

# SEXUAL VIOLENCE DECONSTRUCTED: SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR, ANGELA CARTER AND RIKKI DUCORNET INVESTIGATE SADE\*

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**Abstract:** The complex universe created by Sade has conditioned the Western imagination in such a way that his figure has been vindicated by the different aesthetic and philosophical perspectives inhabiting the last century. Due to his potential of transgression Sade has become a cultural icon with some relevance for the evolution of feminism in the last decades. It is the purpose of this article to draw a critical line starting with the masculine tradition and analyzing later the different feminist rewritings that begins with Beauvoir's revision (1955), followed by the essay *The Sadeian Woman* (1979) by Angela Carter, ending with Rikki Ducornet's *The Fan-Maker's Inquisition. A Novel of the Marquis de Sade* (1999).

**Keywords:** Sade, feminism, sexuality, historiographic metafiction, deconstruction.

**Resumen:** El complejo universo creado por Sade ha condicionado de tal forma el imaginario occidental que su figura sigue siendo reivindicada desde las múltiples perspectivas filosóficas y estéticas que sustentan el pensamiento del siglo XX. Debido a su enorme potencial de trasgresión este escritor pornográfico ha sido un icono cultural significativo en la evolución del feminismo durante las últimas décadas. Es el propósito de este artículo trazar una línea crítica partiendo de la tradición masculina con el objeto de analizar las diferentes reescrituras realizadas por feministas que comienza con el estudio de Beauvoir (1955), seguido del ensayo *The Sadeian Woman* (1979) de Angela Carter, terminando con *The Fan-Maker's Inquisition. A Novel of the Marquis de Sade* (1999) de la norteamericana Rikki Ducornet.

**Palabras clave:** Sade, feminismo, sexualidad, metafiction historiográfica, desconstrucción.

The twentieth century has proved to be a prolific period for the constant redefinition and displacement of the concept of sexuality, informed by a diverse range of discourses that cover the domains of philosophy, science, psychology, literature and the fine arts. Haunted and nurtured by Freud and his theoretical system which placed sex at the centre of human subjectivity, the twentieth century took the challenge of exploring its importance by identifying it with the celebration of the new era's iconoclast revolution in human

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knowledge as well as in aesthetics. These new tendencies in philosophy, science, literature and art were instrumental in the elaboration and representation of a new sense of the self, a modern subject defined by alienation and psychological instability usually conveyed through a connection with 'bohemian' (not-normalized) sexualities.

The insertion of (hetero)sexuality in the domain of culture, which was profusely evidenced in the inauguration of the new century<sup>1</sup>, paved the way for an increasing interest in the Marquis de Sade, pornographer and libertine of the eighteenth century who had been subsequently erased from discourse for over a century. Sade offered a philosophical system that posed a challenge to the bourgeois view of society in general and, more specifically, to its claim about the functionality of sexual activity. This rebellious position made the Marquis an important motif within the imaginative landscape inhabited by the poets, painters and artists of the moment.

It was Apollinaire who recovered Sade for modernity when in 1909 he published a volume with the pornographer's selected writings and announced that his legendary shadow would dominate the century. This pronouncement was correct to the extent that Sade became a myth soon after Apollinaire's statement. The "Divine Marquis" came to embody an amalgam of previous concepts such as the Romantic genius, and his singular demonic perversions were affiliated to the figure of a visionary close to divinity and the sublime, plus new ideas about the liberation of (sexual) desire proclaimed by Surrealism<sup>2</sup>.

His pornographic work offered so many scenarios of liberated desire, sexual aberrations, and of radical attitudes against the Norm that he emerged as an inspiration for those advocates of revolution who joined forces under the label of the avant-garde at the dawn of the twentieth century. But his influence did not stop here and Sade continued an on-going interaction with the fundamental forces developing and revitalizing the cultural milieu. The sexual terrorism celebrated in his books—which justified violence, sex crimes and depravity as natural components of human nature—was taken up by a group of philosophers and writers who came of age after the Second World War and who were highly influenced by the Surrealist credo. Their analysis produced a new approach to the question of the human being as naturally evil in an attempt to come to terms with the existential atmosphere of the moment. Thus, the decade of the forties ended with the publication of Pierre Klossovski's *Sade mon prochain* (1947) and Maurice Blanchot's *Lautréamont et Sade* (1949), which were followed by Jean Paulhan's *Le Marquis de Sade et sa complice* (1951) and George Bataille's *La littérature et le mal* (1957). The process of

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<sup>1</sup> The forms of sexuality depicted and articulated by the bohemians tended to envisage an active male subject constructing a highly eroticised image of women, whose natural space was the brothel, the cabaret, or the artist's studio. The erotic body became the proper object of art *par excellence* and transformed the artist into a devoted voyeur, which justified the overall presence of the female nude in the museums, the galleries and the movie houses from the last decades of the nineteenth century.

<sup>2</sup> Romanticism and Surrealism as aesthetic movements which produced new notions of the self are marked by a certain sense of continuity, mainly in their interest in subjectivity. Both created similar concepts of the artist who should be necessarily original, constantly experiencing life as a search for innovation in form and content. And both defined this search as an activity very close to transcendence, which established the artist as the philosopher or the prophet in a godless society. When applied to sexuality the emphasis placed on irrationality, imagination and the challenge of the norm brought about an interest in forbidden pleasure and profanation which made Sade's pornography an essential reference.

reinstating Sade in a period of cultural and social crisis was meant once more to explore the possibilities of using his works to illustrate the nihilism inherent in this crisis<sup>3</sup>.

Sade thus became a recurrent figure of relevant use value for philosophical inquiry. Furthermore, when the first woman writer took interest in this problematic writer, she gave a new turn to the Sadeian work. Simone de Beauvoir paved the way for a new gender-oriented understanding of it in her essay “Faut-il brûler Sade?”, published in 1955. Beauvoir’s analysis detaches itself from the metaphysics of violent eroticism performed by her male counterparts and focuses upon the justificatory explanations included in his pornographic novels, granting him the relevance of being Freud’s precursor in pointing out the part of sexuality in the construction of identity (Beauvoir 1974: 36).

In some parts of her essay, Beauvoir either clearly defends or at least justifies Sade, the man, as an existential antihero experiencing the inner struggle confronting his perverse desires and his obligations as a social being. She explains his quest for freedom as an abominable venture conditioned by his alienation. Sade is the moneyless aristocrat living in a society who clamours for the destruction of aristocratic privileges, a defective husband dominated by a vindictive mother-in-law, a sexual criminal in a period of political terror, a pornographer in a time of moralistic censorship. Nonetheless, there are sections in which Beauvoir expresses more critical views with regard to the particular notion of subjectivity created by Sade: a human being who not only denies the Other, but victimizes and destroys it in the ritual of a never-satisfied egotistical solipsism (Beauvoir 1974: 41-43).

These observations, through which Beauvoir becomes the pioneering commentator on the relevance of Sadeian eroticism for the Woman’s Question, pre-empt some recurrent issues in feminist debates of the next decades such as the dissociation of female sexuality from reproduction, and the connection between sexual activity and social order. When examining the nature of sexual violence, Beauvoir observes that in his works as well as in his life Sade challenges the patriarchal system by stressing the interchangeability of subject and object in the sadistic stage, which favours homoerotic desire. Though Beauvoir’s interpretation does not offer a radical feminist approach, it is possible to understand it as a first step toward the feminist theoretical developments which were to channel the debates on women’s sexuality and identity in the seventies.

This is the line of argumentation taken by Raquel Osborne, in her article “La actualidad de una pregunta de Simone de Beauvoir: “¿Hay que quemar a Sade?”, in which she pays attention to the importance of these female characters who embody Sade’s rebellion against normalized sexualities and conventional gender roles (Osborne 1989: 80-98). In this sense, Osborne situates Beauvoir’s appraisal within the context of the pornography debate which occupied the feminist arena for the rest of the century and which produced an important division within feminism into two conflicting factions, namely: the anti-

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<sup>3</sup> From this rediscovery of Sade on, his figure becomes a starting point and an evidence for the assessment of the failures of modernity as a project, by using him to deconstruct the foundations of the Enlightenment with its celebration of nature and human reason. Instead of marginalizing Sade as the monstrous being that threatens the order of society or as the utopian figure promising liberation from the chains of a hostile society, from this moment to the next decades his works start being analyzed by means of historical, cultural and ideological contextualization. See Berman 1968; Cerruti 1969; and De Capua 1986.

pornography groups headed by Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon, and Susan Kappeler, and the civil libertarians rejecting any kind of censorship (Cameron 1990).

One of the spokeswomen of this last faction in Great Britain was Angela Carter, a feminist writer who experienced the effervescent sixties as a utopian era of liberation for women which actually left some illusions broken in the process of redefining femininity. Her writings in the seventies, radicalised and iconoclastic, were fundamentally influenced by her life in Japan and the process of alienation it produced in herself. She confirms her entrance into feminism just upon her return to England as a personal commitment which was provoked by her awareness of the failures of the sexual revolution, when she realised that sexual liberation could not be equated with the liberation of women.

Guided by a materialistic perception of women's lives, Carter investigated the different discursive systems and the myths that led women toward annihilation and silence. In her project, she had to face some conventional ideas about femininity in feminist theory: the different nature of women with respect to morality, feeling and emotion, or the biological determinism that proposed motherhood as an essence of female identity. To counteract these dangerous mystifications Carter embraces pornography as an ideological instrument to confront these myths which were oppressing women as much as civil and political indifference; ideological positions that provoked serious confrontations with essentialist feminists.

In 1979 Angela Carter published *The Sadeian Woman. An Exercise in Cultural History* and joined the pornography debate within feminist criticism. This essay takes Sade's work and uses it as an instrument for a feminist critique of representation, in the light of Foucault's analysis of sexuality as a discursive practice. In this sense, Carter advances one of the most relevant tendencies for feminism in the late 1980s and the 1990s, which was completely misunderstood in the moment of its publication<sup>4</sup>. As Sally Keenan argues:

[W]hat a retrospective examination of the text highlights is its almost heretical disagreement with certain aspects of feminist thinking current in the 1970s. First, her suggestion that women too readily identify with images of themselves as victims of patriarchal oppression, that in effect they are frequently complicit with that oppression, was a distinctly unfashionable notion in the mid-1970s ... Second, there was the attack she launched on the idealization of motherhood in its various forms ... Third, there is her challenge to the revisionary psychoanalytic theories of the French feminists, especially Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, in whose work during the 1970s, motherhood and the maternal body assume crucial significance in a whole variety of ways (Keenan 1997: 134).

Carter's appropriation of Sade's novels centres on the use of sexual violence as an exercise of feminist deconstruction, which lays bare the dangers of assuming certain essentialist tenets when defining women. In this sense, Carter does not deny that women are frequently abused by male violence but she argues that, in taking for granted certain myths of femininity, women may be accomplices of their own victimization. To demonstrate

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<sup>4</sup> This polemical essay has been analysed through the lens of cultural theory and Foucauldian perspective, offering some important insights for contemporary feminism and its awareness of the failures of the past. See Altevers 1994; Gamble 1997; Day 1998; Keenan 1997; and Rubinson 2000.

this idea she analyses the protagonist of *Justine, or the Misfortunes of Virtue* (1791), who represents the bourgeois woman guided by a high degree of morality, and whose continuous sufferings becomes the direct result of her moral ethics. Her identity, marked by the bias of sentimentalism and asexuality, locks her in the trap of her virtue and what she receives in turn is violence, punishment and never-ending sufferings.

Justine is the epitome of eighteenth-century ideal of womanhood: she is passive, submissive to the powerful, maternal and prone to goodness, and her weakness justifies the cruelty Sade imposes on her, inasmuch as Sadeian philosophy identifies being with pain, produced or suffered. In Carter's view, Justine's characterization is too limited to act for liberation, as she can only find satisfaction in keeping virtue intact, in a process of immolation:

Justine's organ of perception is the Heart that forbids her to engage in certain activities she feels to be immoral and her autobiography illustrates the moral limitations of a life conducted solely according to the virtuous promptings of the Heart. This Heart is an organ of sentiment, not of analysis, and it never prompts her to sacrifice herself for the principles by which she claims to live (Carter 1979: 51).

In the depraved universe created by Sade, Justine has no agency and is only an object of lust for whom not even Nature feels pity (she dies when struck by bolt of lightning). She negates her sexuality, and this negation produces her sexual repression: she cannot think in any form of pleasure resulting from sex, which she regards solely as a means for reproduction. This femininity as masochism is further developed by Carter in her analysis of Justine as a recurrent archetype in fictions of the twentieth-century that includes complacent female characters who accept their passive role in a world not made for them. These women are always ready to suffer, masochistically experiencing goodness as pleasure in their suffering, as some of the greatest actresses of Hollywood cinema (Greta Garbo as Marguerite Gautier in *Camille*, Marlene Dietrich in *Blond Venus*, or Marilyn Monroe as the icon of herself in her dramatic life) have shown to their emotionally-moved audiences.<sup>5</sup>

However, Juliette, the protagonist of *Juliette, or the Prosperities of Vice* (1797) embodies for Carter the sexual terrorist, in an analysis that rewrites what Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno wrote about this female character in *The Dialectics of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno 1994: 129-163)<sup>6</sup>. Juliette is rationality incarnate, she uses her positivist thinking to find a secure position in an absolutist universe, she believes in science and because of that she despises all superstitious thought that cannot be demonstrated by means of reason. These epistemological categories include: faith in God;

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<sup>5</sup> Angela Carter's interest in Hollywood as a myth-making factory is quite relevant in her career, and it becomes one of the most recurrent tools for the deconstruction of femininity coming from American cinema. The novel *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) and the short story "The Merchant of Shadows" included in the collection *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders* (1992) develop the idea of masochistic femininity as artificial performance in the line later theorised by Judith Butler.

<sup>6</sup> These two philosophers are ascribed to the Frankfurt School whose object is the critique of Enlightenment and its idea of human reason and its theory of neverending progress. For them the enlightened reason brings about the irrationality of a high technological and industrialized world that demands a complete exploitation of the human being.

eneration of motherhood; moral obedience; or the superiority of Good over Evil. In her iconoclast behaviour, Juliette learns to feel pleasure from anal intercourse which was not only a crime against the Law but also a way of avoiding impregnation, thus rejecting her social function as a mother. Her school is the convent where she is taught the basic mechanisms for survival in a society based on the exercise of power: for a powerless girl the tool is a sexual apprenticeship together with the assimilation of ideas such as the relativity of ethics, the inverted nature of justice, and atheism. With these dictates, Juliette learns the pleasures of transgression and sacrilege that reach their climax in the episode of her child's murder by her own hands.

Carter deals with the issue of mothering by deconstructing the psychoanalytic concept of femininity in another chapter devoted to the analysis of Sade's *The Philosophy of the Boudoir* (1795). She proposes the idea of studying Eugénie, its protagonist, as a prototype of a female Oedipus. This picaresque novel (this is how Carter considers Sade's works) structures the plot through a family drama in which the main characters are a girl, her mother, her father and her father's mistress. The plot takes the reader to the mistress's boudoir where the girl, Eugénie, must be educated, with her father's approval, in sexual expertise. Her mother enters this Sadeian scenario and tries to save the girl from a depraved world but Eugénie attacks her mother, rapes her with a dildo, contaminates her with syphilis and sews up her vagina. In Carter's interpretation, the primary plot line is Eugénie's confrontation with her mother, who represents the girl's sexual repression and virtuous learning, and the girl's triumph over archetypal femininity. The psychodrama naturalized by psychoanalysis is now inverted: Eugénie turns into a female Oedipus who commits incest with her mother by offering her a mechanical phallus and, acknowledging rivalry as the basic relationship between mothers and daughters, seals her mother's sexual organ to be sure of her success. But this is only a vicarious success because Eugénie does not act out of her own will but is authorised by her father, the actual source of power:

So, finally, the violation of the mother is no more than a performance, a show; it demonstrates and creates Eugénie's autonomy but also the limits of her autonomy, for her freedom is well policed by the faceless authority beyond her nursery, outside the mirror, the father who knows all, sees all and permits almost everything except absolute freedom (Carter 1979: 131).

At this point of the essay Carter offers the proper understanding of her use of Sade as part of her feminist agenda. The Sadeian woman, the one who inhabits Sade's works, can only partially transgress her condition as a woman by removing the power of God and of human Law, but must remain loyal to the great power of society, that of masculine authority that hates, and at the same time is jealous of, the Mother's womb. For Sade, the ultimate meaning of the phallus is ambivalent because sometimes it is the instrument of pleasure but most of the times it is an organ of punishment against women for their sin of being women. According to Carter, Sade does not forgive his being in the world, and his primary sexual object is transformed into the object of his rage, a rage that he extends to the concept of fecundity and generation. Being in the world is a hellish experience and he, as a pornographer, displaces the setting of the world to the inverted Eden of the brothel where

political and social privileges dominate. This is the meaning of a ‘moral pornographer’<sup>7</sup>, the pornographic writer who utilises the conventional elements of the genre in order to explore gender relations, that is, relations in which sexuality does not mean a private experience between equals but a social practise from which inequality between men and women derives.

Thus *The Sadeian Woman* served in the 1980s to involve the Sadeian philosophy in the development of feminism in critical years for the movement. From the last years of this decade on, feminism had to face certain new trends of thought and of political activism which made feminists confront and contrast their theories with poststructuralism, postmodernism and postcolonialism. These confrontations produced new developments which demanded the interaction of female identity with other issues as race, ethnicity, and class, which had been ignored in the previous period. Around the mid-eighties, the question of feminism’s differences of opinion was instrumental in the segregation of feminists into distinct camps, namely: socialist feminists, black feminists, lesbian feminists, etc. which thus indicated the partiality of the category of gender:

Postfeminism has emerged as a result of critiques from within and outside feminism. It has encouraged an intellectually dynamic forum for the articulation of contested theoretical debates emerging from within feminist theorising, as well as from feminism’s intersection with a number of critical philosophical and political movements including postmodernism and post-colonialism (Brooks 1997: 210).

In this new development of feminism Sade has been used again as a tool for ideological exploration in Rikki Ducornet’s *The Fan-Maker’s Inquisition. A Novel of the Marquis de Sade* (1999)<sup>8</sup>. This writer is concerned with the use of the mechanisms that fiction offers to deconstruct the ideological bias of political, social and cultural colonization. Unlike Carter’s, Ducornet’s entrance into the literary world took place in the decade of the 1980s, which makes her a practitioner of historiographic metafiction, quite prominent in the literary works of the period<sup>9</sup>. Following a tendency common to all her novels, Ducornet explores the violence derived from intolerant ideologies by recreating the last years of the eighteenth century in France, during the turbulent period of French Revolution. The selection of this period and of the Marquis de Sade as the central character of the narrative

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<sup>7</sup> ‘A great moralist’ is how Simone de Beauvoir described him, because his pornography does not arrange the narrative elements only for the satisfaction of sexual pleasure but also, and more importantly, his novels deal with his own confrontation with morality and the definition of useless virtues (Beauvoir 1975: 76-77).

<sup>8</sup> Rikki Ducornet (1943- ) is an American author and her work to date consists of seven novels (*The Stain*, 1984; *Entering Fire*, 1986; *The Fountains of Neptune*, 1992; *The Jade Cabinet*, 1993; *Phosphor in Dreamland*, 1995; *The Fan-Maker’s Inquisition*, 1999; and *Gazelle*, 2003). She is also the author of two collections of short stories: *The Complete Butcher’s Tales* (1994) and *The Word Desire* (1997). Her writings are influenced by surrealism and magic realism from which she creates fabulous imaginary worlds through thematic structures dealing with mankind’s fear of transmutation and chaos, the mysteries of sex, time and consciousness.

<sup>9</sup> The term was proposed by Linda Hutcheon in her *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction* (1988) to name a tendency in postmodernist literature to introduce a critical dialogue between past and present by fictionalizing historical figures or historical events and offering a new perspective to their historical value.

is not at all arbitrary, since she wants to point to the hidden side of the Age of Reason and the terror produced by the construction of modernity.

The intertextual connection between past and present, which historiographic metafiction conveys, is achieved here by the use of juxtaposed texts destabilizing the ontological level of the narrative. This cross-over of narrative times is informed by some letters written by Sade to his fictional friend Gabrielle, the proceedings of the French Committee, and extracts taken from a fictional book written by the two principal characters about the Catholic colonization of Yucatan in the sixteenth century.

Diego de Landa, a Spanish Franciscan, historically known as the most important collector of Mayan culture, is the protagonist of the book Sade and Gabrielle are writing in the fictional time of Ducornet's story. But their desire is precisely to dismantle the epic myth of the Inquisitor by revealing Landa's interest in destroying pre-Colombian culture. The different narrative sources produce an ideological commentary that allows Ducornet to establish points of connection between the ideology of Rationality and the religious fanaticism of the past, through the identification of the mechanisms used by the Committee in eighteenth-century France with the ones used by the Inquisition. The idea that governs the whole narrative is the deconstruction of the binary opposition between civilization and savagery, subverting the positive connotations of progress that results in suffering and death for the people located at the other end of the binary axis.

The novel is divided into two parts which correspond to, on the one hand, the trial which leads Gabrielle, a Parisian fan-maker, to the guillotine, and, on the other, the notes written by Sade about Gabrielle's life, which bring to the reader a view of Sade as psychologically devastated by the terrible scenes he watches from the window of his cell:

And now –a death machine, là! là! Just beneath my window! Have I engendered it? It seems that I have. Even the clouds pissing rain, the air filled with mortal shrieks, with sobs, the laughter of sobs, seems to pour out of me. I imagine that every orifice of my body oozes crime. A lover of empiricism ... it occurs to me that I might find a way to measure or track this seminal poison and direct it. For the gore that accumulates like the dead apples of autumn beneath my window sickens me, yes! It is one thing to dream of massacres, it is another to witness one (Ducornet 1999: 16-17).

The Marquis becomes the chronicler of the enlightened nightmare, an idea which began to mature in Ducornet's interests from the moment in which she read his letters where she found a more humane version of his personality than the tradition had naturalised. In this sense, she says, Sade's books need a profound analysis because they represent a moral, philosophical and political exploration of ideas that helps understand some contemporary preoccupations:

Again and again Sade demonstrates that the libertine, determined by redundancies and burdened by a cumbersome apparatus imposed by acute sexual malaise, is never a free spirit but instead the puppet of his own profound incapacities ...Sade dared to think unthinkable thoughts and he dared put them to paper. I often wonder: if Sade were read with the rigor he both demands and deserves, perhaps we would come closer to an understanding of our own boundless capacity for crime (Ducornet 1999/2000: 16).



The prison where Sade was jailed during the massacres of the Revolution in Ducornet's novel becomes a metaphor of the prisoner's mind, maddened by what he sees, and continuously imagining the cruellest crimes as a response toward a world that advances on irrationality<sup>10</sup>. However, this is not the only reason for the depravity of his mind: Ducornet justifies it by including episodes of Sade's childhood and adolescence, in order to see his perversions as a direct consequence of them. Ducornet's general interest in criticizing Catholicism finds here a space in which she introduces the Abbot, Sade's uncle, with his fondness for pornography and his preferences in matters of sexual aberrations:

When he was not reading pornography ill-concealed in theological treatises, my uncle was perusing a fantastic book on the Spanish Inquisition in the New World, illustrated with a multitude of copper engravings, a kind of catalogue of sexual terror, licentious extravagance, and murder. As the *abbé* was so often engaged with Pélisse, and as my tutor was on his own knees after some bug or other ... I had plenty of time to gloat over those instructive scenes that—as was later proved—assured my life would be ruled by *furia amorosa* and an unbridled imagination (Ducornet 1999: 166).

The counterpoint to this distorted imagination is Gabrielle, Sade's alter ego; a craftswoman who makes fans with pornographic scenes painted on them. She introduces rational thinking into a novel full of irrational violence. The exercise of reason and common sense separates this character from the fanaticism of the people of Paris who accuse and condemn her at the end of the story for her friendship with Sade, her lesbian affairs, and her book against imperialism. In this way, Ducornet transforms the Utopian slogan of the French Revolution: "Freedom, Equality, Fraternity", into its opposite, represented by the intolerance of Gabrielle's judges. The Committee's conservative attitude is evidenced when the protagonist's femininity is put into question in the courtroom, and is attacked for her vision of sexuality as a source of pleasure. Ducornet situates one of the fissures of the Enlightenment and its project of equality at the different hearings of the trial: for the judges sexuality is a practise that needs to be contained and normalized by rational law due to the fact that sexual freedom is a great danger for a well-organized society whose progress must be understood in terms of control and restraint.

Gabrielle's discourse is fundamentally feminist in her criticism of the Revolution's censorship of women's sexuality, and in a moment of the narrative in which she talks about her friendship with Sade she articulates the dismantling of the traditional idea about the functional separation of the sexes:

Early in our friendship, Sade said I had the mind of a man. That was to say that I was fearless, fearless of ideas, which, after all, are mere abstractions until put to use. I told him that I had the mind of a woman, adequately stimulated, adequately served. You see: Under the guidance of an enlightened parent, I became an educated woman transcending the limits of my craft (Ducornet 1999: 22).

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<sup>10</sup> In this sense Ducornet retakes Beauvoir's understanding of Sade's work as a result of his imprisonment (inner and outer). This is why her novel is interested in Sade's life and not his novels, because she wants to find the reasons for his perverted mind in his environment and his education, just as Beauvoir did in her essay.

Ducornet usually confronts the masculine and the feminine in her novels in order to transcend them as the social constructs they are. Her novels attempt to show a Utopian universe which has given way to metamorphosis and change. And for her the sources of change are those women who can recover the communion with nature, as a solution for barbaric destruction and the dissolving of identity produced by violence. From this perspective, Gabrielle's lover, a woman of letters who is also condemned by the Committee, proposes the moral of the story when she dreams of an imaginary city, perfect in its depiction of the human being in communion with nature:

In times of Calamity —Famine, Plague, and War— the forests assured that a family, a group, or even the entire population could return to a State of Nature. Also, the wilderness scattered with lakes and ponds, supplied the market year-round with trout and pike and eels.

Every city square was planted with an orchard. The citizens came together in the fall to harvest hazelnuts, almonds, apples, and, in summer, cherries! Every child with cherries dangling from her ears! Imagine the joy of children growing up in “the Almond Quarter”, the pleasures of a city park shaded by one hundred walnut trees (Ducornet 1999: 208).

This is the moral landscape to which Ducornet guides the reader in all her novels, one which must be regarded as a parable of a new kind of Eden; an imaginary place that counteracts the devastating effects of the civilized world. These imaginary places that Ducornet usually presents in her novels to confront the negativity of capitalism, materialism, and rationality, are natural spaces connected with the sensuality of the body. The relationship between this recovered paradise and female identity does not follow the patriarchal bias of opposing women to rationality as it would seem when thinking through binary categories. Instead Ducornet proposes a new world driven by distinct categories of being where civilization does not equal devastation of Nature but utopian tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

Ironically, this utopian paradise is related by opposition to the conceptualization of the modern world; the civilized world which sees Sade's novels and life as a dangerous provocation. In this sense, Rikki Ducornet enriches the tendency inaugurated by Beauvoir regarding the use of Sade as a valuable figure for the discussion of sexuality, identity and femininity in contemporary thought. As proposed here, the French feminist channelled the twentieth-century ongoing interest in the Marquis into a thorough study of the figure for the sake of feminism that developed simultaneously with the movement, up to the last year of the century with Ducornet's postmodern revision. The forty-four years that separate Beauvoir's essay from *The Fan-Maker's Inquisition* proved to be the period of time for the problematization of feminism's aims and for the reassessment of its nature, and no doubt the literary figure of Marquis de Sade has played a significant role in this reassessment.

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