteen-year old boy] turned over, with her teeth she tears away its genitals'.\(^89\)

But on a second level, these heightened states allowed readers a glimpse of the true 'natural man'. As Sade kept repeating in all his books, biological instincts drove people not towards the good and the beautiful but rather towards chaos and death. At the same time, however, sensibility potentially confounded this instinct by driving people to substitute their true appetites with sentimental affects. To find the true self, then, libertines must shock their sensibility to the point that it collapsed all their civilized manners and mores. In this sense, Sade's characters must themselves become 'contra-natural', and in the medical sense of that term, by dominating the moral and the physical to find their inner selves. Artifice must purge artifice! So Sade's cure was homeopathic. And after having cleansed the self, the 'natural man' emerged in all its glory.

\(^88\) Sade, Juliette, p. 1144.  
\(^89\) Sade, Juliette, p. 1128.
Clearly, Sade's 'natural man' was a species apart. Unlike Rousseau's 'noble savage', who was moved by equal doses of self-interest and sympathy, Sade's primitive man was a 'savage' of the most animal kind. In short, he was 'constitutionally vicious', 'instinctually cruel' and 'studiously ferocious'—hardly at home on Paul and Virgénie's island, or at Bougainville's Tahiti, for that matter. When libertines took sensibility to its extreme, this is where they found themselves. Sade's message is clear. 'Abandon men to Nature', he writes, 'she will be a far better guide to him than your legislators. ... What necessity is there that man live in society? Restore him to the forest wilderness whence he came, and let him do there whatever he likes'. This is because 'savage man is subject to two needs only: the need to fuck and the need to eat: both are implanted in him by Nature'. Yet it took a lot of disciplined work to figure this all out and discover this 'natural' state of consciousness.

Nevertheless, Sade rejected the more straightforward hedonism associated, for instance, with d'Holbach or with C.-A. Helvétius's extreme sensationism. With Sade, something more disturbing was going on. In his mind, natural man wanted more than just food and sex. Shockingly, this being also desired what Sade took to be Nature's ultimate goal: death itself. In this regard, Sade's philosophical radicalism is easy to overlook nowadays. Modernist and postmodern philosophies, ranging from Friedrich Nietzsche to Sigmund Freud, Georges Bataille and Jacques Derrida, have long insisted on the relation between death and desire. But not so in Sade's

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90 Sade, Juliette, p. 580.
91 Sade, Juliette, pp. 1116-17.
92 See, for example, Allan Megill, Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
time. It is true that in the mid-1700s certain philosophers, notably G.-L. de Buffon and Denis Diderot, had speculated about death and regeneration, situating both in the great circle of life. But it took the French Revolution to force intellectual figures to think about Nature itself as an agent of creative destruction. Much like the physiologist Bichat's *Recherches sur la vie et la mort*, Sade proclaimed that death ruled the living world. Paraphrasing Bichat, Sade wrote, 'In all living beings the principle of life is none other than death: at the same time we receive the one we receive the other, we nourish both within us, side by side ... death is as necessary as life'.

To experience life fully, then, one must not avoid death or try to contain it. Rather, one must embrace it, perhaps even foretaste it. Libertines could do this by witnessing death secondhand, as a spectacle in their debaucheries, or perhaps they could even simulate it by bringing themselves to doorstep of the great divide. Libertines thus used heightened sensibility to disintegrate all normal subject-object relations; they broke all taboos and entered a death-like state, a state in which they experienced what Georges Bataille has called the greater 'continuity' of beings. And in this place, as Sade's characters make plain, anything goes. 'So rend away', says Sade, 'hack and hew, torment, break, wreck, massacre, burn, grind to dust, melt, in a word: reshape into however many forms all the productions of the three kingdoms' of nature.

As a consequence of all this, Sade insisted that human activity was hopeless. All plans and all hopes ended up in

death. And so he took the next step and said that we have nothing left but to retreat within ourselves and recreate experience through artifice. Inner life becomes the center of being. But before uncovering the self's authentic, innermost core, one must first master sense and sensibility. Through this means, Sade's libertines could invent a new syntax, a kind of primitive formalism, which allowed them to express their new experiences and thoughts. It gave them absolute freedom and creativity: physical, intellectual, moral. Sade's characters are the new explorers of this inner world, navigating and conquering the unmediated realm of the deep self. Sade concludes:

I have said it before, I proclaim it again, yes, if one wishes to understand man, it is there one must follow his behavior: it is in his hour of lubricity, in his licentious expressions that his character, laid absolutely bare, yields itself, in all its truest colors, to the appreciations of the philosophic student; and it is after having scrutinized him in these moments of intimacy that one can estimate and predict the consequences of the impulsions of his execrable heart and of his terrifying hungers.  

To conclude, then: in L'Histoire de Juliette, the Marquis de Sade transformed his earlier ideas about sensibility and control, now putting the body the body — the physical — in the service of the mind — the moral. Here Sade's libertine characters learn to dominate mind and feeling through  

Sade, Juliette, p. 1108.
the power of the will. The key to all this, for Sade, was a clear medical understanding of the nervous system. By mastering the physical apparatus of sensation, libertines could control their minds and bodies and thus push themselves into transcendent realms of experience, something far beyond conventional nature and reality.

There were two dimensions to Sade's approach. On one level, Sade believed that one must first deaden sensibility—both as a physical and ethical-moral quality—before unleashing its full psychological and sensual potential. On another level, libertines must also shock their nervous systems repeatedly so that they could overwhelm all moral checks and thus liberate their creative imaginations. As this point, having uncovered the 'natural man', the imagination became an independent force of creation, moving beyond the world of mimesis or traditional representation. To borrow a phrase from painter Odilon Redon, Sade thus put the 'logic of the visible in the service of the invisible'.

In all this, Sade's libertines turned inwards to encounter the deep self, and they then projected this inner experience into the world of consensual reality. And here Sade's vision presaged a new terrain of aesthetic experience, one by which the imaginative individual could substitute expressivity for reality itself. But it was a vision, so startlingly rich for future aesthetic meditation, that was articulated within the form and narrative conventions of eighteenth-century sensibility itself.