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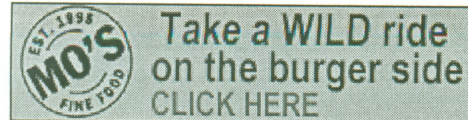
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The Erotics of Virtue

Kenneth Anderson



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Book Reviews

June 20, 1999

The Erotics of Virtue

STORY OF O; By Pauline Reage; (Ballantine: 204 pp., \$5.99 paper)

By KENNETH ANDERSON

Finally acknowledged publicly as the author of "Story of O," Dominique Aury died a year ago last month at the age of 90.

Her novel recounts, in language at once pornographically explicit yet (and for that somehow more shockingly) refined, the deliberate self-degradation of a young 1950s Parisian woman, O, a fashion photographer who becomes the consenting sex slave of her unflinchingly violent masters, Rene and Sir Stephen, who put her through elaborate rituals of torture, bloody whippings, brandings and brutalized sex. Media major and minor worldwide carried obituaries of Aury, reflecting her novel's enduring popularity and scandal, which has sold millions of copies worldwide, has been translated into 20 or more languages, has never been out of print in 40 years and is, one suspects, France's chief postwar literary export. National Public Radio, for example, used the occasion to broadcast a moderately salacious but whip-and-chain-less passage, after warning parents to stop up their children's ears. But the general tone of Aury's obituaries was circumspect and while noting "Story of O's" violent sexuality, tended to elide the issues it raised, preferring to dwell upon the elegance and rigor of its language, and indeed upon the elegance and rigor of the austere, intellectual Aury herself.

So "Story of O" will apparently not be debated upon its author's death in unseemly terms of the cultural fissures of feminism and pornography, conservative religious sensibility and sexual licentiousness that one might have thought the novel's scandal required. By the same token, however, apparently neither will it be debated as a novel, literature and arguably that rarest of all achievements, the pornographic as genuine literary masterpiece. The London Times, for example, consigned it instead to the category of eccentricity, a classic, to be sure, but merely "entrenched in its own eccentric canon as a classic of eroticism." Elegant, literate, cool, in its own eccentric way, canonical within its own specialized genre and cult, yes--but literature? Masterpiece of modern fiction? Let us not overreach.

The marginalization of "Story of O" amounts to saying that it reveals to us little of what, in literary studies, used to be described as "the human condition." Leaving aside the

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ensorious and puritanical of all persuasions, whether America's Christian right or MacKinnonite feminism, the diminishing of Aury's achievement has been abetted by two perhaps surprising sources. On the one hand, in various interviews late in life and in her essay, "A Girl in Love," Aury tells us that "Story of O" was undertaken as a kind of extended love letter to rekindle the passions of a lover, the eminent French writer and editor Jean Paulhan, who was gradually losing interest in her. She was in her late 40s when, as she said, "I wasn't very pretty" (photographs from the period suggest otherwise) and "I was no longer young," and she wrote the novel in three months. Paulhan was, in a word, captivated, and it was subsequently published in 1954 by Pauvert under the pseudonym Pauline Reage--homage, according to Aury, to her heroines Pauline Borghese and the 19th-century feminist-socialist Pauline Roland--to great scandal and considerable speculation over its authorship. All this is known, of course, to readers of John de St. Jorre's out-of-print "Venus Bound: The Erotic Voyage of the Olympia Press and Its Writers," containing interviews with Aury from the early 1990s, or the 1994 New Yorker essay based upon them, or Aury's obituaries themselves.

The point, however, is that although the story of the novel's birth is high romance--Paulhan was won over, and he and Aury remained lovers until his death in 1968--it is also an account that appears to limit severely the artistic aspirations of the novel. Aury's confession demystifies the origins of the story, its names, its people. O, for example, had no significance for Aury other than that the name started as Odile, a friend of Aury's, and as the story grew, Aury shortened it to O to protect her. But above all, Aury emphasizes, "Story of O" was written as a private letter, in the intimacy between two people, a fantasy life offered from one to another. It is this privacy, this deliberate blindness to the world outside that exists between lovers, the deliberate intent to arouse a particular lover with passions (the anodyne contemporary term "preferences" is pathetically inadequate) particular to him, and which impart something of the passions particular to her (in this case her lonely girlhood reveries in Brittany), which give force to the prose.

No matter how elegant, cool, removed, limpid or polished the language, no matter that such language is often precisely the language of literature and high art, language to communicate the intimate to an outside world, this is language directed by a single woman toward a single man, calibrated to arouse him. If by happenstance it exposes anything of broader interest about human beings, especially if it happens, as it did, to convince this one lover that the author is a genius of sorts, possessed of a soul whose interior is filled with the most astonishingly baroque phantasmagoria and hence is sexually desirable, and--finally--if it flatters his amor propre to have what he will correctly regard as a literary masterpiece written for him and only after that transmitted to the public, the virgin novel violated by him first--well, that's all very well. Aury's shrug of indifference is slightly pained, nearly imperceptible, yet real. In the end what really matters is this one man's arousal, passion, faithfulness, loyalty and

attention, and even the attention of the public and the praise of critics are only instrumental to that. This is a crucial element differentiating "Story of O" from "Lolita" (a masterpiece of eroticism, rather than of pornography), which makes plain from the beginning that the particular serves the general and was never written for an audience of one.

Aury's own account of "Story of O" thus partly argues against it as literature in the "widest" sense, in the sense (however outmoded in the academy) of the particular in service to the universal, which is what the London Times' judgment of "eccentricity" really comes to. This is not decisive, of course, for how many novels have started in their authors' minds as particular, didactic, instrumental, private--"Don Quixote," to begin with--but then emerged from those boundaries as something else? Still, surely something is different about a story aimed at bringing one particular man first to masturbatory orgasm and thence back to his mistress' bed. In this romantic sense, "Story of O" is not literature at all but instead something far more powerful and ancient: an incantation, a charm, a magic spell, an enchantment. Reading it, when not ourselves the object of its magic, we read not a novel but the witch's recipe for bewitchment.

On the other hand, quite apart from Aury's instrumentalism, "Story of O" has been progressively diminished, paradoxically, precisely by becoming a canonical text of the subculture of bondage & discipline and sadomasochism (BDSM). Indeed, as Molly Weatherfield, herself a writer of pornographic novels, put it in one of the few serious essays on Aury after her death, in *Salon*, the Internet magazine, "Story of O" has "given shape to countless fantasy lives." Meanwhile, however, BDSM subculture has gradually felt more self-confident in asserting itself (the role of the Internet in creating networks where once were isolated individuals cannot be overstated) as a genuinely different form of sexuality. It has worked out theories and ideologies seeking largely to get rid of psychoanalytic categories of sadism and masochism in favor of categories of consensual rituals consisting of eroticized exchanges of power, differential distributions of domination and control, surrender and submission among participants. For BDSM, conventional sexuality among equals who, even in the throes of the private sexual moment, refuse to relax their atomized, distrusting and disconnected equality--the formal equality of the public space--is sexuality drained of the erotic. BDSM celebrates instead the effort to find places within emotional, eroticized hierarchies--hierarchies sometimes shifting and fluid and sometimes not.

One might have thought that anyone who had reflected even minimally on the erotic would have reached something like these conclusions about erotic hierarchy. But playing them out with actual artifacts, whips, ropes and chains--the stuff of fetish--has put the BDSM subculture into the real world in ways not contemplated when it was all just literary pornography and the inventory of imagination. After all, the Internet bookseller Amazon.com sells such how-to titles as "The Bottoming Book: How to Get Terrible Things Done to You by Wonderful People" and "Screw the Roses, Send Me

the Thorns: The Romance and Sexual Sorcery of Sadomasochism," both cataloged electronically, not insignificantly, under "Personal Health." The milder parts of fetish have entered mainstream culture in so many ways that large parts of it are barely noticed, let alone transgressive, anymore. But the extrusion of this sexual subculture into the world has had two consequences for "Story of O."

First, once identified with a specific sexual subculture which claims the novel's emotional experience for its own, Aury's story receives more attention for what it says about those who have found their identities within that subculture and correspondingly less attention for what it might say to everyone at large. Interpretation of "Story of O" has been ghettoized precisely as the BDSM community has become more visible and public; "Story of O" explains and provides a point of identity and, to a certain extent, canonically encodes the sexual community that is about those practices, or at least is about their imagination. Yet by the same token, because "Story of O" is canonical for the BDSM subculture, it is thereby not canonical for sexuality generally and need not be seen as revelatory of it, either.

Second, as the BDSM community enters the real world via the Internet, it seeks acceptance and, inevitably, as with every "outsider" culture (and deliberately modeling itself on gay and lesbian liberation, especially), respectability. It seeks, as Weatherfield put it, a "faith that it's possible to integrate daily life and supportive relationships with the extreme demands of the sexual imagination." The method of doing so is scarcely surprising, for it is the same as with nearly every other normative aspect of contemporary Western life--justification within therapeutic terms. "Serious" (and most unserious) contemporary porn novels are pervaded, Weatherfield rightly observes, with a "therapeutic quality . . . that remarkable insistence that this stuff is good for you, bringing with it self-knowledge, autonomy, and the ability to love." Even the allegedly most transgressive writers, John Preston and Pat Califa, for example, embed within their "leatherman" and "leatherdyke" fiction large doses of what Weatherfield calls "supermarket romance laced with the banalities of consciousness raising."

But "Story of O" has none of this redemptive therapy; nor does it seek to raise consciousness or establish a community. Although it is a canonical work of imagination for the BDSM community, it exemplifies, Weatherfield correctly says, an "unflinching notion of sexuality" that could not be further from either the communal or the therapeutic. On the contrary, O herself is a woman of magnificent loneliness, on the one hand, and a woman of insistent virtue on the other; Western literature often has seemed to take the view, whether of Penelope or St. Joan or even Mathilde de la Mole, that one goes with the other. The contemporary BDSM community simultaneously elevates "Story of O," as though an icon in a religious procession and yet depreciates it because BDSM's path to respectability is instead therapeutic.

For these reasons, "Story of O" remains an ideal type and never enters the real world. "Responsible" and "caring"

BDSM participants, those seeking community within and acceptance without, spend much of their time ensuring that erotic pain does not inflict physical damage of the kind that would result from playing "Story of O" out in the real world. In this sense, "Story of O" is a fairy tale, not just in the meaning of enchantment, but also in the extreme cruelty that pervades it, the utter mercilessness which, in fairy tales, may or may not be relieved in the end but which is essential to their attraction and function.

For the fairy tale is not fundamentally a morality tale, in the sense of cautionary moral preachment, as "Story of O" is not a morality tale. The fairy tale (say, "The Juniper Tree" or even "Hansel and Gretel") is rather a nearly unmediated account, first, of the irremediable aggression and cruelty within human beings, brought squarely to the surface and, second, of the imperfection and indifference of the world itself, prior to its restructuring by categories of morality. It is a restructuring, however, the efficaciousness of which--to judge by the enduring appeal of fairy tales--we are not wholly persuaded. The fairy tale, as Carlo Ginzburg explained in his profound study of the witches' Sabbath, "Ecstasies," is pre-Judeo-Christian, pagan, as "Story of O" is pagan. And as O herself is pagan, worshiping men-as-gods who resemble sacred trees standing hidden in terrifying sacred groves, demanding sacrifices in blood without reference to morality at all, and who may, and finally do, abandon her without the slightest care for her fidelity and devotion to their phallic cult: precisely the abandonment, in other words, that Aury feared from her lover Paulhan, and which only the vehicle of the fairy tale allowed her to express without recourse to moral categories. They could do her no good; for although one may remain with someone for reasons of morality, moral reasons alone cannot ensure that one has remained because one is still in love.

Of the many moral criticisms offered against "Story of O," perhaps the most important is directed against O, the woman. It seeks, first, to establish her passivity and then, second, to use that passivity as evidence by which to undermine the moral validity of her apparent consent to being beaten and abused. O suffers, it is asserted, from false consciousness; her consent to her treatment, notwithstanding that it fulfills the outward criterion of informed and accountable action, is not to be respected. Passivity is not the only evidence that can be brought to bear to show the invalidity of her consent; it can be argued directly (as in one standard reading of John Stuart Mill's arguments against selling oneself into slavery) that the ends she intends are dispositive of invalidity. O is a person morally damaged in the faculty of autonomy, it might be said, using the metaphor of therapy. Hence, too, the preoccupation of actual BDSM participants, in the real world and not O's, to demonstrate the therapeutic healthiness of their practices, in order to be able to give grounds that their practices and exercises of autonomy are not similarly dispositively invalid.

Yet the charge of passivity is hard to sustain given that it fails to distinguish, as medieval theologians once did and contemporary BDSM theorists continue to do, between mere

"passivity" and active, deliberative "submission." And so more important to the claim of invalid consent is Weatherfield's charge that although O is "modern," she is modern only in a 1950s, pre-feminist way; in contemporary terms she is, crudely, a morally defunct model of the feminine, and so O's consent, in today's world, remains invalid. In this way, Weatherfield reconciles a version of feminism with BDSM consciousness; O does not address us and our concerns, nor does she, as the central character in an otherwise profoundly disturbing fairy tale, risk upsetting our contemporary moral categories of consent and autonomy because she is obsolete. But this seems to me--however comforting it is to the moral authority of the present moment--all quite wrong.

It seems just as plausible, rather, to read O not as a person psychologically needing to be dominated, by implication caught in the grip of false consciousness or morally damaged or defunct, but instead as a person powerfully drawn to the virtues associated with hierarchy; O, although pagan, has a vocation. That there are such virtues is not particularly strange. Mercy and forgiveness, for example, are virtues that cannot be conceptualized without reference to status and hierarchy, higher and lower--virtues that help perform what the philosopher and psychoanalyst Herbert Morris has aptly described as reconciling the equilibrium of morality. Mercy is "bestowed" upon someone, higher to lower; as everyone knows, it "droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven." The social causes that permit one person to occupy the place necessary to bestow mercy upon another are varied and often historically contingent. While in traditional societies those hierarchies are often permanent features of the social order--the king, the priests--in contemporary society, they are more typically ephemeral or at least formally unacknowledged, if not denied outright.

Neither is it inconsistent with reading "Story of O" as "pre-moral" fairy tale also to observe O's own attraction to moral virtues and rituals of discipline wedded to hierarchies. A theme of the novel running between the scenes of whips-and-chains that few, flipping through the book, get around to reading is that O seeks to be the object of the virtues of fidelity--fealty, really--and mercy. The small mercy O seeks--Aury seeks--with Stendhalian precision and irony is fidelity, fealty itself, to be not abandoned, not even as an object. Reading the biblical text, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God," O thinks instead to herself, "That isn't true. What is fearful is to be cast out of the hands of the living God." Tracking O through the modern world, one has the uneasy feeling of reading a strange, pagan, alien "Lives of the Saints"; the spiritual mood is deeply akin to certain early Catholic female religious, notwithstanding that the moral compass is entirely, sinfully different.

O seeks virtue, but the virtue she seeks flourishes only in hierarchy, and the modern world has done its best to abolish the hierarchies spiritually necessary for her. This simple theme is taken seriously in "Story of O" and unsurprisingly is a staple theme of much BDSM fiction. Yet O's own modernism is undeniable; she cannot be passed off as a dysfunctional 1950s housewife, as Weatherfield does,

trapped in a domestic space, without a place in the wider world. On the contrary, she is fully in the world. O's profession as a fashion photographer was a staggering choice on Aury's part: First, because photography is the quintessentially modern art form; second, because to put O behind the camera lens signifies that O knows fully the manipulation of the image and the viewer that fashion and photography jointly and severally embody; and, third, because the control, of participants and images, that goes in particular with the photography of fashion is, finally, a burden to her. O is scarcely retiring in her sexuality, either; the story is rife with accounts of her aggressive lesbian seductions of girls in her school days and beyond.

The dilemma for O is the contradiction demanded by modern ideals of equality and her desire for virtues defined by hierarchy. She wants a world in which she can experience mercy, forgiveness, fidelity, fealty and grace. That she experiences them as an erotics is part of her paganism, but then she would hardly be the first, and anyway to experience everything as an erotics is part of her--and our--modern inheritance. But the conditions for these virtues are very hard to sustain in a world based on equality; what is demanded of her, instead, is precisely the exercise of her autonomy, her consent, her will to submit; this consent is precisely what her tormentors want most to hear from her. O seeks, with a courage far indeed from the false consciousness that many would gracelessly impute to her, to re-create the essential conditions of those virtues of the spirit once again from the materials of her own body. Yet she fails, over and over again, trapped in a downward spiral of self-abasement established by the conditions of equality and autonomy themselves.

At each crucial erotic juncture, O fervently seeks a hierarchy that will release her from equality and from the exercise of autonomy with respect to equality. What is demanded instead by her pagan gods, however, is not directly her obedience, but in thoroughly modern and crueler fashion, her consent to obey. It is the reaffirmation of precisely what she does not want. And so she drives herself further into self-abnegation, consenting in each spiral downward to further degradations, in hopes that this will be the one that frees her from consent. Whereas each new abasement brings with it a new demand for consent and the reassertion of modern equality.

Hers is a quest in the grand sense, and a doomed one, but O comes closer to Quixote than any of her many critics. The quest fails and, yes, it consists of O's steep spiral down into abasement of a profoundly "unhealthy" kind. Yet its failure is as much an indictment of the modern world and its inability to sustain certain virtues which, O's abasement notwithstanding, continue to place spiritual demands upon all of us, as much as it is an indictment of O and her pagan virtuousness. Health is not the point for O; virtue is. Grant to O her lucidity and, to Aury, a clarity to rival the Code Napoleon.

That you or I or, for that matter, contemporary participants in the BDSM sexual subculture, all of us modern to the core, would readily sacrifice these virtues for modern, therapeutic

mental health is likewise not the point. That we should forbear from pitying O for her self-degradation, however, as though she were merely a kind of addict of abuse, is. We have not the right; there is room for pity here, but it is the pity of tragedy, the pity of unsparing fairy tales, the pity of the doomed quest (not pity for an abused person--as though O were merely a passive victim lacking the psychological attributes to say no) that ought to move us. Is not O's story finally an erotics of virtue, and O herself, a maid of constant virtue?

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Kenneth Anderson Teaches Law at American University, Washington, D.c., and Is Legal Editor of the Forthcoming "Crimes of War: What the Public Should Know" (W.w. Norton)

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