

A black and white close-up portrait of Jean-Michel Rabaté, an older man with white hair and round glasses, looking directly at the camera. The background is dark.

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Beckett

Beckett and Sade

Jean-Michel Rabaté

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Elements in Beckett Studies

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BECKETT AND SADE

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CAMBRIDGE
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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108726832

DOI: [10.1017/9781108771085](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108771085)

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First published 2020

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-108-72683-2 Paperback

ISSN 2632–0746 (online)

ISSN 2632–0738 (print)

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DOI: 10.1017/9781108771085
First published online: October 2020

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Abstract: Much has been written on Beckett and Sade, yet nothing systematic has been produced. This Element is systematic by adopting a chronological order, which is necessary given the complexity of Beckett's varying assessments of Sade. Beckett mentioned Sade early in his career, with Proust as a first guide. His other sources were Guillaume Apollinaire, and Mario Praz's book, *La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica* (1930), from which he took notes about sadism for his *Dream Notebook*. Dante's meditation on the absurdity of justice provides closure, facing Beckett's wonder at the pervasive presence of sadism in humans.

Keywords: sadism, torture, the Revolution, ethics, politics

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ISBNs: 9781108726832 (PB), 9781108771085 (OC)
ISSNs: 2632-0746 (online), 2632-0738 (print)

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Introduction: The Sade Boom

Beckett kept a keen interest in the works and person of the Marquis de Sade all his life. Quite late, he became conscious that he had participated in a ‘Sade boom’, dating from the inception of French Surrealism, from Guillaume Apollinaire, André Breton and Georges Bataille to the explosion of Sadean scholarship in the 1950s. Even if Beckett realized that he had been caught up in a Sade cult, he never abjured his faith in the importance of the outcast and scandalous writer, and kept rereading Sade (as he did Dante) across the years.¹ I will begin by surveying Beckett’s letters to find the traces of his readings and point out how a number of hypotheses concerning the ‘divine Marquis’ evolved over time. Beckett revisited Sade several times, and he progressively reshaped and refined his interpretation of what Sade meant for him across five decades. Following the evolution of these epistolary markers that culminated in a more political reading, I will distinguish four moments in Beckett’s approach.

Beckett knew the details of Sade’s exceptional life, a life that was not a happy one but was certainly a long one, for his career spanned the Old Regime, the French Revolution and almost all of the First Empire. Sade was jailed for debauchery from 1777 to 1790, then imprisoned for a short time at the height of the Terror in 1793–4, which allowed him to witness the mass slaughter; he was freed just before the date set for his execution, thanks to Robespierre’s downfall; he was jailed again for his pornographic writings under the Consulate and the Empire under direct orders from a puritanical Napoleon, between 1801 and 1814. He died in the Charenton asylum, where he was kept under the pretence that he was insane. The authorities knew very well that he was a subversive writer but considered him a pornographer even though his writings were more emetic than titillating or erotic. Altogether Sade spent twenty-seven years in prison, quite a record for a nobleman from an ancient and distinguished family who had never killed anyone. Sade was aware that the imposition of force on his passions had not restrained them but on the contrary exacerbated their violence. Indeed, Sade’s scandalous reiterations of perverse fantasies go beyond the limits of what is considered as sayable. Feeling sympathy for this accused martyr who had produced a radical form of literature, Beckett recognized the importance of the dire lessons on love, sexuality and power contained in Sade’s sulphurous works.

The first mention of Sade comes from a 1934 letter revealing Beckett’s sense that the Marquis de Sade’s influence had permeated the cultural world of the Dublin intelligentsia, a world in which eccentrics and perverts were hard to

¹ See Eric Marty’s critical and perceptive book, *Pourquoi le XXe siècle a-t-il pris Sade au sérieux?* (2011). For a comprehensive assessment of Beckett’s interest in Sade’s works, see Pilling (2014).

distinguish. This satirical moment corresponds to the unpublished novel *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, Beckett's farewell to his student years in Dublin and Paris. It brings us to the moment of intense rumination preceding the writing of *Murphy*, when he was elaborating an aesthetic of non-anthropomorphic values. This comes to the fore in a letter to MacGreevy from September 1934; Beckett praises Cézanne for his paintings of Montagne Sainte Victoire, a landscape rendered 'incommensurable with all human expressions whatsoever' (2009, 222), adding:

Could there be any more ludicrous rationalisation of the itch to animise than the état d'âme balls, banquets & parties. Or – after Xerxes beating the sea, the Lexicographer kicking the stone & the Penman under the bed during the thunder – any irritation more *mièvre* than that of Sade at the impossibilité d'outrager la nature. A.E.'s Gully would have thrilled him. (Beckett, 2009, 223)

Here, Sade's 'irritation' is presented as *mièvre*, which suggests something soft and effeminate, hardly what one would expect from the Marquis! In 1934, Sade can be compared with those Irish artists who still appeal to an anthropomorphized nature, whereas Cézanne's strength was that he presented it as inhuman. This allusion to Sade follows an ironical evocation of James Joyce, whose terror of thunderstorms was legendary. Beckett had found in Mario Praz Sade's statement that 'L'impossibilité d'outrager la nature est, selon moi, le plus grand supplice de l'homme [The impossibility of outraging Nature is, according to me, man's greatest torment]' (Sade, 1967b, 281; Praz, 1948, 109).² This quote is taken out of its context; we find it in *La Nouvelle Justine*, spoken by Jérôme, one of the Libertines, the oldest of a group of ferocious monks. Jérôme likes being whipped or sodomized when engaging in his main activity, which is torturing to death little girls and boys. Jérôme is one among many Sadean anti-heroes who all express a demiurgic urge to commit crimes so extravagant that they will have no equivalent in the annals of human debauchery; they are ready to destroy the whole human race, if not the world. However, here Beckett betrays a second-hand knowledge, for he lifted the sentence from Praz's *The Romantic Agony*.

At the time, Praz was developing a groundbreaking concept of decadence that took Sade as the hidden source both of a darker neo-Gothic Romanticism and of an enervated and affected late Symbolism (Praz, 1948, 107).³ Praz finished writing his book in 1930, just when Maurice Heine was publishing the first

² *La Nouvelle Justine* is an expanded version, published in 1797, of *Justine, ou les malheurs de la vertu* from 1791. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's own.

³ Praz attributes this sentence to Sade and not to the character who uttered it, Jérôme.