

Lionel Abel

## SO WHO'S NOT MAD?

### On *Marat/Sade* and Nihilism\*

It was Susan Sontag, I think, who first pointed up the extreme theatricality of *Marat/Sade*. Susan Sontag was right, *Marat/Sade* is theatrical. Is the play dramatic, though? About this there seems to be some question in even Miss Sontag's mind. When she discussed the work in her *Partisan Review* article (Spring 1965), the word "dramatic," scarcely used in her text, came up in this sentence: ". . . *Marat/Sade* is far from being the supreme masterpiece of contemporary dramatic literature, but it is scarcely a second-rate play." From which I infer that Miss Sontag herself has doubts as to the value of *Marat/Sade* as drama. My own opinion—which has the virtue at least of being settled—is that the play is indeed a "director's play," and owes most of its values of excitement and bravura to the staging and direction of Mr. Peter Brook. Whatever life *Marat/Sade* has on the stage comes, in my finding, from the devices of its director, not its author.

One could not say this were the play truly compelling. For certainly a play not soundly dramatic can do little more than hold its audience; the devices of a director can merely make a play bearable. To me, *Marat/Sade* was certainly bearable, but little more than that, except for a few moments. The first part was often tedious, and the second part a repetition of what is boring in the first. But what concerns me here is a general point, the difference between the theatrical and the dramatic.

When we find Marat on the Martin Beck stage, half of his body is enclosed in a metal bathtub, and the naked flesh of him that we do see is covered with large red spots. There he is, immobile, frail and blotched in his bath, stained by his disease. Now the effect is electric. But this effect lasts only for a moment, for Marat is going to speak. We want to hear what he says. And as we listen, we tend not to look

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\* *The Persecution and Assassination of Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum at Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*. By Peter Weiss. Directed by Peter Brook. Martin Beck Theater, New York.

at his red spots; but what he says is less interesting than the red spots, much less interesting humanly, much less interesting dramatically. His voice, which often rises to an orator's shout, somehow erases the strong effect the sight of his body first gave us. His is a theatrical presence, not a dramatic one.

To point up the contrast between the theatrical and the dramatic, one has only to think for a moment of Danton in Buechner's play, *Danton's Death*. The real Danton, the Danton of history, was pockmarked, but Buechner in the directions for his work never insisted on representing him as such. For what interests us in the Danton of Buechner are the things Danton says, and were he presented with a pockmarked visage, the force of his lines would limit, make one forget, or even quite destroy, I think, any theatrical value his appearance with a pitted skin might have, just as the feebleness and platitudinousness of Marat's lines in *Marat/Sade* tend, as that play goes on, to destroy the theatrical effect our first sight of Marat, spotted and in his bathtub, gave. I suggest that the theatrical is something very different from the dramatic, and that it is finally dependent on the dramatic. A play in which the first is substituted for the second will tend to lose whatever value, as it goes on, it had at the start. This is what happens in *Marat/Sade*. Highly theatrical at the outset, never becoming dramatic, as it progresses it loses its theatricality. And not because the theatrical is contrary to the dramatic or in some sense its opposite. The theatrical sums itself up in one moment of time whereas the dramatic links into a culminating action many moments of time. When we speak of a *coup de théâtre* we have in mind an event which combines the theatrical with the dramatic, but the *coup de théâtre* simply cannot take place if some dramatic development has not prepared it. Now there is no *coup de théâtre* in the utterly theatrical play of Peter Weiss. In fact, the most theatrical thing about this play is its full title, which takes up about a minute's reading time. Read it: *The Persecution and Assassination of Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum at Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*.

The idea that Sade might put on a play to be performed by the inmates of a lunatic asylum, and that in this play he and Marat might be the leading characters, is certainly a fascinating one suggesting a real drama. But no drama takes place in Peter Weiss's play. Sade tries to convert Marat, who does not listen to him. Why would he listen to the platitudes of sadism? Marat, totally unresponsive, declaims, in his turn, the political platitudes to which he remains committed. There is no yielding of one to the other, consequently there is no dramatic

play between them. The author has said that the center of his play is an argument. Now I heard none. For in any true argument there is always a moment of wavering on the part of the one or the other. But in *Marat/Sade*, the Marquis is scarcely beguiling, and Marat never gives any indication of being beguiled.

Some, including Miss Sontag, have found a great theatrical interest in the fact that almost everyone on the stage is mad. I am inclined to think that this reveals in those who take such a view an ideological interest in the mad rather than an aesthetic or even psychologically normal response to madness. Anyone who has ever had a discussion with another person and noted or suspected at some point that the other was mad, must recall that with that thought or suspicion there was an immediate tendency to break off discussion. For one cannot know what a lunatic is thinking or feeling and the normal impulse is to detach oneself from any consideration of what may go on in his mind. And so it follows, however surprising this may be to some people, that madmen, though theatrical, are fundamentally undramatic and do not properly belong on the stage. A moment of madness, yes, particularly as expressed by someone whom we have seen as sane before, can have dramatic interest, and of course a sane man pretending madness is interesting. But real madmen, or persons presented as really mad, do not belong in any theater attended by people with a taste for drama.

Yet I must admit that the audience at the Martin Beck Theater does not reason as I do, and does not feel as I do. During the last moments of *Marat/Sade*, when the inmates of Charenton threw off all restraints and went berserk, there was an unmistakable feeling of solidarity with them on the part of the audience, so that for some moments I half expected whole groups to get up on stage and add their own versions to the outrageous "twist" Peter Brook designed. Why this fellow feeling for the mad? In answering this question, one can perhaps find some reason for the very great success of Peter Weiss's play.

Now the play is quite devoid of any intellectual meaning. Is Weiss trying to say that the content of history is sadism? This judgment might indeed make a play, and a challenging play, though I think the judgment false. In any case, Weiss has denied that this is his judgment. He asserts, "Everything irrational and absurd is foreign to me." He claims, also, to side with the platitudinous opinions uttered by Marat. Of course, none of Weiss's statements about his play need be taken seriously. In public interviews he has on the one hand described himself as a socialist, and on the other hand said that he considers socialism a failure. Such indecisiveness of judgment is hardly

the sign of a superior sensitiveness to what, after judging, may remain ambiguous. Very probably, we can only learn about what is unresolvably ambiguous in politics and morals from someone whose moral and political position is clear. Certainly it would be unfair to confront Weiss's play with masterpieces like Dostoevsky's. Nevertheless, the art of the Russian novelist did settle one question (there are some questions that have been settled) now being called upon by the partisans of *Marat/Sade*, notably its director, Mr. Peter Brook. What Dostoevsky's work proved, to those, of course, who know how to read him, is that one can choose finally—Dostoevsky chose Christ as against science and socialism—and yet acknowledge with full awareness all that is valid in what one rejects. No reader can be in doubt of Dostoevsky's judgment; he denies no reader a taste of the ambiguous. Bad or inconclusive thinking is hardly the best, or even a good way, to apprehend ambiguities.

But why the enthusiasm for *Marat/Sade*? Here, I think, we have to turn aside from the aesthetics of drama and look to the ideological motives of the play.

Let me go back to the frenetic response of certain members of the audience to the final scene of *Marat/Sade*. In that response there was a clearly articulated sympathy for madness. What sustains so peculiar, and to my mind unnatural, a sympathy?

Do people tend to think now that history is a madhouse? Or, to cite again Joyce's much-quoted phrase, a nightmare? In that case, why would they not want to wake up from it? I must also point out, that, when any strikingly leftist remark was made on the stage, the very same members of the audience who solidarized themselves with the stage's madmen again came to life with clapping and cheers. So there was a feeling in the theater for leftism plus madness, and I think this feeling is expressed in the play itself, whose two chief protagonists have the names Marat and Sade.

I suggest that the play appeals generally to those who have violent leftist notions and yet, like the author, think socialism a failure. In madness, one can combine such ideas.

However, the interest in madness presently expressed, and by a good many talented and intelligent people, may go far beyond the need to conciliate political leftism with despair of socialism. The frantic, the frenetic, the wild and outrageous are continually being stated as positive values nowadays, in literature, in the films, and on the stage. I recently saw an extremely clever French film in which the goal of the hero—he achieves it—is schizophrenia. The film is light, intelligent,

ironical, and in that way pays tribute to French rationality, but it is an ironic tribute, for the real appeal of the film is in the figure of its protagonist finally at home in the white walls of an asylum. And if one correlates with a film of this kind, the various expressions of hysteria, irrational violence, homosexual hatred, and sheer nuttiness regularly expressed by our youngest writers, one has to look more deeply into what may have caused or promoted what now amounts to a powerful trend.

I have in mind *The White Negro*, that wacky though powerful essay by Norman Mailer, in which our genial friend and Marxist gone haywire singled out psychopaths as the bearers of future values. In this piece, he also defended the courage of some tough young kids who beat up a weak old man. Now there was a time when courage was understood very differently. Not a few French knights in feudal times thought it unmanly to engage in combat when not outnumbered. I also have in mind Mailer's recent novel, *The American Dream*, in which the protagonist, Rojack, kills his wife and then immediately afterwards buggers their maid. I must note here that the deed is a variant of one in Jean Genet's *Querelle de Brest*. In that novel the young sailor Querelle, having killed a man, feels that he ought to pay for his crime, and has himself buggered by the local pimp. Thus buggered, Querelle becomes a marked man, an *enculé*, and for all eternity. So Querelle does not entirely escape the mark of Cain. Except that the mark Cain had to bear on his forehead is kept hidden by Genet's hero in his ass. Now Mailer's American hero, who kills as if Cain had never existed, appears, after his crime, like an innocent abroad; he has no feeling of guilt, no need for expiation. And how was Mailer's novel understood? When Philip Rahv attacked the book insofar as its hero is without any kind of conscience, his objection was met with derision, as if it were absurd to judge a fictional character morally! As if the best of our critics had not done just that, and ever since the novel came into being.

Or take Leslie Fiedler's article, *The Mutants*, published in the Fall 1965 *Partisan Review*. I heard Mr. Fiedler give that essay as a lecture at a conference at Rutgers University and so I can supply some additional data which may throw light on Mr. Fiedler's purposes; these, from his essay as published, may be unclear. In his essay, and also in his lecture, Mr. Fiedler quoted a contemporary kid as having said to him: "Freud is a fink." Now what interested Mr. Fiedler was not whether this judgment was true or false. What interested him was that a kid should say this, and I submit that if you look at Mr. Fiedler's article you will see that he is inclined to accept the kid's judgment. Why? At Rutgers Mr. Fiedler said in so many words, though I quote

from memory—but there is a transcript of the discussion which may be checked—: “I myself have become as tired of the rationalism of Freud as of Marx.” Is Freud then really a fink? And why did the young man Fiedler cited say so? The answer to this is not hard to find. Norman Brown, who has had a very great impact on many of our very young men, says in his now famous book that the insistence of many conventional American males on satisfying women sexually is a form of repression stemming from Freud, and something to be rejected in the name of freedom. So even fucking, in other words, is to Mr. Brown and to the young enlightened by him a bit too classical, just too upstanding!

I want to say something further about Mr. Fiedler’s essay. According to him, the taking of drugs by the young is their expression, and main expression, of dissatisfaction with a boring and spiritually flat society. I will not go so far as to say that Mr. Fiedler recommends that the young take drugs, but I suggest that no one whose children are engaged in taking drugs should call on Mr. Fiedler to dissuade them from doing so. To take drugs, according to him, is to be an adventurer, and in a society in which little adventure is possible. It is to travel inwards, something very up-to-date, like the up-to-dateness of the cosmonauts who go towards outer space. Once again, I do not want to charge Mr. Fiedler with recommending the taking of drugs, but I think his whole essay is a confession that he cannot call upon one value in whose name he could oppose it. Why?

When there is a real trend, and I think I am talking about a real trend here, one has to look for something deeper to explain it than the views of those who represent it verbally, even with cleverness. It is not enough to call names as Philip Rahv did in his review of Norman Mailer’s *The American Dream*. Nor is it enough to argue politically with the youth, as Irving Howe did in his article on the “new left.” Call Mailer foolish or a bad novelist—the last he is not—and the young will still listen to him. Call the “new left” ahistorical, as Irving Howe did in his essay, and the young will reply—they already have replied—with violence. Philip Rahv and Irving Howe are perfectly right, of course, but I can’t help remembering Hegel’s remark about Rome in its decadence. The philosophers were right, Hegel said, but the people were right not to listen to them.

Once again, what can be understood to lie behind the not always clear inclination of the contemporary youth for all forms of the irrational?

More than fifteen years ago, in Alexandre Kojève’s extraordinary book, *An Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, a work which has in-

fluenced all French thought, including Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's, I read the following remarkable passage, the full meaning of which I confess not to have understood at the time and which I am here translating rather freely:

Philosophy has no sense or reason for being unless it can lead to Wisdom, or at least to the Sage, that is to say, to the Man of Wisdom. On the other hand, to believe that the Sage or Man of Wisdom is possible is to necessarily accept philosophy, understood as a means of attaining Wisdom, of realizing the Sage . . .

Now on the question of the Sage the only fundamental disagreement is between Plato and Hegel . . . Let us see what their disagreement amounts to. One can of course, with Plato, deny that Wisdom can be realized. Then we have an either/or. Either the ideal of the Sage is never and nowhere realized, and the Philosopher is simply a madman who pretends to be what he *knows* it is impossible to be. Or he is not a madman; and then his ideal of Wisdom is or will be realized, and his definition of the Sage or Man of Wisdom is or will be a truth.

But to deny the existence of wisdom realized, either in God, as with Plato, or in man, as with Hegel, means, according to Kojève, to say that the philosopher is a madman—in other words, that there is no difference between the madman and the philosopher. (One might add, between the philosopher and the criminal, and between the philosopher and the dope addict.) The point of view expressed here, and which is so pertinent, in my opinion, to our contemporary problems, may be summed up as follows: either God exists and perfection on earth is not required, or God does not exist and human life can be perfected. That is, philosophy is a reasonable pursuit. But if God does not exist (contrary to Plato), and if wisdom cannot be realized (contrary to Hegel), then the madmen, the criminals and dope addicts are as reasonable as the philosophers, and even more reasonable insofar as they do not attempt to philosophize.

Now, the final deliverance of this epoch is that God does not exist and that human life cannot ever be perfected and hence that the madman, the criminal, and the dope addict are not inferior to the philosopher. That is why it is so difficult to argue with a young student against taking drugs, not to speak of dissuading him from doing so. Can one say to him that God exists? No. Can one say to him that society can be perfected? No. (It will not do, according to Kojève, to say that society can be somewhat improved.) Then can one say that the philosopher is better than the drug addict? No. Or better than the criminal or the madman? Again no. It is the vague recognition, I will

not call it knowledge, that no one to be respected can answer these questions affirmatively which emboldens our contemporary youth and makes them so rash and so sad.

Obviously our dilemma was not new in the Russia of the 1860's. What is new, though, is the impact on a mass society of the issue of belief which Dostoevsky raised. Do we today believe in God or in man? And by "we" I mean the masses, I mean the many, the millions. For there are many Raskolnikovs among us and many more Rojacks. In fact, to appreciate fully the effect on the masses of our spiritual dilemma and the receptivity of present-day society to any and all answers, no matter how drastic, one has only to think of a contemporary Dr. Raskolnikov giving a seminar on the Double Meaning of Killing Two Pawnbrokers, or of a Dr. Rojack lecturing at an honored university on Why It Is Not Wrong to Kill One's Wife. Say that Norman Mailer is no Dostoevsky, who's going to say he is? But to say that he is not is to discriminate, and the whole question now is whether discrimination is valid. As for Mailer, his excesses in thinking were prophesied, I believe, in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. When Bloom, about to fall asleep, plays with variations on the name Sindbad, calling up Ninbad the Nailer, Tinbad the Tailor, and Binbad the Bailer, he suddenly becomes less lethargic, somewhat more caustic, and gets to the name we know and he didn't: our contemporary to him is Mindbad the Mailer.

But never mind Mindbad. The question is not whether Mailer is intelligent, but whether intelligence counts any more. The argument for intelligence, that is for philosophy—and by philosophy I mean the taking up of any topic, art, morals or politics, with a sincere intent to be reasonable—was, I once thought, stated forever by Aristotle. He said: if you want to philosophize, then let us philosophize; and if you don't want to philosophize, you still have to philosophize. But who in philosophy feels he has to philosophize nowadays?

In fact, our young philosophers are dulled, I believe, by their aim, which is only to be bright, that is brighter than other philosophers. And the brightest and most intolerable of all philosophers in recent times was Ludwig Wittgenstein, who said against philosophy what no philosopher ever said before him: Philosophy is Hell. For why undertake the great labor of reasoning if reason is futile, if wisdom is unrealizable, and if the philosopher is no better than the madman, the criminal, or the addict? Why? Genet is a problem to Sartre, the philosopher, who devoted a book of over 600 pages to explaining him. Sartre, as all the young know now, is no problem to Genet.

But to get back to Weiss's play. It is my assumption that the depth



of the contemporary situation is there and present whenever the least conscious members of the audience at *Marat/Sade* respond to that work as they do and empathize with its moments of madness. I know I could argue with them about the aesthetics of drama, dispute and even refute their notions of taste, but how am I going to refute their spontaneous identification with the mad figures tumbling convulsively at the play's end across the stage?

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