

PURLOINED *O*:
OCCUPATION, COLLABORATION AND RESISTANCE
IN DOMINIQUE AURY'S (PAULINE RÉAGE) *STORY OF O*,
AS READ WITH JACQUES LACAN

by

Shelley Newman

B.A., Simon Fraser University, 1981

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS
in the Department
of
English

© Shelley Newman 1998

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

November 1998

All rights reserved. This work may not be
reproduced in whole or in part, by photocopy
or other means, without permission of the author.



National Library
of Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Acquisitions et
services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

Our file Notre référence

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-37602-8

Canada

Abstract

Dominique Aury's (Pauline Réage) *Story of O* is a contradictory and misunderstood text, resistant to interpretations that deny its paradoxes. As pornography written by a woman, it challenges and disrupts the authority of the phallus even as it seemingly reinscribes it in O's body and psyche. However, a woman writing about sexuality is a powerful woman in confronting her fantasy and placing herself as participant. Aury creates O to destroy her, the fantasy of submission describing (not prescribing) women's historic lack of control over their identities and their bodies. O suicides into the art of the text, but art vitalizes her memory, suggesting that power, like desire, moves in a circuit, subverting the phallus and asserting the O. By endorsing the circularity of desire's path, Aury effects a return to the influence of the maternal space, the womb, which contains not the phallus but the infant self.

Reading Aury with Lacan sets up a theoretical relationship of collusion and resistance, paralleling the fictional text. Lacan, who is variously misogynist, racist and obsessed with power, poses a dilemma: what to do with brilliant ideas which issue from an unethical source? I explore the possibility of working within those ideas, a kind of collaboration with Lacan, in order to rethink the authority they obscure, a kind of resistance to Lacan. My argument traces a Lacanian knot of occupation, collaboration, and resistance. The knot's first ring, occupation, makes the analogy of O's sexualized body as the site of occupation, within the memory of France's occupation by Germany during World War II. The second ring, collaboration, discusses Aury's fantasy of submission to the phallus, as a

screen for her desire for her absent mother, sharing Freud's and Lacan's account of fantasy as a collaboration between the past and the present that allows one to live. The third ring, resistance, reads the pornographic as a metaphoric resistance which uses the symbol of woman to insist on the necessity of crossing out the phallus as the prime signifier, by reclaiming the first place of the womb. The knot's centre is the acceptance of ambivalence which comes of working through the injury of Aury's abandonment, allowing the opposing structures of knowledge that birth initiates to be tolerated, wherein birth and death come to assume their meanings.

Acknowledgements

The idea of Simon Fraser University has been with me ever since, as a very young child, I first saw the university under construction. The wonder and excitement of this place built for books and ideas inspired me as a five year old; it continues, to this day, to do so. If Erickson's architectural vision captured my imagination then, it is the intellectual creativity of Simon Fraser's faculty and students that has, over many years, nurtured my ability to take part in academic dialogue. I have studied with many wonderful scholars, two especially I would like to thank. Don Kirschner of the History Department, and David Stouck of the English Department, have influenced my thinking, writing, and teaching with the grace of their own, and I hope to live up to their examples. Simon Fraser's support has been material as well, in the form of a Graduate Fellowship, a Master's Research Stipend, and travel funding, all of which have helped to make my graduate work possible. I am also grateful for the opportunity offered by the Western Deans' Agreement to extend my studies to the University of British Columbia, where I studied Freud and Lacan with Michael Zeitlin, producing the paper out of which this thesis grew. David Stouck, Michael Zeitlin, and Paul Keen, my thesis committee, have my respect and admiration, in large measure, for taking on this project on *Story of O*, and giving it, in turn, their respect and good humour.

My other debts are off campus. To Gaby and Michael Weiss; Michael for telling me to go back to university at thirty-seven; Gaby for keeping me here, against all odds, many of my own making. To my parents, Helen and Russ Newman, for giving me the great gift of curiosity. And to my family, David Rippon, Matt and Daniel, for everything, every day.

If it is dark
when this is given to you
have care for its content
when the moon shines.

My face is my own.
My hands are my own.
My mouth is my own
but I am not.

Moon, moon,
when you leave me alone
all the darkness is
an utter blackness,

a pit of fear,
a stench,
hands unreasonable
never to touch.

But I love you.
Do you love me.
What to say
when you see me.

from "A Form of Women"
Robert Creeley

All my life, all I am, all I own
Mind, body, spirit all are yours
Fused in the flame of our love
Our souls not two, but one.
You live in me, in you I live,
I now more you than I am me.

from "Fantasy"
Bertaut

Table of Contents

Approval Page ii

Abstract iii

Acknowledgements v

Epigraphs vi-vii

Table of Contents viii

Introduction: Purloined *O* 1

Chapter 1: Occupation: Reading Aury with Lacan 17

Chapter 2: Collaboration: Fantasy and the Exception 43

Chapter 3: Resistance: (Re)Figuring the Symbolic Womb 68

Works Cited 95

Introduction: Purloined *O*

Anne Desclos was born in 1907 at Rochefort-sur-Mer, the only child of Auguste Desclos and his wife who, though profoundly and negatively influenced by her Catholic upbringing, did not have the child christened. The newborn infant was given to her paternal grandparents to raise, by one account in England until she was twelve, by another, in the French countryside. Her father, a teacher, fought in the First World War; her grandmother worried constantly, and with good reason, that he would not come home. He did, and went on to become the director of the Collège Franco-Britannique. Desclos's mother was both kind and tyrannical in her denial of the physical body, her own and others.' She couldn't stand to touch herself, not even to wash; she refused her husband's desires. Her husband, a charismatic man whom other women adored, taught his teenage daughter about sex when he discovered that she had been reading his extensive collection of erotica. Desclos read extensively, and not just about the body; as a scholar, she published a collection of sixteenth and seventeenth century religious poetry; as a well known literary critic, translator and journalist, she worked for the Parisian publishing house, Gallimard.¹ She was married to Raymond d'Argila and divorced; she had a son, Phillipe. She served in the French Resistance during World War II, writing for and helping to distribute subversive newspapers. And in the middle of her life, while she was living with her parents, she fell in love with Jean Paulhan, respected writer, editor, and member

¹As evidence of her scholarship, she kept on her desk, in a "glassine envelope," a copy of the poem, "Fantasy," by Bertaut, whose title "in sixteenth century parlance meant 'imagination'" (in Deforges 101).

of the Academie Française. She would be his lover until he died in 1968. Her parents are dead; her mother apparently died in 1970, her father, either in 1968, or in the early fifties, not long after he had introduced his daughter to Paulhan, sources disagree. Desclos's home is now in Paris, with her son and daughter-in-law.²

Anne Desclos is Dominique Aury, who in turn is Pauline Réage, author of *Histoire d'O* (*Story of O*), the ur-text of twentieth century pornographic writing. She also wrote *Retour à Roissy* (*Return to the Château*), along with its introductory essay, "Une fille amoureuse" ("A Girl in Love"), about the writing of *O*. From this point on, Desclos will be Aury, partly to respect her wishes to protect her family, and partly because this is the name that I have come to know her by. I have introduced her this way for a few reasons: first, to bring together from many sources the small amount that we know about this notoriously and intentionally hidden woman; second, to make it clear that she lived a life, like most of us, both ordinary and extraordinary; and third, to insist against critics who have denied her gender, her singularity and even her existence, that she is very much a real woman who wrote herself into and out of her work, and that *Story of O* is, before anything else can be said about it and which must underline everything that is said about it, in Jessica Benjamin's words, the work of "a gifted woman writer" (55). As such, Aury and

²This information is compiled from interviews with Dominique Aury by Régine Deforges (1975; 1979), by John de St. Joré (1994), by Maya Gallus (1995), from Charles Chadwick's brief article, "The Real 'O'" (1995), and from the Associated Press release (May 3, 1998). That Aury contradicts herself in these interviews supports her statement, "I'm the first to admit that I'm a walking contradiction. It took me a long time to come to realize that, and even longer to come to terms with it. My use of a pseudonym in my writing is much more than mere artifice; it reveals and denounces that basic contradiction" (in Deforges 148).

her text are replete with identity crises: not only, who is Pauline Réage, but also, what is this book? Erotica? Pornography? Literature? Art? Is it a male fantasy? How could it be a female fantasy? What is the fantasy? Why would a woman write this? These, like other questions of identity, are intensely political questions, and *Story of O* is a political text; it is about the power shared between Aury and Paulhan, between a text and its readers, its culture, and between the subject and its (self) object. While most of *O*'s critics have focussed on the debate between pornography and literature, or *O*'s place within a cultural context, few have written on the psychical reality that the book represents, or about Aury's role within and outside the book. This is my purpose, and to do so, I have used the framework provided by Jacques Lacan, a psychoanalyst whose personal behaviour and ethics come into contradiction with his theoretical brilliance. And because as Elizabeth Grosz has noted, "it is virtually impossible to understand Lacan's writings without a thorough familiarity with Freud" (3), my reading of *O* and Lacan refers inevitably back to Freud. Politics and ethics are the vexed ground of this pairing between Aury and Lacan; their brilliance, I think, is undeniable, as is the affect of their writing; it is difficult not to be moved – in anger or admiration, often both – by either. My argument proceeds developmentally through occupation (exploring Lacan and Aury's existential connections as post-WW II writers), collaboration (using Lacanian and Freudian notions of fantasy and exceptionality to read Aury and *Story of O*), and resistance (breaking away from Lacan's emphasis on the symbolic phallus to theorize a symbolic womb, and *Story of O*'s relation to it). These three terms have political and ethical dimensions and obligations; my reading of Aury and Lacan does likewise, suggesting as it does that psychoanalysis is eminently

concerned with reading the individual's narrative as environmentally staged and culturally interactive, or to put it another way, with interpreting development and transference.

As an example of the change in emphasis I would like to effect, consider an early Freudian reading of *O* by Carol Cosman, in which she describes O's encounter with the Commander as an "open expression" of the book's "Oedipal fantasy" (33). O is "[t]hrust back into a child's vision of the world . . . imagin[ing] herself as a small girl, threatened by the 'gigantic' proportions of the Commander. And Réage very quickly makes the situation explicit by the association with childhood memory involving injury or a wound of some kind (the consequence, in a child's mind, of sexual violation by the father and punishment) and talk of sexuality"(33). Fair enough, but what interests me about this moment is that O slips into a "dream or at least . . . the dusk of a near sleep" (*Story* 194); in her anaesthetized state, she reverts back to an infantilized condition, her hands held by Sir Stephen as the hands of a fetus are restricted in the womb. The voices she hears are muffled, disembodied, as they would be heard in the uterine environment; her body under discussion is the infant named in advance of her birth, brought into the condition of language prior to her arrival in it. When Sir Stephen wakes her up, bringing her out of the symbolic womb into consciousness, it is to dismiss her to her room, not to hold her. Once there, the discussion with Natalie focusses on the loss of Jacqueline, the self image and that part of herself as represented by the womb, that O sees in other women's bodies. The point of this reading is to recognize the place of the mother's body in O's psyche, and the repeated, returning loss that she suffers as a consequence of the first separation of birth. The connection to Aury is in her experience of maternal abandonment, played out as

narrative symptom. And the resolution is also in the story, refilling the blank page as the womb, that Aury and O may be delivered of it, with an acceptance of the paradox of the womb: that by offering us into life, we grow into death, as O is abandoned into the grave at story's end.

Lacan read *Story of O*; calling *O* one of the “finest works” in “a certain Sadean posterity” (*Seminar VII* 202), he nonetheless seems to have misread it rather badly: “[in] The Story of O-, [sic] the victim survives the worst of her ordeals, and she doesn't even suffer in her sensual power of attraction, that the author never ceases evoking, as is always the case in such descriptions; she always has the prettiest eyes in the world, the most pathetic and touching appearance” (*Seminar VII* 202). O, of course, doesn't survive, her sensuality is absolutely controlled from the time of her initiation at Roissy, and her eyes are not mentioned as “pretty.” Lacan's remarks suggest something of his fantasy of O, which is ironic because he uses *Story of O* to exemplify “that which appears in the fantasm as the indestructible character of the Other, and emerges in the figure of his victim” (*Seminar VII* 202). The indestructibility of the Other in fantasy stems from the “most intimate part of [the] self” (*Seminar VII* 203), the displacement of a horror so deep within the self that it is not known as part of the self. That much in relation to *O* seems accurate, but Lacan wanders off the mark again in assuming that *O*'s author is a man; a return, perhaps, of a culturally symptomatic reading of the book as a male fantasy from which Lacan was not exempt.

Whether Aury read Lacan or not, we can't be certain. But she did know of him, as evidenced by a pointed reference to him by her interviewer, Régine Deforges. Deforges

suggests that women are caught in a lose-lose situation when they discuss their sexuality: pursued until they do, they are stigmatized when they do. Therein the reluctance that Lacan noted of women to “confess to, or talk about” (Lacan in Deforges 136) their pleasure. Confession -- oddly enough, the English title of Deforges’s book is *Confessions of O* -- the after the fact act of sin, transgression named retroactively. Aury didn’t buy it, didn’t accept in her own self that she had fallen. Unrepentant at eighty-seven, Aury told another interviewer, Maya Gallus, that she had done “something very ordinary,” not “extraordinary at all. [*Story of O* is] just a plain account of something very ordinary, thank God” (*Brick* 16, 17). Aury’s ordinary gesture was to write a love story for Paulhan, the man she loved unreservedly. That her book is painfully and fantastically Other, a love story outside of her experience in material reality but evocative of a horror lodged in psychic reality, brings fiction back to theory, Aury face to face with Lacan. Aury told Gallus, “Maybe I’ve been hiding things too. But I’m not conscious of that, of having hidden anything” (*Brick* 16). *Story of O* read with Lacan is about mistaken identity, concealed meaning, and the possibility of beauty infusing horror, intimacy becoming in Lacan’s word, extimate; the encounter of fiction and Lacanian theory -- at times complementary, at others, at odds -- offers a way of reading that interprets the analyst as well as the novel, the author as well as the critic. If it is true that we are always writing about ourselves -- whether a scholarly paper, a pornographic novel, or a psychoanalytic seminar -- then the partnership of Aury and Lacan, and by extension, myself, promises a textual and critical hall of mirrors in which revelation courts disguise and undoes it, a way of confronting the many unknown selves which each individual locates in others.

Aury and Lacan met textually, so to speak, an introduction of personas, if not of flesh and blood. However, the question of identity insists. Lacan didn't know *Story of O's* author by any of her names.³ Nor did he suspect that for all of O's apparent passivity – and I use that word advisedly, because I don't believe that O is passive – her creator was a woman of great determination. Lacan is not to be particularly singled out for this; in addition to the intriguing game of hide and seek that Aury played with literary detectives, there has been an equally curious reluctance on the part of literary critics to come to terms with Aury's identity. Pearl Chang reported the speculation that *Story of O's* author was “a joke or riddle,” although like the book, a highly sophisticated one, and that she was in fact “a committee of literary farceurs, sworn to guard their separate identities, like the pseudonymous authors of a revolutionary manifesto” (16). A few years later, feminists of the early seventies deigned to believe that *Story of O* could have been written by a woman, arguing that “[t]he female name on the cover of the book is part of the package, an element of the fiction. It confirms men in their fantasy that the eroticism of the female exists within the bounds of male sexual imperatives” (Dworkin 34).⁴ Although Jan Gordon

³Chadwick's information regarding Réage, Aury, and Desclos was published after John St. Jorré's 1994 *New Yorker* article on Aury, which claimed to reveal “the author's true identity [which] has been shrouded in a literary mystery” (42), and in response to John Phillips's “‘O' Really.” It comes from *Who's Who in France*, and from his personal acquaintance with Aury while he was a student at the Collège Franco-Britannique. While Chadwick is keen to share his knowledge, his note also hints at a voyeuristic, “who'd have thought?” in his comment, “I imagine none of us suspected that she was about to write *Histoire d'O*.” He restores Aury's implied lapse by pointing out that she concealed her name to protect her parents (18).

⁴I am intrigued by the dynamics of this statement, especially in contrast to the cover of a recent (1996) edition of *My Secret Life*, an erotic “memoir” from the mid-1860s. Illustrated by a barely dressed woman, the book – and the woman – are labelled “Walter.”

revealed to a North American readership in 1971 that Pauline Réage was the pen-name of Dominique Aury (Gordon 32n), critics of *O* have steadfastly clung to the idea of Aury's anonymity. Between granting that Réage could stand for a woman, albeit a woman in need of protection from "the inevitable response to the book's publication" (Cosman 26), to tacitly accepting Aury's name after offering a list of male authors who had variously been thought to be *O*'s creator -- "Henri de Montherlant, Raymond Queneau, André Malraux, André Pieyre de Mandiargues, and Jean Paulhan" (Brown and Faery 191), to erasing Réage/Aury altogether as "the imaginary author" (Silverman 327), Aury's critical introduction has been limited to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Aury, or Desclos, has been exposed, as her character O is, to be "irrelevant," "a pornographic construction" (Silverman 348 fn), making the critics responsible for her erasure (unwitting) accomplices to the larger cultural project they read in O's erasure. However, more recently, the relatively widespread circulation of John de St. Jorré's interview with Aury in *The New Yorker* has caused John Phillips to question the disavowal of authorial identity, noting "the dangers of drawing either artistic or moral conclusions from a writer's presumed identity: are we not, [he asks] each of us, a complicated mix of personae, social, psychological, and

I think also of Edvard Munch's woodcut of a beautiful woman titled, named "Sin." These two examples confirm for me Dworkin's argument. However, Réage's name on the cover of *Story of O* suggests something different: that a woman authored this story in her chosen name, and that "the eroticism of the female" (whatever that means) needs to be read as part of a cultural understanding of eroticism, especially when that expression seems contrary to women's political goals. Dworkin and others, for example, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1969), Susan Griffin's "Sadomasochism and the erosion of the self: a critical reading of *Story of O*" (1982), and Kaja Silverman's "*Histoire d'O*: The Construction of a Female Subject" (1984), stigmatize instead of investigate the very expression that challenges "male sexual imperatives," playing into the forces which silence women's voices.

sexual?” (“O’ Really” 16). He makes the point that identity “goes beyond the *identité civile* of an individual listed in *Who’s Who*” (“Pseudonymous O” 17), as well he should, but I think the obfuscation of identity in Aury’s case, points to a cultural anxiety about discovering something it simply doesn’t want to know. Unnamed, Aury retains a kind of monstrous anonymity, and a safe distance from other imagos of woman, while confirming an age old prejudice about woman: she is Eve *and* Lilith.

Along with identity, the question of subjectivity is a major issue in *Story of O* criticism. Dworkin typifies the response that *O* is about the brutal eradication of female subjectivity found in a masculinist culture of pornography: “Any clear headed appraisal of *O* will show the situation, *O*’s condition, her behavior, and most importantly her attitude toward her oppressor as a logical scenario incorporating Judeo-Christian values of service and self-sacrifice and universal notions of womanhood, a logical scenario demonstrating the psychology of submission and self-hatred found in all oppressed peoples” (56).

Nathaniel Brown and Rebecca Blevins Faery note the anti-feminist implications of Aury’s expressed desire for “annihilation,” but argue that the novel also exceeds authorial intent, reading it as “a metaphor of traditional patriarchal marriage . . . [which] becomes a feminist cautionary tale, warning of the dangers to which such loss of autonomy leads” (191). They conclude that *O*’s subjectivity is ironically and utterly destroyed through love, rather than realized by it; the book’s lesson is that “[f]reedom lies in self-actualization, not in self sacrifice. Patriarchal definitions of love lead not to a fuller life, but to death” (206). David Mickelsen comes to a similar conclusion, that the “metaphorical frameworks” Aury uses are binaries of power: “lover: beloved [,] slave: master [, and] worshipper: God”

(173). Mickelson is influenced by the work of Susan Sontag, one of *Story of O*'s first critics (1966), and certainly the most prescient of the lot for recognizing that the pornography of *O*'s existence is, in fact, an opaque screen which masks the psychological dance behind it. As such, arguments which focus on the pornographic content miss both the art of the novel -- its oft mentioned literariness -- and the implication that *O*'s transcendence, destructive as it is, demonstrates the misalliance between subjectivity and sexuality which "has always haunted man, as accustomed as he is to decrying such a split" (Sontag 58).⁵ Further, Sontag observes that "pornographic literature" (as distinct from pornography),

drive[s] a wedge between one's existence as a full human being and one's existence as a sexual being -- while in ordinary life a healthy person is one who prevents such a gap from opening up. Normally we don't experience, at least don't want to experience, our sexual fulfilment as distinct from or opposed to our personal fulfilment. But perhaps they are distinct, whether we like it or not. Insofar as strong sexual feeling does involve an obsessive degree of attention, it encompasses experiences in which a person can feel he is losing his "self." The

⁵Dworkin notes that *Story of O* "has the weight of literary adulation behind it" (*Pornography* 166), citing Sontag's theory of pornographic literature. Sontag's distinction is based on the realization that "not every pornographic work speaks, either overtly or covertly, of death. Only works dealing with that specific and sharpest inflection of the themes of lust 'the obscene,' do. It's toward the gratification of death, succeeding and surpassing those of eros, that every truly obscene quest tends" (60). On the relation between obscenity, art and *Story of O*, even adoring critics disagree. Graham Greene calls *O* "a rare thing, a pornographic book well written and without a trace of obscenity" (in Hill and Wallace 104). François Bondy writes, "[t]his book is evidence that art can be obscene, but an example even that real art must be obscene." My thanks to Pia Rippon for her translation of Bondy's article from the original German.

literature that goes from Sade through Surrealism to these recent books [including *Story of O*] capitalizes on that mystery; it isolates the mystery and makes the reader aware of it, invites him to participate in it. (58, 59)

Lacan would concur; the split being of whom Sontag writes is the barred subject of the Lacanian universe, who is divided by “the impossibility of the ideal of a fully present self-consciousness . . . the subject will never know himself completely, but will be always cut off from his own knowledge” (Evans 192). Pornographic literature, then, contains this (self) alienating otherness -- Sontag’s mystery -- and allows it to circulate, defining the separation which produces human subjectivity.

Jan Gordon’s 1971 article takes up Sontag’s notion of *Story of O*’s evocative and cathartic effect by connecting its pornographic conventions with those of the novel’s historical evolution. He sees a parallel between “[t]he breakdown of a ‘sincere,’ identifiable narrator; an aesthetic that sees every fictional utterance as being ultimately about the possibilities of that utterance; the relationship between ‘apprentice’ fictions and ‘master’ fictions; and finally, the relationship between the existential spaces that define authors, characters, audience, and lovers,” and the “accessibility” of the novel genre, its “democratizing space” which accommodates endlessly varied expressions of subjective fantasy (43). Gordon’s unwritten assumption seems to be that the novel is a female space, like *O*’s body, onto which democratic -- read masculine -- imperatives may be projected, given the disintegration of its resistance. Gordon’s analogy of woman/novel/democracy is implicitly contested in another context by Jean Wyatt, who reads the merger of narrator/character/author, not as a “breakdown” which encourages democratic

participation, but as a return to “[t]he fluidity of self-definition implicit in preoedipal modes [which] threatens the cornerstone of Western patriarchal systems: the distinct and unified individual who stands separate and self contained is at the heart of syntax (as ‘I’, the subject of enunciation), at the center of bourgeois democratic ideology (as the individual citizen), and at the top of the ladder constructed by post-Freudian orthodoxy (the separate, self-contained ego)” (2).⁶ The difficulty of *O* (and of *Aury*), is that she is equally “breakdown” and “merger,” her body representing an excess of access to a borderless field. That this access is employed by men and women in the novel, and it could be argued as much so outside the novel, confuses any notion of individuality within the group which uses *O* at Roissy, or within the audience who reads the novel worldwide.

Kaja Silverman’s widely quoted essay, “*Histoire d’O* : The Construction of a Female Subject,” uses *O* to explore “what distinguishes female from male subjectivity within the present symbolic order, and . . . what is lost for woman during her entry into that order” (321). Her argument that the body and meaning are independent and discursively determined -- “while human bodies exist prior to discourse, it is only through discourse that they arrive at the condition of being ‘male’ or ‘female’ -- that discourse functions first to territorialize and then map meaning onto bodies” (324) -- is well made, and certainly her hypothesis is sound. However, I disagree with an important assumption that underlies her conclusion, namely that authorship in *Story of O* is irrelevant to its meaning. *Aury* suffers a classic case of theoretical erasure, so that Silverman can make the point of *O*’s

⁶It should be noted that Lacan would have no part of the particular Anglo-American orthodoxy of self or ego psychology to which Wyatt is referring here.

universality, that “it is the history of the female subject -- of the territorialization and inscription of a body whose involuntary internalization of a corresponding set of desires facilitates its complex exploitation” (346). But she eclipses the possibility for O -- or the female subject -- to be anything but a victim by not raising the question of authorial intent, in either of its literary or political dimensions. What does it mean for a woman to write, as a woman, in a male discourse? What happens when a woman assumes a male prerogative to achieve her own ends? It seems to me that Silverman’s unwillingness to own *Story of O* as a text authored by a woman further distances her goal of history read otherwise, and as Amalia Ziv has pointed out, “if we discount the agency of the [authorial] subject, and regard her merely as a passive medium, we will have no ground from which to theorize change” (73).

Recent criticism on *Story of O* -- Benjamin (1988), and Ziv (1994) -- asks somewhat different questions of the novel. Benjamin’s argument, developed out of an earlier essay, “Master and Slave: The Fantasy of Erotic Domination,” focusses on the problematic of consent in the sadomasochistic relationship, and the desire for recognition and transcendence as expressed in willful participation. She writes, “[b]eneath the sensationalism of power and powerlessness, the yearning to know and be known lies numbed. Real transcendence . . . implies that persons are able to achieve a wholeness in which the opposing impulses for recognition and differentiation are combined” (*Powers* 296). According to this reasoning, O’s transcendence is false, based on the loss of self in the other; rather than being filled by her lovers, O is emptied out, “losing herself to enslavement” (*Powers* 290). Benjamin’s O, fearing abandonment by the other, abandons

herself instead: “O’s loss of self is *his* gain, O’s pleasure is *his* pleasure. For the slave, intense pain causes the violent rupture of the self, a profound experience of fragmentation and chaos. It’s true that O now welcomes this loss of self-coherence, but only under a specific condition: that her sacrifice actually creates the master’s power, produces his coherent self, in which she can take refuge. Thus in losing her own self, she is gaining access, however circumscribed, to a more powerful one” (italics hers, *Bonds* 61).

Benjamin’s conclusion, that the wish for coherence and wholeness which is the hidden content of erotic domination, begs the question of remediation, real and ideal. Her solution is in rethinking maternal subjectivity to allow for the “possibility of balancing the recognition of the child’s needs with the assertion of [the mother’s] own” (*Bonds* 82). It would be difficult to disagree with this as an ideal; however, Benjamin’s analysis of *O* and the theoretical implications she draws fail to recognize the many levels of meaning in *Story of O*. For example, the sadomasochistic relations in *O* are by no means fixed, being that *O* is perpetrator/victim -- the masochist who forces the sadist’s hand, calling into doubt the locus of power -- and perpetrator -- singular -- in her seductions of Jacqueline and Natalie, and victim -- singular -- in her submission to men. Further, Benjamin leaves out of her account the interplay of author and character, audience and book, in which Aury assumes the master’s position over her own fantasy, much as the reader does over the text. The complexities of imperatives and identifications in *Story of O* calls for theoretical recognition of instability and movement.

Amalia Ziv takes on the project of *O* in another light, comparing it with Anne Rice’s *Beauty* trilogy; however, in making her argument that *O* is “inscribed by an

essentialist ideology which apparently assigns all women masochistic tendencies in relation to men, and all men sadistic tendencies in relation to women” (71), she repeats Benjamin’s assumptions, if not her arguments. Interestingly, neither Ziv nor Benjamin mentions Jacqueline, the character who dispels essentialist interpretations. Jacqueline is seduced by O and René, but she is not taken in by either of them. Instead, she breaks René’s heart, turning him into a suffering shadow of his former self. Significantly, Jacqueline is not just a model, she is an actress -- that is to say, she acts on her own behalf -- and a knowing one too. O may betray Jacqueline’s body, but Jacqueline’s is the more impressive betrayal; rather than being enslaved by her love of sensuality, Jacqueline enjoys it, and maintains her independence. Which is to emphasize, in distinction to Ziv, that *Story of O* resists interpretations that deny its paradoxes. Ziv’s contribution is in her observation that “female-authored pornography” (73) is both subversive of a traditionally male discourse, and compliant with “its historical positioning within a network of larger discourses from which it cannot simply extricate itself” (73), and that subversion itself is dependent on the discourse it seeks to subvert. Ziv’s understanding of the negotiations between author, culture, and history, rather than the determination of one by another, helps to open up the possibilities for a new feminist reading of *Story of O*.

Like Tennyson’s “Ulysses,” I am “part of all that I have met,” and read. My interpretation of Dominique Aury’s *Story of O* with Jacques Lacan is in that spirit of looking backward and forward, to the challenge of understanding a text which confounds intellection with affect, which was written by a woman whose once necessary artful mask, like the owl’s mask she absconds from Léonor Fini for O, disguises the artist in the act of

rewriting her relation to the world.

Anne Desclos died on April 26, 1998, at the age of ninety. A private ceremony was held in Paris; no details were given.

Chapter 1: Occupation: Reading Aury with Lacan

A piece of paper posted on a friend's door reads: "Eros, Thanatos, Overdose." The words, in bold computer type, are each given their own line as in a poem. Above and below, hand printed in blue ink, is the message: "Back Soon."⁷ The note speaks to me when I pass by, referring to my experience of reading Jacques Lacan. "Eros" is creativity, sexuality, choice — life itself. "Thanatos" is death — reunion, stasis, no way out. "Overdose" has to do with my resistance: enough, this is where I stop. "Back Soon" gives it a Lacanian irony: the subject is missing. Is it my corporeally absent but linguistically present friend? Is it the trio of "os(e)s," each a circle in the Borromean Knot? Is it me? Which me? Reminding me that in psychoanalysis, we are never quite back. We are always caught in a retroactive causality, in search of the moment that, as D. W. Winnicott put it, we have lived but "*not yet experienced*" (italics his, in Kumin np). To be back soon, past conjoined with future, implies the difficulty, perhaps impossibility of living in the present. But to reflect on impossibility offers its own kind of possibility. This is what Stuart Schneiderman is getting at in the conclusion of his introduction to Lacan: "Lacan

⁷My friend, the source for this note, wishes to remain anonymous, a condition to which my friends normally do not aspire, testifying to *O*'s power to engender a curious self censorship. Another friend writes, "I can't offer any advice about the paper, as I don't know very much about Lacan, and I don't admit to knowing very much about the *Story of O*! (Actually, I just came across a reference to it in an article by my supervisor where he called it a 'classic of 19th century French pomography' — I was going to point out the mistake to him, but then I thought better of it 'cause 1) it's too late to correct the mistake, 2) pointing out your supervisor's errors is a dubious venture at the best of times, 3) I realized that coming across as an expert on the *Story of O* was probably not to my advantage!)" He also didn't want his name used.

defined psychoanalytic practice as a repeated encounter with the impossible. And he located that practice under the figure of the knot. The impossibility of psychoanalysis, first noted by Freud, is not a counsel of despair. Quite the contrary. Precisely because it is impossible, psychoanalysis produces results, lets things happen outside itself, lets people exist” (182). The hope of psychoanalysis is in only ever being back soon, unable to act in the present without some kind of remembering, without looking in those actions for the remnant of the moment that impels them.

I am beginning, quite deliberately, on a hopeful note, partly because I want to write on a distinctly unhopeful novel, Dominique Aury’s (Pauline Réage) *Story of O*, and partly because I want to read it with Lacan in mind, Lacan who variously confuses and disables my thinking, forcing me to deal with my affective as well as my intellectual responses to his theory. In my uncertainty about what is descriptive and what is prescriptive in Lacan’s writing, I often feel rather than think my way out of it, distrusting my powers of intellection, which in Lacan, are no powers at all. There is a similar intuition in *O*, when, realizing her love for René and his for her, O observes that “instead of providing her with any new proof of her power, [it] had stripped her of those she had previously possessed” (*Story* 93). I will come back to *O*, but for now I want to play with this idea of disorientation, and how Lacan’s command of it -- it over me, Other over self -- can offer a way into a novel which is by turns erotic *and* overwhelmingly pornographic, fascinating *and* obscene, exquisitely detailed *and* horrifyingly indifferent.

Lacan is not an orientation or an answer so much as a disappointment; he fractures the point of the question, disappearing it into other questions, other concerns, so that the

question posed comes back tainted/tinted by its exposure to the Other. Take Lacan's own example. He asks why the planets do not speak, and the answer (not Lacan's, but the philosopher's whom he asks) is quite obviously, "[b]ecause they don't have mouths" (italics his, *Seminar II* 237). An answer worthy of the film *Airplane*, but not the answer Lacan was looking for. It is instead a "real answer," precisely because it is a disappointment. He writes: "At first blush, I was a bit disappointed. When one is disappointed, one is always wrong. You should never be disappointed with the answers you receive, because if you are, that's wonderful, it proves that it was a real answer, that is to say exactly what you weren't expecting If we receive the answer we were expecting, is it really an answer?" (*Seminar II* 237). The disappointment, the Lacanian "real answer," is where thinking stops, interrupts itself, and starts anew. Lacan's connection to the *Story of O* is in this theoretical practice of interruption, akin to Peter Brooks' notion of textual interference, where the "encounter and confrontation" of psychoanalysis and literature is "unsettling to both, a kind of interference of two systems productive of insight into both" (24). To borrow further from Brooks, Lacan offers "an approach *to* much more than *an* arrival at" the novel, and vice versa (italics his 32). It is an approach in which the contradictory, slippery nature of both texts, which seem equally to eclipse hope and choice, produces a way of understanding which surprisingly allows for possibilities through their very eradication.

To return to Eros and Thanatos then, and the question of resistance, why does thinking stop with Lacan and with Aury? Because they both beguile and offend, subverting my ability to speak as well as the possibility of being heard. I feel I am made

helpless by Lacan's formulation of a self which is fundamentally alienated and displaced from itself, constructed and maintained outside itself. Lacan writes of a self which is no self at all, but rather a dialectical process of internalizing the external. Aury does the same with the character of O, who in her essential alienation from herself and others, allows herself to be transformed from human subject into pure symbol. She who is signified by the symbol O becomes the symbol alone by the end of the novel, through a progressive litany of abuse and torment. It is O's consent to this transformation that is so Lacanian, because even her will to be debased, the permission she yields, the betrayals she commits, are not self determined but externally created: "O's decision finally came from an authority outside herself" because her/self does not exist (*Story* 127). She says yes to her tormentors of her own free will, a will that is given *to* her to emanate *from* her. It is a little like Roald Dahl's story where, after much consternation over a woman's difficult and dangerous labour, our prayers are answered not by the joyful arrival of the innocent babe, but by the monster, Hitler (in Žižek 181n). In *O*, a woman's sexuality masquerades for death; the cover story of Eros, like Dahl's of the woman giving birth, is the veil under which Thanatos hides. And the effect of the veiling is to lure us into hoping for the realization of that which would destroy us if we had the choice to know what the veil obscures.

It is the issue and the absence of choice which I find so troubling about Lacan and Aury. In my own return to Freud, I can find the rudiments of existential choice; he finds meaning not so much in the impossibility of knowing the unconscious, but in trying to know it through its traces. Freud lets me be Camus's Sisyphus, choosing to move the rock, despite the inevitability of its rolling back. Lacan removes the choice: the meaning is

simply the circle of repetition. With the existential self, the decision to make the circuit circular is crucial; in Lacan, the speaking, choosing self is obliterated in the interplay of subject and object, Sisyphus and rock. Lacan's Sisyphus is the chastened con-artist of Greek mythology, condemned, without choice, to his unending labours for betraying Zeus and outwitting Thanatos.⁸ Lacan places choice, with desire, in the Other, so that choice is always a function of desire, always in the realm of the Other. We could rewrite Lacan's statement, "[m]an's desire is the *desir de l'Autre* (the desire of the Other)," as man's choice is the choice of the Other (*Ecrits* 312). There is no autonomous self, only the self which is driven by the Other, as the Other is in turn driven. O, "motionless" and "listening," is the self spoken by, moved by, the Other: "she had the feeling that by some strange substitution Sir Stephen was somehow speaking for her, in her place. As though he was somehow in her body and could feel the anxiety, anguish, and the shame, but also the secret pride and harrowing pleasure that she was feeling . . . her secret did not depend upon her silence alone, did not depend on her alone" (*Story* 115, 116). O's secret is her submission which allays her alienation, the goal for which all her sufferings repeat, and it is a goal which is by necessity mediated by another. As with Sisyphus, the goal only

⁸Sisyphus was punished for his treachery, not by death, but by a fate worse than death: an endless confrontation with futility, a fitting humiliation for one who had repeatedly and maliciously tricked the gods. Sisyphus's torment is akin to O's; Aury writes: "You think humiliation serves no basic need? O is trying to be destroyed, and the most profound destruction is humiliation. You can kill someone, but you mustn't humiliate him. You can assassinate a political enemy, but you mustn't insult him. I can understand how under certain circumstances, let us say overwhelming circumstances, someone might have to be done away with: one deems that he is dangerous and he has to be eliminated. Shoot him, but don't insult him, don't torture him . . . I find there are worse things than death" (in Deforges 23).

alludes to the “circular path The real source of enjoyment is in the repetitive movement of this closed circuit” (Žižek 5). O, as her name so neatly indicates, is likewise a “closed circuit,” the increasing intensity of her desire and torment making the circuit into a spiralling movement towards death.

The context for Lacan and Aury’s excision of choice, if it is not to be found in Freud or in their existential contemporaries, Sartre and Camus, does exist in the historical space of World War II and its aftermath. Lacan and Aury are post-Holocaust, post-occupation writers, determined by their temporal experience. I write this to contest Lacan’s “decision not to be influenced by the course of history” (Roudinesco 158) -- as though the choice were his to make -- and with the words of Elie Wiesel in mind. At a recent forum, Wiesel said that so many writers killed themselves after the war because they understood that their words had no power to change the past or influence the future. The fantasy of their art exposed reality as obscene and themselves as impotent.⁹ Lacan takes this a step further: if the self is constructed in language, the language of the Other, and language is powerless, then the self is also powerless. His is a zero times nothing kind of equation. Lacan doesn’t kill the self; rather it suicides by its inability to speak, by its willingness to be spoken for. Lacan’s philosophy often seems to me like the justification for the mentality of “just following orders,” as though he could anticipate Nuremberg. I resist Lacan for the story he tells, for the arrogance of thinking he can tell it, especially with the imagos of Wiesel’s dead writers hovering around Lacan’s head. I think of other

⁹Wiesel made these comments at a public forum at SFU’s Harbour Centre Campus, May 6, 1996.

stories I resist, for example, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. It took me a long time to get past Sethe's testimony, the tree-like scar on her back a conjunction of beauty with horror – the negative sublime. Another place where my reading stops is in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. When Caravaggio's thumbs leave, so do I. In each case, my identification with the body as text negates the novel, and the intensity of the transference between book and reader breaks of its own strength.¹⁰

However, neither *Beloved* nor *The English Patient* helps me contextualize Lacan; the *Story of O*, a book I have avoided for years, does. Published in 1954 under the pseudonym, Pauline Réage, it was “greeted with considerable respect by the critics, who none the less did not know what to make of this latter-day, female Sade” (d'Estrée, “Note” ix). The novel subsequently became a *cause célèbre* across France, a year later garnering the *Prix des Deux Magots*, “a prize established for and generally awarded to new works of an unconventional nature” (d'Estrée, “Note” x). Remarkably, it was threatened with censorship only once in France, at the same time that the works of Henry Miller and Sade were being prosecuted under anti-pornography laws (Deforges 7). Following the celebrity it gained by the prize, *O*'s publisher, Jean-Jacques Pauvert, and Jean Paulhan, *O*'s inspiration and author of the book's introductory essay, were investigated. As the anecdote goes, “suddenly, as unofficially as it had begun, the investigation ceased. It is said that the desist order was sent down by a high government official, but this remains unsubstantiated.

¹⁰Another knot, another linkage is found somewhat serendipitously between my reaction to Ondaatje's Caravaggio, and Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio's painting, *Narcisse*, and Salvador Dali's *Metamorphose de Narcisse*. For a discussion of Caravaggio (the painter), Dali and Lacan, see Hanjo Berressem, “Dali and Lacan: Painting the Imaginary Landscapes” in *Lacan, Politics, Aesthetics* (1996).

In any event, there have never been any further censorship problems” (d’Estrée, “Note” x). Aury was also visited at home by the police after *O*’s publication, but the mystery of the book’s freedom from prosecution seems to be in Aury’s personal influence on the Minister of the Interior. After sharing lunch with Aury and others, the Minister lifted the injunction on the book. Aury relates, “the law is such that when a Minister de l’Interieur, not anyone else, stops the interdiction, it can never be recalled. It is forever. So it was free to be sold anywhere, and at any time. And by anybody”¹¹ (in *Brick* 18). Aury’s identity as *O*’s author has been widely known in France since 1969 (Gordon 32fn), and in North America since 1994 (St. Jorré 43).¹²

Story of O is an ideal text with which to read Lacan, because as a text, it is its own unique language into which the reader passes and which “marks the reader, which leaves him not quite, or not at all, the same as he was before he read it” (Paulhan, “Preface” xxiii). *O*, by virtue of Aury’s anonymity, enfolds the reader into a narrative language where meaning’s origins and references are always delayed and shifting, rather like the nature of the erotic text which maintains its effect by keeping gratification just beyond, suggesting but not quite merging the imaginary with the real. Consider the metonymy of *O*’s authorship. “Pauline Réage,” with its pun on rage, is the author’s screen; *O* is another. The authorial self is obscured in the creation of the fantasy -- the first person narrator all

¹¹Alex Hughes and Kate Ince write that *Story of O* was “banned, and [became] the subject of legal wrangling” (185) in *French Erotic Fiction* (1996); other than citing it as a landmark, they give no details. I have not found any other supporting suggestion that the book received this kind of attention.

¹²Gordon published this information in *Western Humanities Review* in 1971; St. Jorré’s article in *The New Yorker*, 1994, does not mention Gordon’s research.

but disappears by page seven, replaced by the reader who assumes the author function.¹³ In order to create O by reading her, the reader must identify with her (as Aury did to write O), which leads just as surely into participating in O's destruction.¹⁴ Because O's destruction is achieved in a reciprocal process of internalizing her Other's will, as it seeks to destroy her as the symbol of the other within itself, and in O's projection of her own tortuous internal other onto the external Other, the reader also aligns with O's many tormentors.

The reader gives O being in language, reading her as the whips read *into* her, marking her body as a text to be read by Others. She is known by the language inscribed into her. Through the ambiguity of her (lack of) name, she is the signified without a word, without a signifier to represent her, for whom her lovers and the reader create signification. O is lack: an open, empty space to be filled by the phallus, to be made meaningful by the reader. By the novel's end, her name, like the Lacanian algebraic symbol, should be \emptyset ,

¹³Lucienne Frappier-Mazur writes that "[s]everal feminist critics have already commented on the frequent (though far from general) use of the third person in women's erotic fiction. They convincingly relate it to a division of the self through which the writing subject objectifies a portion of herself (ultimately identified with the maternal body) and disowns it: the more transgressive the experience, the more necessary the use of the third person" (124). In a footnote, she suggests that "[a] comparable division may operate in the reader" (124fn).

¹⁴Since *O*'s publication, there has been speculation about the identity of Pauline Réage even though Aury's name has been available for years, leading Kaja Silverman to write, "[t]o some degree, that speculation is irrelevant, since regardless of who actually wrote the novel, the subjectivity designated by the name "Pauline Réage" is a pornographic construction" (348n). I disagree with Silverman; while such speculation may not tell us who Aury/Réage is, it does suggest much about the impulse to locate the source of "pornographic construction" (safely) outside of the self. Silverman's comments also take away from Aury's artistic purpose in fashioning an anonymous authorial self, and the relation of that obscurity to the nature of the text as fairy tale. That said, Aury as Réage did eventually break her silence and claim *Story of O* as her own fantasy in *Confessions of O: Conversations With Pauline Réage* (1975,1979).

barred, filled in, crossed out. The effect of these many twists and turns is an intricate system of collaboration, the text being a foreign language, an occupying force which demands resistance and submission from O and from the reader alike.

Occupation and collaboration: this is Lacan's context, this is *Story of O's* context in post-war France. Written behind "dusty black curtains of passive resistance, the last remaining vestiges of the war" ("Girl" 7), and by virtue of the book's dual endings, O is the survivor whose marked body inscribes/ describes the traces of death, and the memory of the open grave, the dead but not properly buried victim. Between the two endings, O realizes Freud's death instinct: the core of her symbolization is death, not sex. She is the parapraxis of sex written across death, not the ignorance of death but its repression. O represents the edge of the grave, her name the border around the empty space which receives the corpse, as her body receives the lash and the phallus: "Beneath the gazes, beneath the hands, beneath the sexes that defiled her, the whips that rent her, she lost herself in a delirious absence from herself which restored her to love and, perhaps brought her to the edge of death" (*Story* 39). O threatens us with what we, like she, could do to avoid falling into the grave, the collaborations we make to survive. Through our transference with her story, we keep her death alive, a reversal of her living death within the story; in a profound confusion of vitality, the presumption of sexuality conceals mortality and death. O moves through desire expressed and demanded in language, and consent maintained in silence, into death. Regardless of which ending we choose, O cannot be buried. She recalls, a decade after the war, the experience of war, with its many allegiances and enmities, each within the other; in her singularity, her being reduced to

nothing/ness, she is the abbreviation of multiple, anonymous, unrecognizable others, a terror which haunts O: “Would a day of death and ashes not come, a day in the long string of other days which would give the nod to madness, a day when the gas chamber would reopen?” (*Story* 97). Paulhan’s comments reflect this post war consciousness: “The only tortures we inflict these days are undeserved and anonymous ones. Therefore, they are a thousand times more terrible, and wars today manage to roast, in a single searing blast, the population of an entire city. The excessive kindness of father, teacher, or lover is paid for by blankets of napalm bombs and the atomic explosion. Everything happens as though there exists in the world a mysterious equilibrium of violence, for which we have lost all taste, and even our understanding of the term” (“Preface” xxxiv).

O returns our understanding, as she did in 1954, to the violence of WWII, and she does so within the context of France occupied by Nazi Germany, the phallus nationalized and signifying death. Seen in these terms, O’s silent submission to death is simultaneously compliance to the Other’s power, and a subversion of it. As she is diminished in her individual death, she achieves in a startling contrast to the brevity of sexual union, the only permanent union there is: she becomes one with the many who have also died. Her power, which is relinquished and usurped within the novel, is restored to her through her notoriety outside the novel. In this regard, O makes another answer to Žižek’s question: “Where do we encounter the same paradoxical experience of an increase in the libidinal impact of an object whenever attempts are made to diminish and destroy it?”(60). O takes on a symbolic value similar to “the way the Jews functioned in Nazi discourse: the more they were exterminated, eliminated, the fewer their numbers, the more [supposedly] dangerous

their remainder became, as their [imagined] threat grew in proportion to their diminution in reality” (6). The sustained and associated effects of O’s horror come, at least in part, from the wish to shut the novel, to push it away, to forget what is determined to be unforgettable.

One good question leads to another: before Žižek, there was Schneiderman, who asks, “[w]here was Lacan during the war?” (164). Schneiderman’s account has Lacan “[escaping] from occupied France in the dead of the night on a boat that took him and his wife across the Loire” (164). I immediately wonder what Lacan had to escape from, how he could be imagined in some way as a prisoner? The answer seems to be in a typical Lacanian turn, one which O would recognize. Although Lacan was Catholic, his second wife, Sylvia Bataille, was Jewish. Because she was endangered by the Nazi Occupation, Lacan -- who would have been constituted by her, his Other -- was also threatened by the loss of her who comprised and responded to his desire. Schneiderman, whose telling is based on Catherine Clément’s -- more veils, more slippages -- sees Lacan as demonstrating “ethical heroism” in his efforts to protect his wife (165). Schneiderman writes, “[Lacan’s wife] was denounced to the Gestapo at the beginning of the occupation. As Clément tells the story, Lacan marched into the headquarters of the Gestapo and demanded the dossier that had been compiled on his wife. Eventually he walked out with it in his hand, though Clément does not say exactly how he accomplished this, whether by bribery or force of personality” (164).

However, if Lacan’s own logic holds, the heroism which Schneiderman proclaims is closely related to cowardice: Lacan was protecting himself behind the act of rescuing his

wife. And in so doing, he was also acknowledging the authority of the Gestapo to authorize his wife, and through her, him -- a triad of collaboration. As such, Lacan was hardly the “ethical hero . . . honoring a commitment [to his wife] and following one of his basic principles: to keep one’s word,” because the word he was keeping was not his own (Schneiderman 165). Further, Lacan points to the impossibility of forming “one’s word:” rather, one is formed by the Other’s word, as Lacan was by Bataille and by the Gestapo.

It is worth looking at Elizabeth Roudinesco’s handling of the same identity paper story because it emphasizes the questions which surround it. Why was Lacan retrieving his wife’s papers? For her? For him? If Bataille was the signified separated from her signifier -- the dossier becomes her signifier -- who actually controls the signifier? Is it the dossier, in the wife’s place, that identifies Lacan? Witness Roudinesco: “when [Lacan] found out that Sylvia and her mother had been naive enough to register themselves with the authorities as Jewish, he rushed to the police station in Cagnes to retrieve the documents in question. Too impatient to wait for them to be handed back, he climbed on a stool, grabbed the file from a shelf, and then, as soon as he got outside, tore to shreds all the papers in it” (158). In this version, Bataille *and* her mother are not “denounced” (the paranoid intrusion of the Other), but volunteer themselves to the authority of another Other, the Gestapo. Lacan’s response, presumably because he was *not* naive, is to reclaim the documents that name Bataille, her mother, and now Lacan, through their mutual identification, as Jewish. His love for his wife causes him, like O, to be absent from himself, in her place, which is an endangered space, which puts him into danger also. Once he has the papers in hand, he does not return them to Bataille and her mother, which

would have literally and figuratively restored their identity; instead, he destroys the file, the sign of them, the signifier, paralleling the Nazi's wish to destroy them as the signified. In a sense, though he is not the Gestapo, Lacan assumes its role; by tearing up the papers, he demonstrates his fear of the other within him (his identification with his wife's Jewishness), and his identification -- read compliance -- with the Occupation.

Roudinesco writes that Lacan "hated oppression but was scornful of heroism" (158). He was at best, or at worst, ambivalent toward the German Occupation, showing no compunction about "fraternizing with the German officers to get a permit to go and see Sylvia in the Unoccupied Zone," while also being "shattered by the Occupation" (Roudinesco 158). In his inimitable way, Lacan manipulated collaboration into resistance -- by cooperating with the Nazis, he outsmarted them. And by announcing his devastation, he took the moral ground, for himself and others to see. Having established his resistance, he could then be persuaded (as he was by François Tosquelle), to continue his work towards "being properly recognized in France," his goal regardless of the war (Roudinesco 158). Perhaps this is what he meant by imagining himself outside of history -- such a strange proposition for a psychoanalyst. Resisting in Lacan's model is a kind of collaboration: one recognizes the other within, based on the fear of and repression of the self in the external Other. And Lacan anticipates the radical's worst fear -- that there is no resistance without collaboration.¹⁵

¹⁵Paul Keen points out that Lacan's reaction can also be seen as disproving my theoretical reading, by the very unselfish, spontaneous nature of his actions in his wife's defence. Lacan's behaviour in the face of "what must have been a terrifying ordeal" (Michael Zeitlin), could suggest to a more sympathetic reader that the individual can act heroically. I would like to share the generosity of spirit shown by Keen and Zeitlin,

And where was Aury during the war? Unlike Lacan, she was actively part of the French Resistance, helping to distribute an underground publication, the *Lettres Françaises*. Aury met Jean Paulhan, her lover for whom *Story of O* was written, through their work in the Resistance, work which jeopardized their lives. Jacques Decour, Paulhan's co-editor of *Lettres Françaises*, was shot by the Germans; Paulhan himself was arrested but freed due to the intervention of a collaborationist friend (St. Jorré 44). Aury's involvement with the Resistance, that "secret society" as she called it (in Deforges 29), combined risk and romanticism with a love affair, the combined erotics of which appeared in *Story of O*. During the war, Aury, like O, by her own admission, "followed orders impeccably, whatever they were and wherever I was called to report" (in Deforges 27). As I questioned Lacan's purposes, though, I can't help wonder at Aury's motivation; her involvement seems uncomfortably self-serving, fulfilling her predilection for recognition and intrigue. If O's outfit, her "uniform" was "a sign of recognition" (in Deforges 29), within the secret society of the novel (and replicated in *Story of O's* readership), then Aury's role in the Resistance seems similarly about realizing her own need for recognition. She writes: "Secret societies are generally founded by men; it's a masculine trait. But still, I often used to dream about secret societies. And of course when the war came along, with its resistance network, I had one ready made" (in Deforges 29). Further, the erotics of war was not about some heroic, moral stance against the Germans; rather it was about "send[ing] those people packing," putting "them back where they belonged, on their own

however, I am cautioned by Anthony Wilden's personal assessment of Lacan as a "megalomaniac" (in conversation, December, 1997), and consequently, I will let my reading stand, albeit with these qualifications.

soil” (in Deforges 29).

O’s identity papers are also lost, like Bataille’s, in the novel’s dual beginnings. The first time they are handed over to her lover, René, as he draws the shades on the car windows, suggesting a boundary between reality and fantasy. The Paris parks, Montsouris and Monceau, where O and René “never go” signal the perverse fairy tale to come, a place where the reader could never go, could never have been (*Story 3*). Her seduction, initially a pact between two lovers, is then replaced by another opening scene. The car which speeds them to Roissy now has three passengers; the stranger is the “third element,” which O and the reader “experience as *intrusion* from the outside,” similar to the paternal phallus which interrupts the mother-child union (italics his, Fink, “Subject” 96n). With this intrusion of the Other of the Other -- in all likelihood, Sir Stephen -- the novel’s tone changes: “Another version of the same beginning was simpler and more direct: the young woman, dressed in the same way, was driven by her lover and an unknown friend. The stranger was driving, the lover was seated next to the young woman, and it was the unknown friend who explained to the young woman that her lover had been entrusted with the task of getting her ready” (*Story 5*).

Once at Roissy, O’s initiation is not about sexuality, the ruse which brings her and the reader there, but about a complex set of rules and prohibitions that alternately control and eventually inhibit any pleasure. The first beginning is revealed as subterfuge for the second, as René is but a cover for Sir Stephen, as love is but a veil for obedience. O’s papers are not mentioned this time; they, like her identity, are irrevocably in the space of the Other(s), who will shatter O to expose her as fundamentally shattered. Identity papers

can be lost, taken away, altered and destroyed, and the self they represent with them. Who writes them? Who reads them? To whom do they belong? There is no question that they belong not to O, but to the men and women who use her; her identity is in their bodies, their voices, their weapons and their love.

What is ambiguous is O's reception of her identity, and the convolutions involved as she introjects this identity from outside. I have suggested that O and her lover, René, represent a pre-Oedipal union which they repeatedly try to reclaim through their protestations of, and demands for, love. O's infantile need for relief from her loneliness is soothed by René's recognition of her, first through his proxies' actions at Roissy, then through Sir Stephen's. By some strange inversion, the mother's breast, given in recognition of the child's need, understood through the mother's remembrance of her own hunger, becomes the punishment inflicted on O as "token[s] of [René's] love," physical pain being the incarnation -- in both senses, into the body, and made manifest -- of René's spiritual connection with O (Žižek 5).

In fact, by the time of O's stay at Anne-Marie's, O herself gives out tokens to determine who will beat her, fully participating in the circuit of acknowledgement. O's receipt of their various insults demonstrates that she is worthy of René's singular recognition, the flesh confirming the spirit. In Žižek's terms, "if the other complies with our wish he thereby bears witness to a certain attitude towards us. The final purpose of our demand for an object is thus not the satisfaction of a need attached to it but the confirmation of the other's attitude to us" (5). O's need to break through her isolation is expressed in her wish to receive punishment, the tangible, felt substitute for René's love.

But because his love is displaced – placed outside of himself through the interventions of others, and ultimately replaced in the person of Sir Stephen – the nature of O’s need is altered by the displacements. O suffers to get to love (René and Sir Stephen make love to her after her punishments, a lovemaking which is rarely described, keeping it another mysterious beyond), but the punishments become substitutions for love and finally, the replacement for love: “what a delight and comfort, this iron ring which pierces the flesh and weighs one down forever, this mark eternal, how peaceful and reassuring the hand of a master who lays you on a bed of rock, the love of a master who knows how to take what he loves ruthlessly, without pity” (*Story* 187). O’s need shifts from seeking relief for her isolation in love through the medium of pain, to the merging of pain with love, where one does not mean *for* the other, but rather means the same *as* the other. This signals the elimination of her desire, desire being the ineffable something which operates beyond need and demand, and whose achievement paradoxically unites the self with the Other, the subject with the object-instrument, a union which brings death through sameness.

The maternal Other, René, is superseded by the paternal, Sir Stephen, to whom O passes her allegiance and desire. Despite the mutilation of her body by his rings and brands, O presents as a “well-brought-up little girl” (*Story* 168), a significant regression from her earlier womanliness. She is mis/taken “for his daughter or his niece, and this mistake was abetted by the fact that he, in addressing her, employed the *tu* form, whereas she employed the *vous*” (*Story* 169). Her dependence on and trust in his brutality has a chillingly absolute, childlike quality to it; she turns to him for protection from the gaze of his Commander, yet another Other of the Other: “So upset was she that she lost control and

raised her eyes toward Sir Stephen, searching for help. He understood, smiled, and came over to her, and, taking both her hands, pulled them behind her back, and held them in one of his. She leaned back against him, her eyes closed, and it was in a dream, or at least in the dusk of a near-sleep born of exhaustion, the way she had heard as a child . . . that she heard the stranger complimenting Sir Stephen on her” (*Story* 194).

The point being, of course, that O has become like a child, through the persistent insistence of her needs and demands; she has returned to a childlike helplessness inculcated, as she was initially told at Roissy, “to teach [her] that [she] is totally dedicated to something outside [her]self” (*Story* 17). But to backtrack for a moment, it is worth looking at how Lacan conceives of the mother-child dyad to understand why O must shift her desire to the father. In the pre-Oedipal phase, the mother and child operate on the prototype of the closed circuit -- but a circuit in which there are gaps. These synapses are representative of the mother’s desire for the imaginary phallus, what the child would like to be to satisfy the mother, but is forbidden to be by the intervention of the father. The child is thus castrated by the father, and the satisfaction of desire remains elusive: the child cannot be the phallus for the mother.

However, the phallus is also symbolic: it is “the signifier of the desire of the Other” (*Écrits* 290). The phallus is the symbol which suggests meaning; the penis is merely the tool -- you’ll forgive the expression -- by which meaning is enforced. The phallus is the point of collaboration between occupied and occupier. Consequently, O does not look at the penis directly: if she did, it would merely be the detail that “does not fit,” that “sticks out” (Žižek 90). But for O to see it from her created for/consented to place of negation, the

penis becomes the phallus invested with all meaning and with which all meaning is delivered. Lacan writes, “the phallus is not a question of form or of an image, but rather a signifier, the signifier of desire . . . the phallus is not represented by an organ but as an insignia. It is the ultimate significative object, which appears when all veils are lifted. Everything related to it is an object of amputations and interdictions . . . The phallus represents the intrusion of vital thrusting growth as such, as what cannot enter the domain of the signifier without being *barred* from it, that is to say, covered over by castration” (italics his, Lacan in Wilden 187). It is the phallus which opens her, penetrates her, for which she must always be ready. The phallus is the symbol she must recognize in order to be recognized by it, and that which castrates her so that she can know her own castration. It is the part, not part of man, the object of man to which O must learn to respond, and her renunciation of René for Sir Stephen achieves this resolution, allowing her transit/transformation into the symbolic. She accepts the phallus *as* the name of Sir Stephen, the father; *it/he is* the law: “It is in the *name of the father* that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law” (*Ecrits* 67). In making the fictional equivalence between the phallus and the father, *Story of O* illustrates the three “time[s] of the Oedipus complex” (Evans 99). Initially, the paternal imposes the law, its “prohibitive and legislative role” (Evans 99). This is the message in Sir Stephen’s intervention between O’s love for René and her obedience to him; he tells O, “[y]ou’re confusing love and obedience. You’ll obey me without loving me, and without my loving you” (*Story* 88). His words engender a “storm of revolt” in O, as much against Sir Stephen’s interdiction as against her own

divided self, the conflict between acceding to her “promises of submission and slavery [and] denying her own agreement, her own desire” (*Story* 89). In consciously agreeing to something that she could not be consciously aware of -- namely, the submission to pain that never having previously felt, she cannot imagine as part of her experience -- O accepts the law of the father as the authority to make her promises, excuse the pun, binding.

The father’s second function is as the figure of omnipotence, “the lawgiver who is not included in his own law because he *is* the Law, denying others access to the women of the tribe while he himself has access to them all” (Evans 99). Sir Stephen is the dialectical, diabolical father: he is the law, which resides in the phallus, which is part of /not part of him, a relationship which constantly turns on itself to enforce itself. O is “common property,” but property whose use is determined and regulated by Sir Stephen (*Story* 121). O cannot be taken by René (or anyone else, as she was at Roissy), in Sir Stephen’s presence or without his permission. And René acts only to enforce Sir Stephen’s law: “Hadn’t it ever struck her as surprising, this isolation in which first René, then he [Sir Stephen] had kept her? They were the only men she saw, either together, or one after the other. Whenever Sir Stephen had invited people to his apartment on the rue de Poitiers, O was never invited. She had never lunched or dined at his place. Nor had René ever introduced her to any of his friends, except for Sir Stephen. In all probability he would continue to keep her in the background, for to Sir Stephen was henceforth reserved the privilege of doing as he liked with her” (*Story* 120).

The father’s third guise -- and they are all dis/guises to displace the locus of the phallus/ power -- is as conspirator *with* the law, enfolding the father into the law. This is

the role of the father as judge or priest, included in the law as the figure who interprets the law. Significantly for O, this is the stage where “the law is revealed as a pact rather than an alternative” (Evans 99). This is Sir Stephen’s aspect when, “with the judge-like resolution and the skill of the father-confessor,” he questions O about her past, inquiring about her habits and preferences (*Story* 113). Appropriately, she denies touching herself, having earlier refused to do so for Sir Stephen, because it would imply independence from his law, a transgression of the agreement which keeps them both operating within its regulation of desire. For O to masturbate would give her access to and control of her desire, falsely locating desire within the self, breaking the limits that law imposes on desire (Evans 99). She cannot allow herself satisfaction without the intervention of the Other to confirm the other within, because the constituents of self cannot communicate directly. To do so would be to eclipse the phallic father, Sir Stephen, from whom she needs recognition, and herself as well, by locating the stimulus and response within her body, testifying to her fundamental and unbearable alienation. To touch herself would be a violation of the shared understanding -- the law which Sir Stephen indoctrinates in O -- which keeps satisfaction of desire always at bay.

Desire, then, is the law’s and in O’s case, Sir Stephen’s, prerogative; desire is the *jouissance* produced by its very prohibition. The law is the other of desire, “creat[ing] desire in the first place by creating interdiction. Desire is essentially the desire to transgress, and for there to be transgression it is first necessary for there to be prohibition” (Evans 99). *Story of O* represents this cycle of transgression and prohibition. It is a text which moves against the body, against the laws of the body which prohibit the conjunction

of pain with sexuality. O transgresses these laws by opening her body, by blurring the boundaries between brutality and satisfaction. She exposes in her physical self, her unconscious self -- an illicit, dangerous movement towards *jouissance* which services the laws of Thanatos while breaking those of Eros.

O as woman is physically and psychically split, and split further against herself with the intrusion of the phallus. Her collusion with Sir Stephen, then, is a move against her fundamental division from herself. O's internal other, alienated and hostile to the self, recognizes in Sir Stephen an/other who is equally violent and destructive, the Other who confirms the other. She accepts the bar of his split self, $\$$, as the weapon of his phallic power (Miller 296). Sir Stephen, in return, locates his masochistic other in O, punishing her as she functions for that part of himself, filling her in as "[her] own faithful servant, in [her] own name, as an executor of [her] own will" (Žižek 109). \emptyset is the expression of yet another collaboration, but one which goes awry: \emptyset is over taken by Sir Stephen. He needs her to erase her, to tame in her that part of him which must obey the hidden Other, the Commander, who appears just as O and Sir Stephen's desire become one. That union, of love and need, is then integrated into submission to a higher authority: Sir Stephen chooses, with O's compliance, to negate her (and him -- they are now one), in subservience to his Commander's law.

O is curiously undescribed and undescribable, moving through transgression, into the fantastic and beyond. In the usurping of reality by fantasy -- the convergence on one plane of impossibly divergent realities which typifies the surreal -- O is the transgressive sublime, the object of *das Ding*, "the impossible, unattainable substance of enjoyment"

(Žižek 83). She is, as Aury names her, “the ‘too much’[she is] there as a symbol and not as a reality” (in Deforges 97). And she is the apotheosis of suffering, the woman reduced to no one; her humanity shrouded in the owl’s death mask, she is a living being who has broken her agreement with life and crossed the margins into death. As Žižek writes, “the sublime object presents the paradox of an object that is able to exist only in shadow, in an intermediary, half born state, as something latent, implicit, evoked: as soon as we try to cast away the shadow to reveal the substance, the object itself dissolves; all that remains is the dross of the common object” (84). O turns from human to owl, victim to predator, a predator who turns its talent for death upon itself. Her last punishment reflects the nature of her transgression: as the owl, she is the transformation of id energy into its opposite, the superego: merciless, unpredictable, absolute. And she is wisdom, like Athena’s familiar: an emissary to another imaginary and deathly world. She is pure symbol, language without words, without speech: “O stared . . . with eyes that, beneath her plumage, were darkened with bister [sic], eyes opened wide like the eyes of the nocturnal bird she was impersonating, and the illusion was so extraordinary that no one thought of questioning her, which would have been the most natural thing to do, as though she were a real owl, deaf to human language and dumb . . . not once did anyone speak to her directly. Was she then of stone or wax, or rather some creature from another world, and did they think it pointless to speak to her? Or didn’t they dare?” (*Story* 202, 203).

O is sacred, sacrificial; approached directly she overwhelms with the horror of her crucifixion. The lesson of the American who crassly grabs at her, mistaking her for his sexual ideal, is that O is not to be taken literally. Her owl’s mask is “[t]he Medusa’s head

. . . the revelation of that which is least penetrable in the real . . . the essential object, which isn't an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words and all categories fail, the object of anxiety par excellence" (*Seminar II* 164). *Story of O* is a myth, or more properly, a fairy tale whose lesson is most clearly apprehended not by a "drunken American," but by the boy and girl, prince and princess, who are O's rightful inheritors:

"There was another girl, very young, a girl with bare shoulders and a choker of pearls around her neck, wearing one of those white dresses young girls wear to their first ball, two tea-scented roses at her waist and a pair of golden slippers on her feet, and a boy made her sit down next to O, on her right. Then he took her hand and made her caress O's breasts, which quivered to the touch of the cool, light fingers, and touch her belly, and the chain, and the hole through which it passed, and the young girl silently, did as she was bid, and when the boy said he planned to do the same thing to her, she did not seem shocked" (*Story* 203).

It is only as myth, or to return to the book's beginning, fairy tale, that O can be, in Lacan's words, "*believe[d] in*" (italics his, *Feminine* 169). Her transgressions lift the spell of repression; her masked/ unmasked body is the talisman around which naïvete is constructed and innocence lost. She demands to be understood obliquely -- as symbol -- allowing the violence that she embodies to be changed from horror into belief, and maintained in memory of her dark morality.

Lacan interferes with Aury's *Story of O* in such a way as to pose a final question: how not to forget the unforgettable? The lesson of Lacan with Aury is a simple one. The

hero and the collaborator exist within the one. The hero, like O, like Lacan, risks the self against itself to achieve its confirmation by an/Other; and the collaborator, again like O, like Lacan, finds the ability to be heroic is composed in acknowledgement of a structure determined to destroy the self.¹⁶ In this light, occupation is the catalyst which joins resistance with collaboration, creating yet another knot, overlaying the historical, the fictional and the psychoanalytic. As to not forgetting, that is the task -- quite possibly of heroic proportions -- of choosing to bring the past back soon, a choice born of the impossibility to choose.

¹⁶O as tragic hero was first offered by Susan Sontag in "The Pornographic Imagination" (1966). Amalia Ziv in "The Pervert's Progress: An Analysis of Story of O and the Beauty Trilogy" (1994), compares the tragedy of *O* to the comedy of Anne Rice's *Sleeping Beauty* stories (61-75). Jessica Benjamin in "Master and Slave: The Fantasy of Erotic Domination" (1983), also calls O heroic, noting that "O finally attains independence by willing to go all the way, to risk her life to gain recognition. This risk is an effort to gain independence from her idealized lovers. In performing the tasks they set for her, she is seeking affirmation of herself, seeking to find the heroic self she had never been able to express" (290). However, my concern with Benjamin's interpretation is essentially the same as with Schneiderman's: heroism, like cowardice, is determined by the subject's relation to the other. If Lacan is right, heroism, as the product of an autonomous self, does not exist, again, because the self exists only in relation to the other. So O is more properly, hero *and* coward, just as her tormentors are cruel *and* loving.

Chapter 2: Collaboration: Fantasy and the Exception

Endings seem to take care of themselves; beginnings are difficult, especially with *Story of O. Histoire d'O*. History, story, Aury – in English their meanings echo and overlap in the narration of the created self, real and fantastic. Their origins likewise stay in flux, in play, in disguise. Interpretation is a resistance to this movement; it is a desire like Freud's, to believe in the original seduction, the seduction of origins. While Freud came to understand that fantasy, not actual seduction, was the symptom of his patients' suffering, he realized its source to be the "psychical reality" of the individual, uniquely experienced, universally replicated from his interpretation of the Oedipus myth. The seduction theory was abandoned, fixed beginning given over to a multiplicity of fantasies, truths given up for analogies. Indeed, Freud said he was "unable to resist the seduction of an analogy," and so my interpretation turns to dictionaries, making definition a wishful analogy for source.¹⁷ From the *OED*, history is "a relation of incidents (in early use, either true or imaginary; later only of those professedly true)." From *Webster's*, a story is "a lie." Dominique Aury is itself an invention, the self assignation of an identity conventional and particular, by an anonymous writer in response to the difficulties of living in and working

¹⁷Evans points to the irony of this wish, explaining that the dictionary "is a synchronic system in which the terms have no positive existence, since they are defined by their mutual differences; it is a closed self referential structure in which meaning is nowhere fully present but always delayed in continual metonymy; [and] it defines each term by reference to other terms and thus denies the reader any point of entry" (ix).

against Occupied France.¹⁸ Aury's given name, Anne Desclos, as opposed to the one she took, remained until 1995, within the fantasy of self naming (Chadwick 18). Pauline Réage is another cloak, Sabine d'Estrée, her English translator, another.¹⁹

I want to begin with this idea of difficulty, the specific difficulty, or disguise, or lie which obscures *Story of O's* meanings. The temptation is to ask, what does *O* mean? But the answer, the Lacanian real answer, is nothing. *O* is a zero, an absence, a negative denominator. In Aury's words, *O* is merely "an idea, a figment, a sorrow, the negation of a destiny" ("Girl" 17). The answer, like the philosopher's to Lacan, is a disappointment, because the real subject of the question goes unrecognized. It is Lacan who is the subject of his question, "why don't the planets speak?" (*Seminar II* 237), but the philosopher's answer is in relation to the logic of the question, not to the intention of the interlocutor. The question is misappropriated by the philosopher which produces Lacan's disappointment. In placing the question outside the subject, allowing it to be other than Lacan's intended, the answer comes back to the question, not to Lacan, and he must allow for the answer's and the question's exteriority.

When I ask what does *Story of O* mean, as a reader and as a critic, I am of course

¹⁸St. Jorré writes, "[Aury] was in her early thirties, single, and unknown, working as a journalist and helping to distribute a clandestine newspaper called *Lettres Françaises*. (It was about this time that she assumed the name Dominique Aury because, being an equally common name in France for a man or a woman, it had the advantage of obfuscation, and Aury because it derived from her mother's maiden name.)" (44).

¹⁹While Aury came from her mother's maiden name, Réage referred to her father, by virtue of its connection to a real estate register where her father had owned property (St. Jorré 44); Pauline was inspired by the names of "two famous profligates, Pauline Borghese and Pauline Roland" ("Girl" 6). Sabine d'Estrée, whom Aury never met, is to St. Jorré's mind, the pen name of Richard Seaver, an American publisher (49).

asking, what does *O* mean to me? I am the subject of the question, and in my response -- *O* means nothing -- I am the philosopher as well. I assume both Lacan's and the philosopher's positions, becoming "the scholar supposed to know, who doesn't." The difficulty is in finding the question which allows for *O*'s nothingness, the seeming absence which is effectively a powerful presence. Because *O* is, first and last, a fantasy, "a making visible" of what is felt and thought but what remains by its definition "a figment," something which cannot be seen (*OED*). My reading of *O* as fantasy becomes my fantasy of interpretation, and the questions change. No longer what does it mean; how to make sense of it, but rather how to escape the logic of the question, how to find the illogic of the answer? Because fantasy is not based in conscious adult logic but in the infant's unconscious perception of trauma which engenders the fantasy and endows it with a logic which is personal and idiosyncratic, as well as general and shared. So the question to ask of *O*, the question which allows it to mean as fantasy, is how does the book *not* make sense? How do we appreciate *O* the fantasy, for what it protects, because for all it reveals and exploits in its adamant sexuality, *O* is still a hidden text, and the difficulty is in finding the moment of trauma, of non-sense -- the blot, the stain -- that the fantasy conceals.

Lacan's matheme for fantasy is $\$ \diamond a$, which simply reads the barred subject in relation to its object, *objet petit a*. While the matheme is itself a fantasy of meaning expressing Lacan's wish to "allow a hundred and one different readings" (*Écrits* 313), it provides a way of structuring the concept. I am following Lacan in the use of the word structuring because fantasy is not a structure, a noun which desire describes, but rather a verb in motion around which desire also circulates. It is a "compromise formation" (*Écrits*

272), a mediation of the subject's desire for *jouissance* with the reality of the subject's being in the world, recalling Freud's reality principle. Fantasy is something that moves, that effects a translation not literal or univocal but idiomatic and multi-voiced between the subject and its object. Fantasy is psychic slang, street smart and adaptable in its protective function as a defence of the self in keeping its trauma unconscious, and cooptable by the self as a resistance to bringing its trauma into consciousness.

The components of $\$ \diamond a$ symbolize this orbit between fantasy and desire, the attraction of opposite principles of interior and exterior. The barred subject, split from itself by the unknowability of the unconscious, is still determined by it, thus the subject's essential division from within. The lower case a, the other/*autre*, is that part of the self which is distinctly *apart*; separate from but belonging to, it is the object of the subject's desire for reunion. The a as part/object, self now other, extimate, combines the imaginary - the body as separable -- with intimations of the Lacanian real, the traumatic moment of castration. The rhomboid, or *poignon*, supposes a relationship between the $\$$ and its a which is impossible, that is to say fantastic, because it is at once perfectly balanced as well as teetering on a point of collapse. In the balance, it protects, maintaining an idealized, thereby safe distance between the subject and its desired (self) object; on point, it threatens, indicating the precariousness of the self and its vulnerability to the revelation of its injury. In a sense, the rhomboid is a skewed screen turned on its axis by the imagination, a screen on which the subject projects and replays his fantasy, stopping the

action just before horror interrupts.²⁰

Catherine Clément reads $\$ \diamond$ a this way: “All the terms of this expression are familiar to us: $\$$, the slashed subject, o [a], the object of desire, tiny, lost, outcast, fallen from the body. This leaves the diamond [\diamond], which Lacan calls the ‘chisel,’ like the chisel used in France to mark silver items and guarantee their authenticity. Fantasy requires a ‘chisel’ because everyone has his own authentic fantasies, belonging to himself and no one else” (179). Given Lacan’s fundamental insistence on the externally created subject -- “the empty subject” (Lacan in Wilden 182) -- Clément’s use of the word authentic is something of a red flag, suggesting as it does that fantasy is the autonomous, though unachievable, trace of the individual.²¹ She continues: “The chisel, the individual’s trademark, is not a symbol chosen at random. It is a combination of the mathematical symbols for ‘greater than’ (>) and ‘less than’ (<), an absurd combination, well chosen to signify the essence of fantasy, namely, its impossibility. Fantasy, then, is for each individual a private stage on which the subject’s relationship to the object of its desire is played out, and this relationship is impossible in the real” (179). This merits

²⁰Evans cites Lacan’s comparison of the fantasy scene with “a frozen image on a cinema screen; just as the film may be stopped at a certain point in order to avoid showing a traumatic scene which follows, so also the fantasy scene is a defence which veils castration . . . The fantasy is thus characterized by a fixed and immobile quality” (60). However, defences have to be adaptive to be effective. I believe that the “fixed and immobile quality” relates to the subject’s fear rather than to the desire which stages fantasy. The circulating nature of desire and fantasy, and the implied possibility of the rhombus’ movement would seem to contradict Evans’ interpretation.

²¹Lacan calls the autonomous ego a Trojan horse (in Wilden 310), indicating not just its fictionality but also his theoretical alternative; the ego is filled with others which consciously and unconsciously direct the subject’s existence.

some explanation, seeming as it does to contradict Lacan. How can an empty being -- empty but for the introjection of the other(s), without which there wouldn't be a self -- conceive an "authentic" fantasy, both necessary and unattainable? The answer, because Clément does read Lacan properly, is in the middle term of the matheme, the rhombus. The rhombus poses a relationship between the first and last terms; that is, it strikes a pose on an imaginary stage between the actor and her desire.²² However, because the split subject sees the *a* as being originally part of the self -- authentic, whole -- the fantasy stands in for the trauma of separation, keeping the *a* other and relational. The fantasy, then, is the subject's authentic production, harkening back to a time of wholeness; *and* relational, because the separation of self from the internal object initiates the subject into knowledge of the external world.

Which brings us back to the knot of author, text and character -- Aury, *Story of O* and *O* -- because the three components operate in this same dialectic of separable/inseparable which stabilizes fantasy and imparts to fantasy its stabilizing effect. Aury claims that the images in *O* are "honest fantasies -- whether they were male or female, I couldn't say. There is no reality here. Nobody could stand to be treated like that. It's entirely fantastic" (in St. Jorré 45). Honest and authentic, yet outside of gender and beyond reality, *Story of O* demonstrates the essence of the Lacanian fantasy: "The real supports the phantasy, the phantasy supports the real" (*Four* 41). The implication in

²²Lacan emphasizes the rhombus as the fantasied link which "registers the relations envelopment-development-conjunction-disjunction" (*Ecrits* 280n). In this sense, the fantasy could be seen as the copula, the verb that placed between, also joins subject and object.

Aury's description, giving it its stamp of psychical truth, is of an imaginary before time, prior to differentiation and the intrusion of the external world, a wish for pre-sexual, past wholeness veiled by an insistence on O as now empty space. O's incessant desire to be penetrated, orally, vaginally and anally, as well as her submission to the lash, the rings and the brands which open her entire body, converting surface to depth, speak of a longing on Aury's behalf for reunion and confirmation, the inverse of her violent imagination.

To refer back to Lacan, by reading the real in its dual sense of trauma and material reality, Aury's literary fantasy combines the existential author who creates the text with the director who manipulates the characters, and with the actors who participate in the events. The result is a fusion and a splitting of Aury with her text and her characters (as well as with her assumed identities of Aury and Réage), which is not unlike a highly complex screen memory where the subject observes herself acting out a self-written script without fully knowing the meaning of the role. Involved but not located, seen as the self by a self which is other than, Aury is at once the figure and the shadow of O. Fifteen years after *O's* publication, another fantasy of past origins invented in the present, Aury described this interplay of author, text and character:

I saw, between what I thought myself to be and what I was relating and thought I was making up, both a distance so radical and a kinship so profound that I was incapable of recognizing myself in it. I no doubt accepted my life with such patience (or passivity, or weakness) only because I was so certain of being able to find whenever I wanted that other, obscure life that is life's compensation, that other life unacknowledged and unshared -- and then all of a sudden thanks to the

man I loved I did acknowledge it, and henceforth would share it with any and all, as perfectly prostituted in the anonymity of a book as, in the book, that faceless, ageless, nameless (even first-nameless) girl. ("Girl" 16, 17)

Aury's recognition and repression of self in the character of O point to the voyeurism inherent in fantasy, the theatrical, play-acting dimension of fantasy. For psychic fantasy is acting within as well as acting out, staging architecturally and developmentally, and watching, always viewing and being viewed. Fantasy as play, which is not to denigrate the seriousness of its content, is evident in O's initiation; she is, as are the other initiates of the pornographic moment, involved in a performance: "In a loud voice, [René] told her he loved her. O, trembling, was terrified to notice that she answered 'I love you,' and that it was true. He pulled her against him Very softly this time he repeated to her that he loved her, and very softly added: 'You're going to kneel down, caress me and kiss me,' and he pushed her away, signaling [sic] to the women to move aside so he could lean back against the console The three men approached. O knelt down on the rug 'A little more light,' said one of the men The three men, who were smoking, commented on her gestures" (*Story* 18,19). O performs for René, René for his cohorts, who adjust the light the better to see O's movements. O is in the spotlight, whether on her bed which resembles a platform, or on the stage at Samoï, or on the stone bench at the Commander's party, but throughout the entire fantasy scene of the novel (or scenes, for while the actions of the story are repetitive, they are also varied in setting and intensity), the desire being staged is Aury's. Laplanche and Pontalis note that "The subject is invariably present in these scenes; even in the case of the primal scene, from which it might appear that he was

excluded, he does have a part to play not only as an observer but also as a participant, when he interrupts the parents' coitus" (318). Aury is O -- and through the faculty of play which encourages the switching of roles, René and Sir Stephen and Anne Marie and Jacqueline -- a displaced Scheherazade capable of the most fantastic transformations, from victim to perpetrator, slave to master, masochist to sadist. In Aury's words, "nothing is more fallacious and shifting than an identity" ("Girl" 12), unless it is the variety of expressions it produces in the imagination of self.

As O, as O's narrator, Aury is "wrested from herself or, who knows, returned to herself" ("Girl" 8), never apparently knowing more about O and her travails than O knows herself, yet certainly knowing, seeing all. As Sontag points out, "[a]lthough written in the third person, the narrative never departs from O's point of view or understands more than she understands" (53). When the narrator interrupts, as she does infrequently, it is this seeing, not seeing quality that she emphasizes. Upon O's arrival at Roissy, the narrator -- Aury, Réage -- assumes this paradoxical relation of interior and exterior self: "when [O's] blindfold was removed, she found herself standing alone in a dark room, where they left her for half an hour, or an hour, or two hours, *I can't be sure, but it seemed like forever*. Then, when at last the door was opened and the light turned on, *you could see* that she had been waiting in a very conventional, comfortable, yet distinctive room" (my emphasis, *Story 6*). It is as though the narrator's gaze is split, never entirely focussed on the textual stage for fear of losing contact with the audience. This places the reader *in* the fantasy, much like O is placed, without a reliable sight line. The narrator never fully deserves our trust -- because we don't know who she is, what she is looking at or where she is looking

from -- but she has it nonetheless because the pornographic story she is telling so disorients our sensibilities. O's lovers are likewise inconstant, unknowable and unreliable, but her choice is to submit to their gaze or be eliminated without it; the medusa is only powerful when she is being looked at.

The vexation of nothingness: to see nothing, no one, is to see something, a quality of absence, yet to see or not is still to be present. Consider this example: "I have no idea how long she remained in the red bedroom, or whether she was really alone, as she surmised, or whether someone was watching her through a peephole camouflaged in the wall. All I know is that when the two women returned, one was carrying a dressmaker's tape measure and the other a basket" (*Story 7*). Aury watches Réage who watches the narrator who watches O, seen therefore present; however, it is the uncounted, unaccountable gaze of the watcher in the wall that captures our attention and holds O captive, for if O is being watched, as are the narrative personas, who observes the reader of the pornographic text? Remember that fantasy is the making visible of an absence; in the pornographic fantasy, the text returns the gaze with a look of its own, identifying not just the author but also the reader in the production of the fantasy.²³

²³ Jane Campion's film, *The Piano*, does a particularly neat turn on the pornographic gaze when Stewart spies on his wife, Ada, and her lover, George. The camera watches Stewart watching Ada and George, his observation fragmented by the limited perspective offered by a crack in the cabin boards, but his imagination of their actions draws him into their passion and fuels a rage and passion of his own. Stewart is imprisoned on the outside, but he is nonetheless connected to Ada and George's intimacy by his own sexual curiosity. His erotic response is quickened and doubled by the dog licking his hand. This is, as Carol Jacobs puts it, a "cruel and witty doubling that makes the dog to Stewart as George is to Ada under her skirt" (784n). But the joke is on us, because as Campion has us watch Stewart watch Ada and George, our views as tightly choreographed by the film's cinematography as Stewart's by the crack through which he

Reenter the matheme of fantasy, with its many interpretations. Žižek emphasizes the gaze, reading $\$ \diamond$ as “the paradoxical conjunction of the subject and the object *qua* this impossible gaze; i.e., the ‘object’ of fantasy is not the fantasy scene itself, its content (the parental coitus, for example), but the impossible gaze witnessing it. This impossible gaze involves a kind of time paradox, a ‘travel into the past’ enabling the subject to be present before its beginning” (172n). Think of the rhombus as the view finder on a camera, but tilted to change the resulting image’s relation to gravity, not false or inaccurate but eccentric. Which is to say that the fantasy further decentres an already decentred subject, shifting the focus to a scene which is out of time, out of sync with reality. Thus Aury’s attention to the accuracy of *O*’s material details -- from the historical costumes worn at Roissy (which return as Jacqueline’s “gala gown”), to the red floor tiles (the same in *O*’s apartment as in the hallways of the chateau and again in *O*’s recollection of a sixteenth century print), to the asters and chrysanthemums that bloom in the fall replaced by the succession of spring hyacinths and camellias, followed by peonies and geraniums of summer -- recording with photographic precision a kind of time lapse condensation of *O*’s progress.²⁴ Indeed, while *Story of O* is rich with the perfection of details connecting *O*

peers, we are also isolated from and connected to the action -- made part of the fantasy by viewing it -- and Campion teases with the barely posed question of who might be licking the viewers’ hands.

²⁴According to St. Jorré, Aury “researched the history of clothes, studying a collection in the Louvre, and became fascinated with the eroticism of eighteenth century dress” (45). In “A Girl in Love,” Aury notes that her characters had their inspiration in people she had known or observed, and that the settings for *O* came from the common ground of real places: “They belong to everyone. The rue de Poitiers and the private room at La Perouse, the room in the warehouse-hotel near the Bastille, with its mirror on the ceiling, the streets in the vicinity of St. Germain, the sun drenched quays of the île St.

back and forth in time, O is almost always waiting for, anticipating her abuse or so caught up in it that time stands still. In Roissy's dungeon, heated by a modern radiator yet dank with the "odor of ancient prisons," past and present simultaneously contain O: "In that hot semi-darkness, O soon lost all track of time. There was no longer any day or night, the light never went out She never saw the men who came in She also lost track of them, of who they were and how many there were She had been waiting for three months, three days, or ten days, or ten years" (*Story* 48, 49). Time becomes less a context than a praxis, a way of a-historicizing O in fantasy's gaze, as fantasy's cause, that is as the woman who desires, and its effect, the childlike being she becomes.

This play between distinction and erasure, between the specifics of real time and detail and the vagaries of the psychic dimension, comes together in the structuring mode of fantasy, as a focussing (as opposed to focal) point through which the subject sees her life. Françoise Koehler puts it nicely: "To Lacan, reality is always -- whatever we are and whatever our structure is -- seen through the window of our fantasy" (117). Such is O's epiphany when the dreamlike memory of Roissy collides with her Paris life, shaping a previously separate existence into a fantasy scheme, much as her dresses and corsets discipline her body into fantastic proportions:

Dream or nightmare, the prison setting, the lavish party gowns, men in masks: all this removed her from her own life, even to the point of being uncertain how long it would last. There at Roissy, she felt the way you do at night, lost in a dream you

Louis, the dry, whitened stones of the back country of Provence, and this Roissy-en-France . . . of course nothing is made up, not anymore than the asters which I said earlier we would have occasion to mention again" (21).

have had before and are now beginning to dream all over again: certain that it exists and certain that it will end, and you want it to end because you're not sure you'll be able to bear it, and you also want it to go on so you'll know how it comes out.

Well, the end was here toppling her from memory into reality and, besides, what had only been reality in a closed circle, a private universe, was suddenly about to contaminate all the customs and circumstances of her daily life, both on her and within her. (*Story 76*)

O discovers the transience of her fantasy, from dream to reality, oscillating between the unconsciousness that produces it and the consciousness that it subsequently disorders. Similarly, Aury cites "this unknown creature" which "escapes us and escapes endlessly through the walls, the ages, the interdictions" ("Girl" 15), suggesting that the evanescence which we mistakenly ascribe to fantasy could just as aptly be applied to what we may only wishfully call reality, as Wilden says, "the two attitudes existing in simultaneous contradiction" (269).

In view of Lacan's penchant for unformulaic formulas, I am concerned to find the latent meaning of Aury's fantasy, reconfiguring the matheme as $O (\$ \text{♀} a)$. The question mark implies the fantasy screen's duality; it receives the projection of the fantasy while containing the impetus for it. O's acceptance of the phallus, the projection as it were of the male other, is the manifest content; latent, behind O's sexualized body, is another self, as hidden and in need of protection as her body is exposed and desiring injury. This part (of) self, injured, apart and unconscious, is the "something irreducible, *non-sensical* that functions as an originally repressed signifier" (italics his, *Four* 251), the kernel of the

“fundamental fantasy” (*Ecrits* 272). But it takes its place as a question mark on the subject’s screen, the interrogative scar. To know the value of this mark is to recognize the psychic opening it seams together; just as O’s body harbours a defining network of scars, a series of openings closed: “[i]n places where the skin had been broken, she still bore the traces of slightly whiter lines, like very old scars. If ever she were inclined to forget where they came from, the attitude of René and Sir Stephen were there to remind her” (*Story* 109). The puzzle remains to find the first opening to which Aury and O are “subject, subjected” (*Four* 251).

At this point, the point of the question mark, Freud interrupts Lacan as the “subject supposed to know” -- supposed: presumed, assumed, imagined, believed, fantasied -- with a speculation I would like to adopt. Aury is operating within the territory of “The Exceptions,” about whom Freud wrote in 1916. The Exceptions are those patients who, having suffered an injury in early childhood which was entirely without provocation or fairness, subsequently transform the injustice to which they have been made subject into a fantasy of exceptionality. The logic is simple: the rules having failed to protect me, do not apply to me; by virtue of my injury, for which I am blameless, I am an exception to the rules. I am exceptional; I make my own rules. Thus a congenital deformity, a serious illness inadvertently contracted, a traumatic injury can have the effect of particularizing the individual, naming her by a condition which may isolate her to herself and to others. This isolation is then willfully and wishfully maintained, becoming a defence against accepting the injury, and a resistance to joining the family and community from which she has been

excluded, albeit the one from which she also desires acceptance.²⁵

Freud saw in the Exceptions a specific character type, unwilling in the analytic course “to make a provisional renunciation of some pleasurable satisfaction, to make a sacrifice, to show his readiness to accept some temporary suffering for the sake of a better end, or even merely to make up his mind to submit to a necessity which applies to everyone . . . individuals who resist such an appeal on a special ground. They say they have renounced enough and suffered enough, and have a claim to be spared any further demands; they will submit no longer to any disagreeable necessity, for they are *exceptions* and moreover, intend to remain so” (italics his, *SE* 14, 312). The exception is caught in a classic double bind; in order to escape her suffering, she introjects it, making it inescapable. Moreover, the exception desires at the moment of her injury to be acceptable, despite the injury; she says in effect, “I am hurt, please love me.” However, the injury which inspires her need for love is that which makes her unlovable and unacceptable. A fantasy (of self) is born. The self goes unrecognized, the injury taking the place of the subject. The basis for acceptance is the same as for rejection, a bedevilled union yielding a misbegotten body and a divisible self. Reading O’s desire as the question mark of her injury, she is desired for the very exceptional “wantonness” (*Story* 95) by which she is also condemned. And her rejection, the fulfilment of the abandonment she so fears, is both confirmation of and justification for her original trauma: “She felt as though she were a statue of ashes -- bitter, useless, damned -- like the salt statues of Gomorrah. For she was

²⁵Wayne Myers takes a similar approach to the author and exceptionality in “Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*: Creativity and the Psychology of the Exception” (1982-83).

guilty. Those who love God, and by Him are abandoned in the dark of night, are guilty, *because they are abandoned*" (italics hers, *Story* 95).

Freud observed that "it is no doubt true that everyone would like to consider himself 'an exception' and claim special privileges over others. But precisely because of this there must be a particular reason, and not one universally present, if someone actually proclaims himself an exception and behaves as such" (*SE* 14, 313). Women, Freud noted, are apt to claim "privileges and . . . exemption from so many of the importunities of life" (*SE* 14, 315), owing to their symbolic castration and penis envy. Leaving aside Freud's fantasy of *penisneid*, and the contradiction in terms of over half the world's population thinking themselves to be exceptional, it seems to me that there is a "particular reason," fundamental and foundational, for Aury's fantasy of *Story of O*, which is to be found not in the relatively late Oedipal stage of Freud and Lacan, but rather in Aury's earliest infantile experience of maternal abandonment. Born to a mother who "hated the flesh, the sins of the flesh Nobody knew how ever she could have a child because she really hated [sex]" (Aury in *Erotica*), Aury was given up as a newborn infant to her paternal grandparents, with whom she lived a solitary and distinctly bookish life, actively incorporating text as fantasy, fantasy as text. Her father, born of French parents living in England, typified the moveable self; he was as much English as French in language as well as in nationality (St. Jorré 44).²⁶

Aury was also bilingual from an early age and in a sense, of two nations, the real

²⁶St. Jorré has Aury raised in France at her grandmother's country house (44); Aury tells Gallus that "I was brought up by a grandmother living in England and I came to live with my parents, when I was twelve years old, not before" (in *Brick* 22).

and the unreal: “I learned at a very tender age that you should not spend the empty hours of the night building dream castles, nonexistent but possible, workable, where friends and relatives would be happy together (how fanciful!) -- but that one could without fear build and furnish clandestine castles, on the condition that you people them with girls in love, prostituted by love, and triumphant in their chains” (“Girl” 14). These “reveries” were for Aury “beneficent and protected [her] mysteriously—contrary to all the reasonable reveries that revolve around our daily lives, trying to organize it, to tame it” (“Girl” 13). Aury’s fantasies set her apart, divided her against herself within herself, and gave her a psychic locale to play out fragmentation against wholeness, the plural self against the singular body. The protective function of her sexual fantasies, produced with the conviction that she was exceptional, untameable -- “I have never known how to tame my life” (“Girl” 13) -- allowed her to transform her injury into “a special providence . . . which would protect [her] from any painful sacrifices” (Freud, *SE* 14, 312).

Aury’s question mark covers over the loss of her mother, not to the father but to the mother’s inability to love (an)other. Her scar is the mark of excision, the wound of her mother’s departure, a premature self differentiation from the (m)other. Aury’s primal trauma, staged and restaged through the medium of the text, refers to her being present not at her conception, the origin of presence, but at her abandonment, the origin of absence. As a metaphor for Aury’s deconstruction, O is repeatedly inseminated but never impregnated; her terror is not what the fantasy screen might reveal, but that behind the action, there is nothing -- no mother, no child, no self. The child lost by her mother is irretrievably lost to herself, the exceptional child who sees in her past her own erasure.

The fantasy of exceptionality is underwritten by a death wish: if my mother can lose me, can I be lost to my mother; am I made to be missing?²⁷ For the truly exceptional child is the one who exceeds her parents in the ultimate test of mortality. The child who passes on in advance of her parents has written her own rules, even into the grave, just as Aury imagines O regressing from woman to child, from child into oblivion. The power of the mother's abandonment is such that it forces the child into an intolerable relationship with life, suggested by *O*'s double endings, the one a living death at Roissy, the other an actual death, each precipitated by Sir Stephen's abandonment of O.

The terror of being left alone inspired Aury to write *Story of O* for her lover; her fear of losing his attentions was intensified by her feeling that having once been recognized by him, she would cease to exist without him. Aury constructed a curious double; as Paulhan's lover, she imagined herself to be dependent on him, even desperately so: "having once *known* each other, they simply asked with fear and trembling that it last, in the name of all that's holy that it last . . . that one not seem suddenly estranged from each other, that this unhopd-for fraternity, rarer than desire, more precious than love -- or which perhaps at long last *was* love -- should endure" (italics, ellipsis hers, "Girl"10).

²⁷Lacan suggests that the child's death fantasy is "[t]he first object he proposes for this parental desire whose object is unknown . . . his own loss -- *Can he lose me?* The phantasy of one's death, of one's disappearance, is the first object that the subject has to bring into play -- as we know from innumerable cases, such as in anorexia nervosa. We also know that the phantasy of one's death is usually manipulated by the child in his love relations with his parents" (*Four* 214, 215). I would add that the child's concern for her own loss is played out in games from the earliest peek-a-boo, to hide and go seek, to fantasies of running away from home. They all relate to the anxiety around disappearance of self, as the child goes through the normal process of separating from her parents, and to the uncertainty implicit in the separated self. The fantasy is then: *a/part* from, do I still exist? In play, the child safely experiences the danger of self destruction.

Aury's life was so strongly cathected with Paulhan's, the subject subjected to (an)other, that she introjected him as the missing part of herself, giving him the godlike (and maternal) authority to create her life and sustain it. She became to Paulhan as O is to her lovers, willing the responsibility for her own life into the hands of another, love's perfect -- thereby exceptional -- victim.

But *O* was also a "risk," taken on a dare from Paulhan that Aury couldn't write the sort of pornographic tale that would please him ("Girl" 10). *O* was a "weapon" meant to "ensnare" Paulhan (Aury in St. Jorré 43), a wickedly effective rejoinder to his power over her, composed not by a victim of injury but by a survivor and a perpetrator, albeit one who uses make-believe to insure her survival in the real. *Story of O* is, after all, a pornographic text written by a woman, the transgressive, subversive, even guilty offspring of a sterile relationship with a married man, moreover, a married man with an invalid -- almost missing, still present -- wife.²⁸ It is the exceptional text making its own rules, disregarding those of culture and gender, just as Aury did in conducting her affair as an open secret, while maintaining in its elegant and restrained language a kind of decorum of the obscene. For transgression has its own codes. Aury knew that she would never spend the night with Paulhan, that they would never marry, that he would never be the father to her son from an earlier marriage, nor she the mother to his children, yet she was able to imagine a parallel life through the pornographic text, constructed out of guilt and pleasure, through which she

²⁸St. Jorré reports that Paulhan's second wife, Germaine Dauplain, with whom he had children, suffered from Parkinson's disease, and became increasingly incapacitated throughout his affair with Aury. Paulhan and Dauplain remained married; she outlived him by four years (43, 48).

fused submission and oppression, discipline and excess.²⁹

Story of O follows the conventions of libidinous literature, conventionally anonymous, named by a pseudonym, which denies the authorial self and sets up a game of discovery, insisting that it be recognized. It is tawdry and absurd, as the narrator points out, written around the “tried and true formulas of more than a hundred volumes sold under the counter” (Mandiargues, “Happiness” xvii), and it is unusual and challenging.³⁰ It is escapist literature of the highest order -- remember Aury’s “[t]here is nothing real here” -- and it is inescapably real, confronting us with the arousal of the reading body, for we read with our bodies as well as our minds. It is introduced, presented by a series of three introductions, already circulated in strangers’ hands, about to be surrendered to another’s, only to be passed on or discarded at novel’s end. And it is surrounded by a kind of protective circle of readers who foster a relationship with a text as non-canonical as it is

²⁹Aury writes, “[t]hey did not have a full night together. All of a sudden, at such and such an hour agreed upon ahead of time -- the watch always remained on the wrist -- they had to leave. Each had to return to his street, his house, his room, his daily bed, return to those to whom he was joined by another kind of inexpiable love, those whom fate, youth, or you yourself had given you once and for all, those whom you can neither leave nor hurt when you’re involved in their lives” (“Girl” 5,6). Aury must have been thinking not only of Paulhan’s family but also of her son, herself and her own abandonment. As a mother, Aury repeated her mother’s actions by leaving her son for Paulhan, but only temporarily, restoring her commitment as her mother had failed to do.

³⁰For example, Pierre the valet, is “absurd in his opera outfit” (*Story* 50), and at Anne Marie’s “there was something absurd about the matter-of-fact way in which the two servants served these naked girls seated around a festive table” (*Story* 160). O’s situation may be deadly serious, but with these cues and others, Aury undercuts the tension she so deliberately creates.

widely read.³¹ All of which is to emphasize that like Aury's real life fantasy with Paulhan, *O* is at once beyond the pale of respectability and within well known, if highly notorious, assumptions. And *O* is as well, asked to give something more extreme, "more serious" (*Story* 73), while also being just another available body, trained, moulded and marked. This is the trio, the knot, held together by a relationship of attraction and repulsion, circulating around the lost *objet (petite) a* -- a for abandonment and its consequences -- a phantom centre, the object-cause of fantasy's desire for the impossible conjunction of exceptionality and acceptability.

Where the textual fantasy dissolves -- *O* is vanquished and vanishes -- the text inscribed Aury's fantasy into her life, confirming Paulhan's devotion in another sort of pseudo-marriage.³² *O* is wed to Sir Stephen, accepting into her body labial rings inscribed with their initials and his brand on her buttocks, symbolically and textually incorporating her vows of obedience. Aury assumes her mark of exceptionality through *Story of O's*

³¹*Story of O's* publishing history is surprising -- especially for a book (almost) no one admits to having read; from St. Jorré: "During the last four decades, "Story of O" [sic] has never been out of print. For a period in the sixties, it was the best selling and most widely read contemporary novel outside of France. It has been translated into two dozen languages, has sold millions of copies, and has been turned into a film" (42).

³²On the subject of marriage, Pearl Chang noted early, and in deference to the spirit of the sixties, that "O is no more than an extreme, or legendary case of the everyday housewife who, having once renounced her freedom on behalf of certain domestic arrangements, thereafter despises her former independence, rejects the power that her sexuality once gave her, and in permitting herself to be tamed and humbled finds the meaning of her life in the conditions which define and eventually depersonalize her" (17). Nathaniel Brown and Rebecca Blevins Faery point to the bias of Chang's comments, noting that "the allegory's bleak reminder [is] that it is women, no less determinedly than men, who perpetuate the patriarchal marriage code, dutifully preparing each other for the discipline and bondage of conjugal subjugation" (201).

publication, a feat accomplished by Paulhan's influence with publisher, Jean-Jacques Pauvert. Paulhan's determination to publish *O*, despite its intimate content and connections, amounted to a gesture of commitment to Aury, making public what had been a private love letter; and through his unfailing protection of her identity, he maintained the exclusivity of his gaze towards Aury, her goal in the first place. By writing her fantasy for him, Aury claimed vulnerability -- as if she were to say, "I will tell you what I dream, but you must protect me" -- yet exacted Paulhan's submission to her will. She denied her own competitive, creative impulses, placing the inspiration for *O* in Paulhan's dare, but it was Aury who took the actor's role to Paulhan's audience when he asked that she "read sections out loud to him, as she wrote them" ("Girl" 11). She gained the upper hand, the authority to strike, reversing his authority over her; by virtue of *O*, Paulhan accepted the lure of Aury's fantasy, becoming willing accomplice to an exceptional woman, lifelong companion to the (once) abandoned child. Whereas *O* must be reduced to a child and be totally possessed by another (eliminating any possibility of procreative, adult sexuality), Aury grew into her role as Paulhan's shadow wife through the conception, gestation and publication of *Story of O*. Aury was ambivalent about legitimizing her relationship with Paulhan, accepting from him a gold ring which she wore on her wedding finger, and a house, travelling with him, and in the end, keeping vigil at his hospital death bed, to the disapproval then acquiescence of the nursing staff. But she refused to confront her responsibility for her actions directly, blaming Paulhan for his carelessness when his wife, Germaine Dauplain, was upset at seeing them together, and expressing outrage at his daughter's suggestion that she take over the running of the household after Dauplain was

confined to her bed (St. Jorré 48). It was the very illicitness of their affair that allowed Aury to retain her fantasy of exceptionality without being caught in a conventional, married relationship. That their affair and her identity as *O*'s author was known only to those in a small circle gave her the intimacy and acceptance she also craved, mitigating her anger for having been abandoned in the first place.

Aury wrote that she “who pretended to disdain any form of vengeance . . . took revenge and wasn't even capable of realizing it. To make up a story is a curious trap” (“Girl” 19). A trap perhaps, as fantasy is a trap of one's making, self made by the interventions of others.³³ Aury's vengeance is enacted in *O*'s monstrous sexuality, a metaphor for and a displacement of her own rage at being made the exception. Just as Aury was not responsible for her mother's actions but still subject to them, *O* is not to blame for her sexuality yet she is defined by its excess, trapped by her own making, inculcated into anger by the actions of others. Indeed, part of the fascination of *Story of O* and of Aury's recollection of it has to do with the apparent *lack* of anger, the extreme evenness with which Aury and *O* seem to accept their status as (other) women. But Aury's words ring true; she, like *O*, was incapable of recognizing her anger because to do so would reunite her with the traumatic moment of separation. Rather than face her injury, knocking fantasy's screen aside, Aury amputated herself and *O* of the ability (and responsibility) to feel anything like anger, using *O*'s death as a proxy for the repression

³³On the subject of traps and language, Jean Wyatt quotes Teresa de Laurentis: “[t]he woman cannot transform the codes; she can only transgress them, make trouble, provoke, pervert, turn the representation into a trap” (222n). The question remains as to whether woman is trapped by a story (not) of her own making, or if in writing the story, she finds a way out of a trap that she knows from the inside.

that allows her to live. Aury's pornographic text and O's sexuality are the metaphoric, magnified structurings of rage surrounded by desire, alienation contained by union, trauma mediated and sustained by fantasy.

When Aury completed *Story of O*, it was as though, with O's death, the story had left Aury, pretending to a beginning and an ending of its own volition. Paulhan gave his blessing that she stop writing, a pretense of origin and closure that Aury accepted. Aury gives two accounts of O's ending, as abrupt and cryptic as the story's conclusion. In "A Girl in Love," she simply wrote, "[a]nd yet one day the story did stop. Before O, there was nothing further that that death toward which she was vaguely racing with all her might could do, that death which is granted her in two lines" (12). A troubling and ambiguous sentence, its subject is confused in the interplay of pronoun references. Technically, "she" seems to refer to O, and O to the text, but the contextual impression is that it refers to Aury as well, a condensation of fantasy's subject with its (impossible) object. Aury's second account implicates Paulhan, completing a fantasy of authorial abnegation which began at the text's inception: "Aury then said, 'One day, I found that I couldn't go on, and that was all. Paulhan said it was all right.' 'You can stop now,' he said.' The writing had taken her three months" (St. Jorré 46). Recall the duality inherent in the fantasy symbol, \diamond : authentic, inseparable, this is the fantasy that holds author, text and character together in a knot; *and* relational, separated, the fantasy which locates the self in the realm of the Other, the place of the subject's desire for the other, the *objet (petite) a* at the knot's centre. Endings have their own powers of seduction, offering the pleasure of an answer, a release from not knowing. A final matheme, then, A/O ($\S \text{ } \mathfrak{A}$ a) P/P – Aury present in O,

containing fantasy's relation to traumatic absence, bordered by Paulhan present in Pauline
– suggesting a fantasy of ending, an illusion of fixity, a fantasia of interpretation in which
the difficulty of meaning circles the nothingness, the non-sense of its origins.

Chapter 3: Resistance: (Re)Figuring the Symbolic Womb

I begin again with the words of another, those of the critic who paraphrased Cézanne. “The landscape thinks itself in me,” he wrote, translating object into subject.³⁴ His words suggest a symbiosis of oppositions, the outside contained (incongruously) on the inside, thinking itself in another, the artist, and through another, his art. Thinking itself. What does it mean to think the self in a place somehow other than the self? What is the self that is thought? What is the unthought, unvoiced, external plane which *expresses* itself *internally*, that it may be returned through the subject’s interiorization into outside objectivity? More impossible questions, perhaps implausible answers: speculations. I am still mindful of the impossibility of psychoanalysis, the unthought crossings of the mind’s topography, which “by slow degrees” (“Girl” 11), reveal and conceal the subject to the self, through the mediation of the analyst. In the successful dialogue of two many-voiced minds speaking into and out of one, the analysand replaces the analyst as the object-cause of her own desire, becoming subject -- philosopher, narrator, author -- through the crossing, and reproducing -- in theory, narrative and artifact -- herself as object. If every

³⁴Michael Podro, in his article, “‘The Landscape Thinks Itself In Me.’ The Comments and Procedures of Cézanne,” quotes from Cézanne’s conversations: “I take its tones, its colours, its nuances. I fix them, I adjust them . . . They make the lines. They become the objects, rocks, trees, without my dreaming of them. They take on volume. They have a value. If these volumes . . . correspond on my canvas, in my sensibility, to planes, to strikes which I have made . . . very good, my canvas comes together . . . it is true, dense, full . . . The landscape is reflected, is humanised, is thought in me. I objectify it, fix it on my canvas” (ellipses in Podro, 403).

analysis, like every critical interpretation, produces its own theory, it is as a reflection of the analysand's passage into subjectivity, the coming into being *through* another as the subject of her own cause *by* another.³⁵

This constant play of metaphors, the unchecked movement of meaning, is at the heart -- and I use that word associatively because my subject, *Story of O*, is a story of the heart, a love story -- of what Lacan calls traversing the fundamental fantasy, the crossing that yields (to) subjectivity.³⁶ And since the notion of Lacanian subjectivity somehow seems an impossible, implausible other, its relation to *Story of O* and the body of meaning that emerges as Dominique Aury/Pauline Réage is worth exploring as a beginning to an

³⁵I want to acknowledge my paraphrase and the influence of Harriet Kimble Wrye and Judith K. Welles's work on the "maternal erotic transference," their naming of the pre-oedipal transference as opposed to the classical conception of the paternally designated oedipal transference, and their respectful delight in telling fresh analytic stories. They write, "[a]s we began to struggle within the constraints of the existing analytic narratives, we ultimately understood that we were going to have to reformulate aspects of clinical theory, in order to do the work as we understood it needed to be done. Of course, in a way, every therapist must do this. Each analysis deserving of the name, and every profound therapeutic experience, produces a theory tailored to the patient, rather than ready made in a book, even an excellent book. And there are excellent books" (xxi). I prefer their approach to the orthodoxy of Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose who admonish us "[t]hat to say Freud's work [and by extension, Lacan's] contains contradictions should not be the equivalent of arguing that it is heterogenous and that it is therefore legitimate for everyone to take their pick and develop it as they wish" (Mitchell in *Feminine* 1).

³⁶It is one thing for Aury and Paulhan to call *Story of O* "*une* [sic] *lettre d'amour*" (St. Jorré 50), another for me to do so. I was interested to read of Maya Gallus's like response in her recent interview with Aury: "When I read *Histoire d'O* and *A Girl in Love* [sic] (the preface to the sequel, *Retour à Roissy*), I thought they were so beautiful because they were about love." Aury replied: "I tried to be accurate about the story of falling in love with somebody and making love and what happens, what one feels, what one thinks. That's all. I didn't want to do anything particularly original, not a bit of it, just plain truth, as far as I could feel or understand it, which is rather difficult" (in *Brick* 17).

end. A word of caution, or of comfort: this is a complex circumnavigation, like tracing the face(s) of the Moebius strip, one of Lacan's topological metaphors for the subject, whose essence contains and is contained by the shifting relationship of outside to inside and vice versa.

I'll come back to this model in a moment, but before I do, I want to clarify the connection I'm seeking with Aury and her novel. I read *Story of O* as a historical novel, in the psychoanalytic sense of history; that is, inasmuch as the individual represents and acts out the personal accretion of all her family's past, then the novel historicizes the individual just as history chronicles the nation. Therein my initial emphasis on occupation, and the analogy of O's sexualized body as the site of that occupation, within the memory of France's occupation by Germany during World War II. Out of occupation comes collaboration, the explication of Aury's fantasy of submission to the phallus, as a screen for her desire for the absent mother, as fantasy is a collaboration between the past and the present that allows one to live. However, occupation and collaboration breed resistance, blending the political into the psychoanalytic. If this seems an unlikely proposition, consider that while both resistances are impediments to the process at hand -- as Freud wrote "*whatever disturbs the progress of analytic work is a resistance*" (italics his, *SE V* 517) -- both point in the direction the process *must* take to resolve the impasse. Thus, the interpretive resistance inherent in reading *Story of O* as a testimony to subjectivity also presents a duality; I read in *O*, Aury's working through of a sexual fantasy to return to a maternal one, the space of the womb containing not the phallus but the infant self. While

the pornographic may be the metaphoric resistance, it only uses the metaphor of the woman, O, as the castrated subject, to insist on the necessity for crossing out the phallus as the prime signifier, that which cannot be reduced, by the reclaiming -- traversing, if you will -- of the womb, the internal/external signifier which places the subject out/in the world. In this way, there is a kind of theoretical bliss in understanding O's apocalypse as Aury's redemption, for as O's destruction by the phallic author gives way to acceptance of the womb of the mother author, Lacan is also placed and replaced within a signifying chain, freeing his meaning to move and fade and mean again in a new metaphor.³⁷

To return to Lacan's example of the Moebius strip, first let's bring it into words. Take a rectangle of paper, a reasonably long one -- this is the stuff of the model, much as the body is the stuff of the subject -- then twist it once and join its ends together, perhaps with a bit of tape. What you have now is a bit of subversion, a figure which seems to present two sides, but which in fact, has only one, "a single continuous surface with neither obverse nor reverse" (Roudinesco 363). If you need proof, draw a line on the strip before you join it; the line will indicate both continuity and disappearance as it travels through the figure. A question: which is more real, the knowledge of one, or the influence of two?

³⁷Robert Benton suggests that we are seeing a change at a cultural level in a "fundamental societal unconscious fantasy -- namely, the fantasy of the meaning of the phallus" (53), which is manifest in theoretical understandings and clinical observations. Further, in bringing these fantasies into consciousness in a variety of venues from popular culture to high theory, "their becoming conscious may be part of a process of societal relinquishing of the fantasy and moving beyond it" (53). Paradigms, even psychoanalytic ones, do shift; the transfer between culture and unconscious, realized individually and in the larger group, raises questions of origin and interplay, challenging, for the purposes of my paper, Lacan's insistence on the authority of the phallus, while supporting his praxis of unfixable meaning.

What is the truth of this figure? Evans explains that “[t]he figure illustrates the way that psychoanalysis problematises various binary oppositions, such as inside/outside, love/hate, signifier/signified, truth/appearance. While the two terms in such oppositions are often presented as radically distinct, Lacan prefers to understand these oppositions in terms of the topology of the Moebius strip. The opposed terms are thus seen to be not discrete but continuous with each other” (116). So within one, we have the insistence of two, though it is impossible to recapture the usual binary hierarchy (the second term as the apparently lesser, though defining term of the pair), because the strip’s continuity defies the privileging of one face over the other.

Then add Lacan’s complication; he draws the Moebius strip as an equilateral triangle. We now have the perception of three axes -- mother, father, child; imaginary, symbolic, real; id, ego, superego, to name but a few -- a structuring where a few words ago, there was only surface. And the structure bears the oppositions which create and sustain its constructive tension, the base at any given time supporting the sides, but capable of becoming the side itself with a twist of the figure. Time enters into the picture -- the time it takes to trace the figure, to achieve the transference, to traverse the fantasy -- as a locating device. We can only discern one side of the triangle, one face of the strip, by where we are at any given moment in time, but we are always working within one figure, on the edge of being turned. Which is to reiterate with Lacanian elegance that psychoanalysis has to do with staging, temporally, developmentally and spatially, of the subject’s desire, a staging that refers backward and forward, the one telling the other

within a single subject in the presence of another.

This is reasonably familiar territory; think of O's transitions between inner and outer self, body and mind, contained and container implicit in her submission to her own desire through the vehicle of another's. She is "spectacle," the stuff bereft of substance on public display, for public consumption, and she has at the same time "the awareness of her own body" (*Story* 44), as a deprived terrain, impossibly deconceived in the body by the conception of the mind: "Daily and, so to speak, ceremoniously soiled with saliva and sperm, she felt herself literally to be the repository of impurity, the sink mentioned in the Scriptures. And yet those parts of her body most constantly offended, having become less sensitive, at the same time seemed to have become more beautiful and, as it were, ennobled" (*Story* 44). O is desensitized yet she feels; she is defiled yet purified, emptied yet filled, but the moment of these transitions can only be apprehended in the unconscious turning inside out of consciousness. Consider O's tortures as the continuing, conscious gift of her body to a process which decomplicates her unconscious will to escape the pain she has given herself into. She cannot but resist the insistence of her body through its very denial, representing in turn "a Moebius surface [whose] outside continues its inside" (*Four* 156).

The triangularity of the Moebius strip, whereby the form comes into the third dimension as a structure, is likewise the return of a familiar figure, mapped out in O's kaleidoscopic movement from one triangular field to the next. O only seems to be paired off with any one of her lovers; in fact, these pairings are always mediated by a third term

which destabilizes any sense of stasis. The Lacanian letter, in this case O, is both character and signifier which determines the circulation of meaning within each successive triangle. For example, O's relationship with Sir Stephen includes Norah, his mulatto maid, whose initial purpose is to witness Sir Stephen's cruelty to O. If O and Sir Stephen are opposite sides of the triangle, Norah is the base who supports the equal tension of their desires; in tending to O's preparations for Sir Stephen, Norah's role as his maid is determined by O's willingness to be presented: "[She] would take O into the small bedroom . . . wait till O had put her gloves, her bag, and her clothes on the bed, and then she would take them and put them away, in O's presence, in a closet to which she alone had the key. Then, having given O the patent-leather high-heeled mules which made a clicking sound as she walked, Norah would precede her, opening doors as they went, till they reached Sir Stephen's study, when she would stand aside to let O pass" (*Story* 138).

However, given a twist of the triangle and a change in O's signifying function, Norah and O take opposing sides, and Sir Stephen is the support. Where previously Norah had been silent witness, she becomes O's tormenter by virtue of having looked O straight in the eyes, interrupting Sir Stephen's authority over O: "She raised her head. If Norah had not glanced at her, and she invariably never did, that would have been the only movement O would have made. But this time it was obvious that Norah was trying to catch O's eye. Those black, beady eyes fastened on her own -- and it was impossible for O to tell whether they bespoke indifference or not -- those eyes set in a deeply furrowed, impassive face so bothered O that she made a movement to try and get away from Sir Stephen" (*Story* 140,

141). This being a Lacanian triangle, Norah, depending upon where she is in relation to O, is the unselfish mother who facilitates the satisfaction of O's oedipal wish for Sir Stephen, and the retributive mother who punishes O for taking her place. The twist which allows one face to disappear into another demonstrates the repetitive return of the symptom; in this case -- and this suggests the central triangle I am working towards -- the symptom is demonstrated in Aury's phallic authority to penetrate and fill O, as her proxy for refilling the womb of her own absent mother, the daughter as unbounded content in search of container.

The symptom carries the repetition of the repressed as the symbolic substitute for the prime signifier which remains always in the unconscious; the symptom/symbol is the determining signifier of the story or the individual -- the letter that circulates in Poe's "Purloined Letter," or O's body, a mere envelope that circulates among other bodies -- which if repressed, returns with a vengeance. Lacan writes: "[i]f what Freud discovered and rediscovers with a perpetually increasing shock has a meaning, it is that the displacement of the signifier determines the subjects in their acts, in their destiny, in their refusals, in their blindnesses, in their end and in their fate, their innate gifts and social acquisitions notwithstanding, without regard for character or sex, and that, willingly or not, everything which might be considered the stuff of psychology, kit and caboodle, will follow the path of the signifier" (Lacan in Felman 43). Lacan insists, of course (along with Freud), that the phallus is precisely and singularly the signifier of desire's path, that which cannot be incorporated into a signifying chain because it remains always beyond it,

the essence of meaning to which all others refer. As such, the Lacanian phallus is the agent of O's castration, her recognition by way of destruction of which I wrote earlier. Through castration, through submission to the phallus, O comes into subjectivity -- though always as a split subject; she is the subject thought within another, the ultimate (an)other of the signifying phallus.

However, I would like to challenge Lacan and Freud with a (re)turn of my own. What if I were to hold in abeyance their prohibition on the phallus, and bring it into the signifying chain with the intention of allowing it to be crossed out? And what if I dispel its authority with that of the symbolic womb, that to which Lacan has given no symbol, no priority of meaning, no signification?³⁸ Think for a moment of the line on the Moebius strip, deconstructing by movement the opposition of any given pair. I am proposing to write the specific pair of phallus/womb along that moving line, invoking the womb as the subversive, decompleting other of the phallus. Since Lacan doesn't, I am going to give the womb a symbol, Å, as a foil for the symbolic phallus, Φ.³⁹ This symbol, Å, adds to the Lacanian A -- "[t]he Other, which can take on many forms: the treasure-house or

³⁸Lacan's symbol for the phallus is Φ, which Fink defines as, "[t]he phallus as signifier of desire or jouissance; not negativizable" (*Lacanian* 173). Fink also refers to Φx, reading "[t]he phallic function, associated with symbolic castration: the alienation to which speaking beings are subjected due to their being in language" (*Lacanian* 173). Evans specifies three of Lacan's symbols for the phallus: ∏∏ represents the real phallus (that is, the phallus in the Lacanian real); Φ represents the symbolic phallus; φ represents the imaginary phallus. Evans cites M as the mark of the symbolic mother (8); it would seem that not only does Woman not exist, she cannot be symbolized.

³⁹Å refers to an Ångstrom unit, a measurement of length equal to one ten-billionth of a meter. It is used to measure wavelengths of light on a nuclear scale. (Richard T. Chen, E-Mail to the author.)

repository of all signifiers; the mOther tongue; the Other as demand, desire, or jouissance; the unconscious; God” (*Lacanian* 173) -- a tiny, open circle, \circ , making the many related forms of the A relative to another, to its issue. The A is connected to the \circ by meaning, in that they are equally other, though each has its own language, *Autre* and other; and they are separable, each their own term, womb and/or infant, mother and/or child. And given that the arrow of the A points to the \circ , it appears as if the \circ has passed through the body of the A, gaining a life of its own with the cutting of the thread that joins them. Thus, mathem(e)atically, the Moebius line would read: $\text{\AA} \diamond \Phi$, the womb in fantasy relation to the phallus and back again, $\Phi \diamond \text{\AA}$.

Using Lacan’s tools, I have done what he didn’t; that is, provide the womb with an arch signification equal to that of the phallus. Consider the twist: “the [womb] is not a question of a form or of an image, but rather a signifier, the signifier of desire . . . the [womb] is not represented by an organ but as an insignia. It is the ultimate significative object, which appears when all veils are lifted. Everything related to it is an object of amputations and interdictions The [womb] represents the intrusion of vital thrusting growth as such, as what cannot enter the domain of the signifier without being *barred* from it, that is to say, covered over by [birth]” (substitutions mine, italics his, Lacan in Wilden 187). What if we desire the phallus only as it returns us to the womb? What if the womb appears behind all veils as the container emptied of its contents, that which holds absence, and furthermore an absence which is our own, because we can only reconstruct the

experience of the womb once we are separated from it?⁴⁰ What if Lacan's "vital thrusting growth" refers not only to the phallic sense of erection, orgasm and ejaculation, but also to the womb as the place of conception, gestation and birth? What if the womb amputates and forbids, shelters and casts out, engenders subjectivity through negation? And what if the cut that permits the twisted strip to form a figure, the symbolic cuts of castration that yield the subject (for in a Lacanian universe, we are castrated twice, once by language and again by desire), refer as well to the cuts into and out of a woman's body: the ruptured hymen, the broken waters, the episiotomy, the severed umbilical cord? Is the womb, then, the first of the third elements, the base that supports the mother-child triangle, before the intrusion of the paternal phallus?

With these questions in mind, I want to return to the time and circumstances of *Story of O's* writing for two purposes: first to look at the womblike, almost intrauterine, imagery that Aury uses in her apologia for *O*; and second, to understand a sequential metaphor inaugurated by what seems to be Aury's unconscious memory of her mother's

⁴⁰On the difficulty of representing the womb, Kate Scheel has written, "The image in my mind, the dark, concave shape looks nothing like the picture in the anatomy books. At first I am astonished. I assume that my inability to envisage things in 3-D is responsible for this lack of coherence between the image in my mind and the ones on the page. I look at more anatomy books, cut-away diagrams, X-rays -- my image is not a vulva, not a vagina, not even a uterus. I am non-plussed." (Seminar Presentation, March 17, 1997). Rather than giving difficulty over to erasure, Scheel offered her own "more visual than verbal" representation, a papier-maché bowl holding three balls: "inclusive, than exclusive [;] relational, rather than hierarchical [;] it holds/ contains place/space [;] the three balls move so it is processive, rather than static [;] the three balls could be seen as thesis, antithesis, synthesis or the family triangle [;] it could be an alchemist's crucible, a holy grail, a communion cup -- all of which signify to me transformation." It could also be the sink of the Scriptures to which O compares herself.

womb, which, through a series of translations, becomes the material metaphor of the book itself. Aury writes “that we are all jailers, and in prison, in that there is always someone in us whom we enchain, whom we imprison, whom we silence. By a curious kind of reverse shock, it can happen that the prison itself can open the gates to freedom. The stone walls of a cell, the solitude, but also the night, the solitude, again the solitude, free this unknown creature whom we have kept locked up” (“Girl” 15). Compressed into this image of a prison cell is a fetal experience of containment, by another, in another; the silence of the womb -- not exactly silent, but the rhythmic monotony of the mother’s body sounding as white noise -- blended with darkness, like the “velvet night” (*Story* 49) that O experiences at Roissy. Given Aury’s mother’s horror of the body, her own as well as others’, the prison cell suggests Aury’s perception of rejection and untouchability within the maternal body, a perception that would be confirmed by her mother’s rejection. The freedom that the infant gains at birth -- as if pushed through gates that open into light, sound, and unboundedness -- is the terrifying freedom implicit in knowledge of its opposite. In the womb, I would surmise, the infant has no contradictory experience or sense of the self as separate. Even fetal movement is equally as within the self/mother as it is against the self/mother, so as to suggest no opposite, no separation. Birth initiates knowledge through the infant’s separation from the mother. That separation, premature even at full term, upsets the amniotic equilibrium of the womb; birth is the cut through which we are created as subjects able to know, the primary castration. And it is the place of the mother’s body, the maternal womb as opposed to the paternal phallus, which becomes, to refer back to

Lacan's interpreter, "the treasure-house or repository of all signifiers" (*Lacanian* 173), the source of knowing to which we crave a return through knowledge.

Another passage from "A Girl in Love" is worth quoting at length because it brings intimations of unity/separation, aurality/orality, confinement/expression, timelessness/terminality into this signifying chain, all the while underwritten by a conflation of sexual with maternal. Aury is describing the setting of her trysts with Paulhan, the "strange sweetness about the meager lighting of rented rooms in hotels near railroad stations: the modest luxury of the double bed, whose linens you leave unmade as you leave the room, has a charm all its own. And the time comes when you can no longer separate the sound of words and signs from the endless drone of the motors and the hiss of the tires climbing the street" (4, 5). Barely lit, temporary, a shared space left unmade, as the infant unmakes the womb at birth; and quiet, a monotone of sounds and signs blurring together inner and outer worlds. She continues:

For several years, these furtive and tender halts, in the respite that follows love, legs all entwined and arm unclasped, had been soothed by the kind of exchanges and as it were small talk in which books hold the most important place. Books were their only complete freedom, their common country, their true travels.

Together they dwelt in the books they loved as others in their family home; in books they had their compatriots and their brothers; poets had written for them, the letters of lovers from times past came down to them through the obscurity of ancient languages, of modes and mores long since come and gone -- all of which

was read in a toneless voice in an unknown room, the sordid and miraculous
 dungeon against which the crowd outside, for a few short hours, beat in vain. (5)⁴¹

⁴¹In French, this passage reads, “Pendant plusieurs années, ces haltes furtives et tendres, dans le répit qui suit l’amour, jambes mêlées et bras défaits, avaient été bercées de ces racontages et si l’on peut dire ces récitades, où les livres ont la première place. Les livres étaient leur seule entière liberté, leur commune patrie, leurs vrais voyages; ils habitaient ensemble les livres qu’ils aimaient comme d’autres une demeure de famille; ils avaient dans les livres leurs compatriotes et leurs frères; les poètes avaient écrit pour eux, les lettres des amants d’autrefois leur parvenaient à travers l’obscurité des langages anciens, des mœurs et des modes révolues -- et tout cela se lisait à voix sourde dans la chambre ignorée, sordide et miraculeux donjon où la houle du dehors, quelque heures, venait briser en vain” (“Ufa” 11). A few points of translation: “la première place” suggests to me this sense of the womb as the first place or placing of the subject; that books take on this first place, almost as a fetish object, relates to Freud’s conception of epistemophilia (the desire to know), as relative to the libido’s scopophilic instinct. (*Introductory Lectures, SE* 406). Melanie Klein incorporated (a Kleinian slip!) Freud’s idea into her concept of the epistemophilic impulse, whereby the child’s curiosity, “his first questions [which] go back beyond the beginnings of his understanding of speech” (72), are prompted by the wish to know (again) the mother’s body, and to repossess it from the outside. Klein writes: “The early connection between the epistemophilic impulse and sadism is very important for the whole mental development. This instinct, roused by the striving of the Oedipus tendencies, at first mainly concerns itself with the mother’s womb, which is assumed to be the scene of all sexual processes and developments. The child is still dominated by the anal-sadistic libido-position which impels him to wish to *appropriate* the contents of the womb. He thus begins to be curious about what it contains, what it is like, etc. So the epistemophilic instinct and the desire to take possession come quite early to be connected with one another and at the same time with the sense of guilt aroused by the incipient Oedipus conflict” (italics hers 72). My hypothesis is that the epistemophilic impulse predates the oedipus conflict, and is integral to the primary separation of the mother and infant at birth. The womb, paradoxically animate inside the mother, and deanimated with the birth of the infant, is then the third element which interrupts the mother-child dyad.

The translation of the word *sourde* as toneless is something of a misnomer. *Sourde*, as in *sourd et muet*, deaf and dumb, better suggests the word muted, which also ties in with the quality of sound in the womb. *La chambre ignorée*, the hidden room, the forbidden room, suggests not only the hiddenness of the mother’s womb, but also the taboo of incest. This is mixed up with the illicit, clandestine nature of Aury and Paulhan’s affair, and among Aury’s many roles, her substitution for Paulhan’s wife and her displacement of her own mother in a relationship with a man certainly old enough to be her father, and by one account, introduced to her by her father (St. Jorré 44). My thanks to Dr. Lorne Prupas, SFU, for his reading of this passage in French, out of which I developed these ideas and

The intricacies of this passage are wonderful: Aury and Paulhan are the lovers who literally and figuratively create a womb of knowledge, a textual inscription of the mother's body, in the books they read together. They are transformed through their sexuality-- "legs all entwined and arm unclasped" -- as infants born and unbound, with Moebian logic, into a uterine space, where the muted voice sounds in an "unknown room," yet another "sordid and miraculous dungeon" in which all knowledge -- of home, of family, of history -- resides, in contrast to the chaos of the external world. Here, in a space of non-sense -- as the womb is a place of sensual equilibrium -- things make sense, sense and sensuality producing a utopian moment of "complete freedom," of subjectivity. Then, "all of a sudden," with the shock of time's intrusion -- as time locates us on the Moebius strip, as time indicates the maternal term -- "they had to leave" ("Girl" 5, 6) forcing a separation, a disjunction which insists on the subject'(s) inevitable return.

Aury makes her return by writing herself into the once filled/space of absence, creating a textual womb out of the blank page. She wrote "lying on her side with her feet tucked up under her" ("Girl" 6), as though consumed and recovered by the story she tells, "without hesitation, without stopping, rewriting, or discarding, she was writing the way one breathes, the way one dreams" ("Girl" 7). She is nourished, comforted and held within the writing space, absorbed into the repetition of her symptom. Sound and light lose their significance as markers; the fantasy scene (or scenes, because her recollection of the writing of *Story of O* is as much fantasy as the story itself), like Aury and Paulhan's

associations.

liaisons, assumes a “sort of strange and eternal present” (“Girl” 9), much like the out of timelessness of the womb. Aury’s narration of *O*, a story which folds on itself to recreate her self, the telling of a tale both “known” and “discovered” (“Girl” 11), indicates page by page the infusion of the symptom into the act. Aury writes and is written by her text, circulating a chapter, a page, or a fragment at a time in posted envelopes “to the same General Delivery address” (“Girl” 11); just like *O*, Aury “kept nothing” (“Girl” 11), conceiving and delivering herself through the substitution of her letter.

The womb is similarly an envelope, the infant the letter, metaphorically speaking, of the mother’s desire. But what is the mother’s desire, or as Freud would have it, “what does woman want?” Lacan’s answer, unequivocally, is that the mother desires the phallus, as the child desires to be the phallus for the mother. However, if the womb itself is the first third term, then the mother’s desire may be to know that part of self as it (ex)ists (in)ternally, to know the envelope which is equally part of her own body and entirely given over to another, containing the external self through an internal other. Further, since the womb exists for little girls as sensation without a corresponding, visible location, it is both an imaginary site, in that it can’t be seen, and real, in that it can be felt.⁴² And as the siting

⁴²Karen Horney wrote about the little girl’s unconscious awareness of her body in “The Denial of the Vagina” (1933); she noted the presence of “spontaneous vaginal sensations . . . aroused by unconsciously stimulating situations, such as that of listening to music, motoring, swinging, having the hair combed, and certain transference situations” as well as those produced by “certain motions of the body, by tight lacing, or by particular sado-masochistic fantasies” (154). More recent theorists, Eric Plaut and Foster Hutchinson (1986), suggest that “[b]ecause these sensations are diffuse and do not originate from a palpable physical organ, they are much more difficult to integrate into the body ego (as well as ego functions such as being able to put the sensations into words) than are the boy’s penile sensations” (419). However well Plaut and Hutchinson’s observations (and

of paradox, the fantasy of the womb acts as a positioning of desire, locating the mother's desire through the infant's place in the womb, but beyond the infant's ability to return to the womb, to fill it again once born. So rather than investing the phallus with the authority to create woman, as Lacan would maintain, woman's subjectivity, it seems to me, is somehow more primally about refinding or bringing into consciousness the experience of the womb – imagined or felt -- as the putting into place of the first separation which engenders differentiation through the lived experience of opposition and paradox.

Therefore, as Gerda Elata and Beatrice Priel have written in another context, “[w]e witness here a reversal of the customary hierarchical opposition between a letter and an envelope, which is already foreshadowed in the initial confusion between the two: The letter can lay claim no longer to a naturally privileged position. In other words, the hierarchical opposition between outside and inside (an external form and an internal content and by implication between the text and its meaning (the sign and its referent) has been denaturalized” (135). To mix metaphors, then -- Lacan's and mine -- the womb as envelope and the infant as letter appear as decompleting binaries along a maternally designated Moebius strip – woman as her own subject -- each seeking an imaginary, impossible return, “each of them function[ing] as text in and of itself” (Elata and Priel 135). But as Calvin Hall points out, “one cannot regain the womb without experiencing

those of their supporting research) follow Freudian orthodoxy, they do so without accounting for Horney's work, in that these sensations are specifically located within the body, even if they are unnamed or denied. My guess is that this would encourage ego functions, such as speech, which is likewise the conversion of something experienced as real into the abstraction of language.

the terrors of birth in reverse. Thus, an insoluble conflict rages between desire and fear, a fear that is acted out in all spheres and stages of one's life" (161).⁴³ Between the envelope and the letter, woman as self subject and subject to another -- her mother and her child -- there is irresolvable ambivalence, two faces in one, of unity and separation, restraint and freedom, pleasure and pain.

If we can accept Aury's claim that *Story of O* was written "the way one dreams" ("Girl" 7), then I would argue that O's travails represent a dream-like fiction of repeating and refinding the mother's body through O's experience of her own body. Through O's forced confrontation of the womb -- accomplished by blindfolds and binding of the hands

⁴³Hall is coming from Otto Rank and Franz Alexander who, in Mitchell's words, "took castration back to the baby's loss of the womb which was once part of itself" (Mitchell in *Feminine* 18). Mitchell maintains that "[t]here is a fundamental distinction between recognising that the castration complex may refer back to other separations and actually seeing these separations as castrations. To Freud the castration complex divided the sexes and thus made the human being, human. But this is not to deny the importance of earlier separations Freud's account is retroactive: fearing phallic castration the child may 'recollect' previous losses, castration gives them their relevance. In the other accounts it is these separations that make castration relevant; here the scheme is prospective; early losses make the child fear future ones. For Freud, history and the psychoanalytic experience is always a reconstruction, a retrospective account: the human subject is part of such a history. The other explanations make him grow developmentally. If one takes castration back to the womb, then the human subject was there from the outset and it can only follow that what makes him psychotic, neurotic or 'normal' is some arbitrarily selected constitutional factor or some equally arbitrary environmental experience" (18, 19). I disagree with the implications of this passage: firstly, that the infant's earliest experience is somehow less constitutive of subjectivity than its later experience; secondly, that the pre-experience, if you will, of the womb and birth is only relevant once phallic castration has occurred; and thirdly, that sexual differentiation is exclusively relative to the phallus. Although this very quickly becomes the subject of another paper, it would be interesting to explore difference in relation to the girl's feeling, not seeing experience of her own body as replicating the mother's, and to the boy's seeing his penis but not having the womb of the mother from which he came.

and the body, the suspension of time within deliberately constructed interior rooms which are warm against O's nakedness, the frequent use of red and black to colour in these rooms and their furnishings, and in the omnipresent mirrors -- O is brought back to the desire and fear of which Hall writes, her dream of her place within the mother's body being a wish fulfilment cloaked, as wishes often are, by horror. O feels this "sweetness mingled with . . . terror" (*Story 23*); O is positioned like Aury as she wrote, "[l]ying on her left side, alone in the darkness and silence, hot beneath her two layers of fur, [and] of necessity motionless" (*Story 23*). O slips into sleep, "no longer [feeling] anything but the collar, the bracelets, and the chain; her body was drifting away" (*Story 24*), her sleep being the release into the uterine security of not yet knowing, and the confinement of her bindings mimicking the not yet being of the infant.

O is awakened from her sleep, brought back into consciousness through the medium of pain; in this instance, it is an early morning flogging from the valet, Pierre, "just before dawn when it is darkest and coldest" (*Story 24*), that delivers O. The beating he administers is in the manner of a steady beat, like the felt sound of the mother's heart beat which alleviates the infant's anxiety, and like the contractions of birth, which are possibly the infant's first direct experience of pain. The association of contradictory responses -- comfort and pain -- to a stimulus which is felt as tender and brutal, creative and destructive, marks O's psychic birth, a separation of her body and will from the memory of another's.

However, Pierre's departure leaves O alone to meet the dawn; she is not cradled or

comforted – the internal container of the womb is not replaced by the external container of loving arms -- except by her own thoughts of submission, and she balances the unconscious, unthinkable anxiety of her birth in solitude:

O was left moaning in the darkness, swaying back and forth along the wall at the end of her chain. She tried to stop moaning and to immobilize herself against the wall, whose gleaming percale was cool on her tortured flesh, as day slowly began to break. The tall window toward which she was turned, for she was leaning on one hip, was facing east. It extended from floor to ceiling and, except for the drapes -- of the same red material as that on the wall -- which graced it on either side and split into stiff folds below the curtain loops which held it, it had no curtains. O watched the slow birth of pale dawn, trailing its mist among clusters of asters outside at the foot of her window, until a poplar tree finally appeared. (*Story* 26)

O's isolation, like Aury's abandonment, denies her the continuity of the womb, which is typically replaced at birth by the mother who holds the infant outside her body, but holds her nonetheless, mitigating the infant's loss. Without a holding presence, O is unconsciously, traumatically caught in and by the process of repeating her first separation, just as she is consciously and repeatedly assaulted, confusing torture and caress. Indeed, her stay at Roissy ends with O "being wrapped in a heavy cloth, and someone taking her by the shoulders and knees, lifting and carrying her" back to her cell and her bed where "her eyes were open, her hands free, and René was sitting beside her, stroking her hair" (*Story*

49).

Lacan writes that “in the Moebius strip there is nothing measurable to be retained in its structure, and that is reduced, like the real . . . to the cut itself” (*Ecrits* 223fn). The cut, which we covered with clear tape so as to be hidden in plain sight -- like Poe’s letter, like O’s body, an opened envelope -- is the symptom which lives the subject, inventively and endlessly displaced, without breaking through into the subject’s consciousness. Thus, O remains in ignorance of her symptom even after she has lived and relived it, subject to an injury not to yet to come but to one that has already taken place.⁴⁴ Her encounter with Anne-Marie, anticipated in advance and considered after, bears this mark of the “unthought known” (Bollas 32) which holds O in thrall: “in trying to visualize Anne-Marie and imagine what it was that Sir Stephen expected from Anne-Marie as far as she, O, was concerned, O was completely at sea, and not even her experience at Roissy was of any help to her. Sir Stephen had also mentioned that he wanted to see her caress another woman; could that be it? . . . No, it wasn’t that. “To show you,” he had just said. Indeed. But after she left Anne-Marie, O knew no more than before” (*Story* 142). O cannot know more than she does, given that the impetus for her symptom is, by definition, unconscious; however, the shift of the triangle that places O and Anne-Marie on equal sides represents a change,

⁴⁴I am thinking of Kumin’s summary of Winnicott’s paper “Fear of Breakdown:” “In it Winnicott traced the adult fear of a future mental breakdown to a fear of a breakdown that has *already* occurred -- but that occurred so early in life it cannot be remembered. Winnicott poignantly described how the past breakdown must reoccur in the transference, as though for the first time, in order to be fully encompassed” (italics his, ix). As I understand it, this is akin to Lacan’s idea of the traversal of the fundamental fantasy, and it parallels the notion of trauma inherent in fantasy.

an intervention which uncovers the nature of the cut, and points to the fantasied twist between the Å and the Φ along which O's psyche traverses.

If Norah is the dark mother split off from O, Anne-Marie is, curiously, the fair one, despite her black hair and eyes so “deep[ly] blue they looked black” (*Story* 142).⁴⁵ She greets O as her child, and she is sensitive to her well being, as evidenced by her concern for O's garter marked legs and her intention that O be “much improved” (*Story* 144) by the clothing she insists upon. While this is ostensibly for Sir Stephen's benefit, Anne-Marie's purpose is to educate O as to her fate “in a totally feminine universe” (*Story* 157), a universe designed at Samois to replicate the authority of the womb in relation to the phallus. The acceptance of this defining paradox is the move towards subjectivity which allows O to fully give herself over to her own desire, not for a release from sexual tension but for a final release from the intolerable anxiety of life. Aury's most recent statement on *Story of O* confirms this: “To give one's self you have to possess one's self. You can't give what you don't own. You can't give anything if you don't own it first” (in *Brick* 24). For O to give herself, she must come into being, not through her lovers, but through Anne-Marie; O, then, is, rather nicely, the fictional inscription of Å, their joined initials signifying O's delivery.

I want to play out this idea of Anne-Marie as the maternal other; consider that O

⁴⁵Kimble and Wrye interpret the detail of a black woman onlooker in a white woman's dream as “the split-off, dark version of her mother whom she feared had wanted to abort her. The dream also suggested her notion of the inadequacy of a mother to give birth to a healthy female/child/self” (48).

cannot possess Anne-Marie despite O's skilful caresses, in fact, "[n]o one possessed Anne-Marie" (*Story* 164). What O comes to possess, though, is Anne-Marie as \dot{A} , as the mother figure who uses the child to return to the space of her own desire -- a space beyond the child, but within herself -- and in so doing creates an insoluble desire in the child. Now Lacan would have it that the mother's desire is for the phallus; that through her transmutation of lack into desire, she demonstrates to the child that she "has submitted to the splitting /barring action of language, in order for us to witness the subject's advent" (*Lacanian* 54). The mother who mothers without acknowledgement of her own lack, who fails to conform to incompleteness, robs her child of the example of separation and individuation. Lacan insists: "what is most anxiety-producing for the child is when the relationship through which he comes to be -- on the basis of lack which makes him desire -- is most perturbed: when there is no possibility of lack, when his mother is constantly on his back" (in *Lacanian* 53). Remember Aury's mother; the woman who is oddly unnamed while her daughter has several names? She was just such a mother, one who could not desire another because she could not accept herself, and in this disavowal, this refusal like O's to touch herself as it were, she is the constant shadow of her daughter as object, obstructing Aury's passage into subjectivity.⁴⁶ Not so Anne-Marie who choreographs O's

⁴⁶Aury recalls her mother as having no language to speak about *Story of O*, no means for bringing *O* -- and presumably, her daughter as author -- into a signifying chain, thereby allowing it to have meaning. Aury's comments on her mother's "shun[ning]" of her own body, still emphatically expressed despite Aury's age (she was eighty-seven at the time of this interview), suggest that far from having "absolutely" no effect, her mother's attitude had a definite effect on her. I would add that Aury's mother in abandoning herself, foreshadowed her abandonment of her daughter (*Brick* 18).

individuation, her splitting off from the womb, by making it clear that as the mother figure, she desires not the phallus -- there is no suggestion that she and Sir Stephen share anything more than an interest in O -- but rather a *jouissance* centred in her internal other, recognizing her own split being: "Anne-Marie was quick to yield -- but not to O. The pleasure to which she opened her eyes wide, staring at the growing daylight, was an anonymous, impersonal pleasure of which O was merely the instrument" (*Story* 163).

Anne-Marie's desire is impersonal, in/personal, simultaneously irrespective and constructive of O. And it is through Anne-Marie's specific "technique" (*Story* 157) that O regains the womb that has previously failed her. Anne-Marie's music room is a womb-like space, but one with a difference because it is womb and phallus, and its subject is woman as infant, impossibly delivering herself out of her own womb, through the experience of the external. Keep that Moebius twist in mind: the inside out becoming the outside in:

The light entering through the French door revealed a room the far end of which formed a kind of raised rotunda; the ceiling, in the narrow shape of a shallow cupola, was supported by two narrow columns set about six feet apart. This dais was about four steps high and, in the area between the columns, projected further into the room in a gentle arc. The floor of the rotunda, like that of the rest of the room, was covered with a red felt carpet. The walls were white, the curtains on the window red, and the sofas set in a semi-circle facing the rotunda were upholstered in the same red felt material as the carpet on the floor. In the rectangular portion of the room there was a fireplace. (*Story* 154)

Light takes the phallic part, penetrating this remarkable fusion of female and male imagery: a rotunda raised to meet supporting columns, a domed ceiling, a gentle arc, a red atmosphere, and warmth. The womb is the phallus as the phallus is the womb, Å \diamond Φ and back again, Φ \diamond Å. And it is impossible to say where one becomes or undoes the other, except by O's position within the room, within the time of her (self) delivery.⁴⁷ She is placed on the dias in a birthing position; her screams are arguably those of a woman giving birth, and of the infant as it is born, locating O as the speaking subject while splitting, fading her from the fiction of a unified self. This O, the one who thanks Anne-Marie for her punishment, is the mother whose cries are answered with the production of herself as infant; she comes into being through a forced confrontation of the womb: hers, her mother's and her ability to create in words the desire which compels her to assert her own voice through another.⁴⁸

But this leaves something unaccounted for: the union of womb and phallus, and the imaginary sense of O's being not penetrated by, but being inside the phallus, as represented

⁴⁷Frida Kahlo's painting, *My Birth* (1932) comes to mind, in which Kahlo, as a grown woman is delivered out of her own body draped like a corpse.

⁴⁸Renata Gaddini holds that "[i]f the child is let down all the time, at a later stage self-rocking or other rhythmical body movement will appear. The rocking child imitates his mother: but in so doing he feels himself annihilated, *becomes* a mother who rocks babies, losing himself in the process. Self-rocking is a sign of deprivation, the result of an inadequate maternal response to his earlier screaming and crying. Screaming, in fact, *is* a cry for the mother, and implies there is still hope" (italics hers, Gaddini in Kumin 143). Similarly, Lacan writes, "[w]hat I seek in speech is the response of the other. What constitutes me as a subject is my question. In order to be recognized by the other, I utter what was only in view of what will be. In order to find him, I call him by a name that he must assume or refuse in order to reply to me" (*Ecrits* 86).

by the columns.⁴⁹ For if the womb can take on characteristics once denied it, those of activity and agency, the reverse is also possible: the phallus can be passive and containing. If this seems unlikely in the context of *Story of O* and Aury's life, it is worth pointing out that Aury's father, though also absent from his daughter's early life due to military service in World War I, was the one who confirmed through his collection of erotic books Aury's knowledge of sexuality (Aury in Deforges 11). And Sir Stephen takes O as much as his daughter as his lover, hopelessly confusing -- twisting -- the gendered symbolism of womb and phallus, activity and passivity.

O's last appearance as owl is the final twist of the triangle, in which the tape is removed and the structure falls apart, returning her to the flatness of Aury's page. O's chains are unfastened, she is unmasked; having returned through the paradox of her birth, she is subject to no one; rather she takes on her own fate unto death, having "come into being as [her] own cause" (*Lacanian* xiii). If O is Athena's familiar, it is to remind us that Aury is like Athena herself, impossibly born full grown from Zeus's head, after he had swallowed entire the pregnant goddess, Metis, yielding a new born woman capable of changing shape and assuming disguises. Athena's skill, her mark of authenticity, of subjectivity, like Aury's to tell a tale, comes from the womb, the fantasy of \dot{A} as it comes together and comes apart from Φ . The womb of the father, the phallus of the mother:

⁴⁹Kimble and Wrye give the related example of an analysand's dream which placed her in a curved hotel room, reminiscent of the analyst's office, within a "tall, cylindrical building [suggestive of the] father's phallus. [Her] fantasies were of being inside the phallus, not penetrated by it; thus she conflated ideas of the phallus as a containing womb and as a signifier of the father's sexual powers" (56).

impossible conjunctions, implausible disjunctions, separations, castrations. The self, thought in another, through another: identity through loss; not staying in the place of loss, but moving through it, traversing. Lacan writes, “I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object” (*Ecrits* 86). Aury’s narrative magic, her transformation of many womblike nights “into make-believe” (*Story* 201), is a power which traverses the wounds of birth, hers and O’s, into the paradox of life and death. She relieves/relieves/releaves a successful birth – successful in that the opposing structures of knowledge that birth initiates can then be tolerated, therein birth and death assume their meanings. *Story of O* is, ironically, a text of *jouissance* and trauma, fantasy and truth – the many truths of the symbolic subject. On being asked where this truth resides, Aury’s last words are unforgettable, well chosen against the impossibility of choice; she says that one finds truth “in some expressions of the written word, maybe. I don’t know. I don’t know because everyone has several truths. And one cannot know how to choose” (in *Brick* 25). Choice, like truth, has no formulas, no mathemes, only the determination of what will be from the assertion of what was, and the insistence that we choose to remember what we cannot forget.

Works Cited

- “Author of ‘50s S-M Novel Dies.” *Associated Press*. May 4, 1998. *Dispatch*. Online posting. June 30, 1998.
- Benjamin, Jessica. “Master and Slave: The Fantasy of Erotic Domination.” *Powers of Desire*. Ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson. New York: Monthly Review P, 1983. 280-299.
- _____. *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination*. New York: Pantheon, 1988.
- Benton, Robert J. “The *Aufhebung* of the Phallus.” *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought* 18:1 (1995): 53-74.
- Berressem, Hanjo. “Dali and Lacan: Painting the Imaginary Landscapes.” *Lacan, Politics, Aesthetics*. Ed. Willy Apollon and Richard Feldstein. Albany: SUNY P, 1996. 263-293.
- Bollas, Christopher. *The Shadow of The Object*. New York: Columbia UP, 1987.
- Bondy, François. “A Literary Delicacy.” *Seven-Books Einzeltitel*. Online posting. Trans. Pia Rippon. December 19, 1997.
- Brooks, Peter. *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994.
- Brown, Nathaniel and Rebecca Blevins Faery. “The Total ‘O’: Dream or Nightmare?” *Mosaic* 17:2 (1984): 189-206.
- Campion, Jane, dir. *The Piano*. Videocassette. Miramax Films. Jan Chapman

Production, 1993.

Chadwick, Charles. "The Real O." *French Studies Bulletin* 56 Autumn (1995): 18.

Chang, Pearl. "O Dear." *The New York Review of Books* 6 April 14 (1966): 16-18.

Chen, Richard T. "Re: Mathematical Symbols." E-Mail to the author. July 15, 1998.

Clément, Catherine. *The Lives and Legends of Jacques Lacan*,. Trans. Arthur

Goldhammer (1981). New York: Columbia UP, 1983.

Cosman, Carol. "Story of O." *Women's Studies* 2 (1974): 25-36.

Deforges, Régine. *Confessions of O: Conversations with Pauline Réage*. Trans. Sabine d'Estrée. (1975). New York: Viking, 1979.

Dworkin, Andrea. *Woman Hating*. New York: Dutton, 1974.

_____. *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. New York: Perigree, 1981.

Elata, Gerda and Beatrice Priel. "Gazing through the Looking Glass: On the Reader's Tolerance for Paradox in Fictional Discourse." *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought* 12:1 (1989):125-140.

Estrée, Sabine d'. "Translator's Note." *Story of O*. (1965). New York: Ballantine, 1991.

Evans, Dylan. *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Felman, Shoshana. *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987.

Fink, Bruce. *The Lacanian Subject*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995.

_____. "The Subject and the Other's Desire." *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan's Return to Freud*. Ed. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink and Maire Janus. Albany: SUNY P, 1996. 76-97.

Frappier-Mazur, L. "Marginal Canons: Rewriting the Erotic." *Yale French Studies* 75 (1988): 112-28.

Freud, Sigmund. "Some Character-Types Met with in Psycho-Analytic work. The 'Exceptions.'" *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (SE)*. Trans. Ed. James Strachey. 14 (1916): 311-315. London: Hogarth P, 1981.

_____. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. SE 5 (1900a): 339-622.

_____. *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*. SE (1917). New York: Norton, 1989.

Gallus, Maya. "A Conversation with Dominique Aury." *Brick* 58 Winter (1998): 16-25.

_____, dir. *Erotica: A Journey into Female Sexuality*. Videocassette. Swept Away Productions, 1997.

Griffin, Susan. "Sadomasochism and the erosion of the self: a critical reading of *Story of O*." *Against Sadomasochism*. Ed. Robin Linden. Palo Alto: Frog in the Well, 1982.

Gordon, Jan. "*The Story of O* and the Strategy of Pornography: Cosmos and Nothingness." *Western Humanities Review* 25 (1971): 27-43.

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*. London: Routledge, 1990.

Hall, Calvin. "Are Prenatal and Birth Experiences Represented in Dreams?"

Psychoanalytic Review Spring (1967): 157-174.

Hill, Charlotte and William Wallace. *Erotica II*. Toronto: Stoddart, 1994.

Horney, Karen. "The Denial of the Vagina" (1933). *Feminine Psychology*. Ed. Harold Kelman. New York: Norton, 1967.

Hughes, Alex and Kate Ince, ed. *French Erotic Fiction: Women's Desiring Writing, 1880-1990*. Oxford: Berg, 1996.

Jacobs, Carol. "Playing Jane Campion's *Piano*: Politically." *Modern Language Notes* 109:5 December (1994): 757-785.

Klein, Melanie. "Early Stages of the Oedipus Conflict" (1928). *The Selected Melanie Klein*. Ed. Juliet Mitchell. New York: Free Press, 1986. 69-83.

Koehler, François. "Melanie Klein and Jacques Lacan." *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan's Return to Freud*. Ed. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink and Maire Janus. Albany: SUNY P, 1996. 111-117.

Kumin, Ivri. *Pre-Object Relatedness*. New York: Guilford, 1996.

Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits. A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton, 1977.

_____. *Feminine Sexuality*. Trans. Jacqueline Rose. Ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose. New York: Norton, 1985.

_____. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of PsychoAnalysis*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. New York: Norton, 1981.

_____. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Bk. II*. Trans. Sylvana Tomaselli. Ed.

Jacques-Alain Miller. New York: Norton, 1991.

_____. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*. Bk. VII. Trans. Dennis Porter. Ed.

Jacques-Alain Miller. New York: Norton, 1992.

_____. *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Ed. Anthony Wilden.

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1968.

Laplanche, Jean and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis. *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*. Trans.

Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Norton, 1973.

Mandiargues, André Pieyre de. "A Note on Story of O." *Story of O*. Trans. Sabine

d'Estrée. (1965). New York: Ballantine, 1991.

Miller, Dominique. "A Case of Childhood Perversion." *Reading Seminars I and II*. Ed.

Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink and Maire Janus. Albany: SUNY P, 1996. 294-

300.

Mickelson, David. "X-Rated O." *Western Humanities Review* 31 (1978): 165-73.

Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics* (1969). New York: Touchstone, 1990.

Myers, Wayne. "Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: Creativity and the Psychology of the

Exception." *International Journal of Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy* 9 (1982-83):

625-645.

Paulhan, Jean. "Happiness in Slavery." *Story of O*. Trans. Sabine d'Estrée. (1965). New

York: Ballantine: 1991.

Phillips, John. "'O' Really." *French Studies Bulletin* 55 Summer (1995): 15-17.

_____. "Pseudonymous O." *French Studies Bulletin* 57 Winter (1995): 16-17.

- Plaut, Eric and Foster Hutchinson. "The Role of Puberty in Female Psychosexual Development." *International Review of Psycho-Analysis* 13 (1986): 417-432.
- Podro, Michael. "'The Landscape Thinks Itself In Me.' The Comments and Procedures of Cézanne." *International Review of Psycho-Analysis* 17:2 (1990): 401-408.
- Prupas, Lorne. Conversation with the author. Vancouver, B. C. July 19, 1998.
- Réage, Pauline. *Histoire d'O*. Paris: Chez Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1954.
- _____. "Une fille amoureuse." *Retour à Roissy*. Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1975.
- Réage, Pauline. *Story of O*. Trans. Sabine d'Estrée. (1965). New York: Ballantine, 1991.
- _____. "A Girl in Love." *Return to the Château*. Trans. Sabine d'Estrée. (1971). New York: Ballantine, 1975.
- Roudinesco, Elisabeth. *Jacques Lacan*. Trans. Barbara Bray. New York: Columbia UP, 1997.
- St. Jorré, John de. "The Unmasking of O." *The New Yorker* August 6 (1994): 42-50.
- Scheel, Kate. Seminar Presentation. University of British Columbia. Vancouver, B.C. March 17, 1997.
- Schneiderman, Stuart. *Jacques Lacan*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983.
- Silverman, Kaja. "Histoire d'O: The Construction of a Female Subject." *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. Ed. Carole Vance. Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984.

Sontag, Susan. "The Pornographic Imagination." *Styles of Radical Will*. New York:

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969.

"Walter." *My Secret Life* (1871). New York: Carroll and Graf, 1996.

Wiesel, Elie. Public Forum. Simon Fraser University, Harbour Centre. Vancouver, B.C.

May 6, 1996.

Wilden, Anthony. Conversation with the author. Vancouver, B. C. December, 1997.

Wrye, Harriet Kimble and Judith K. Welles. *The Narration of Desire: Erotic*

Transferences and Countertransferences. Hillsdale: Analytic P, 1994.

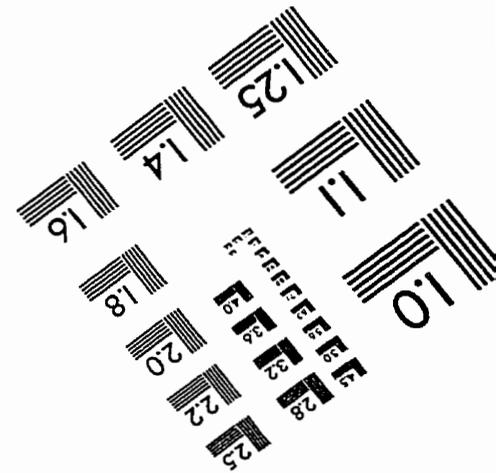
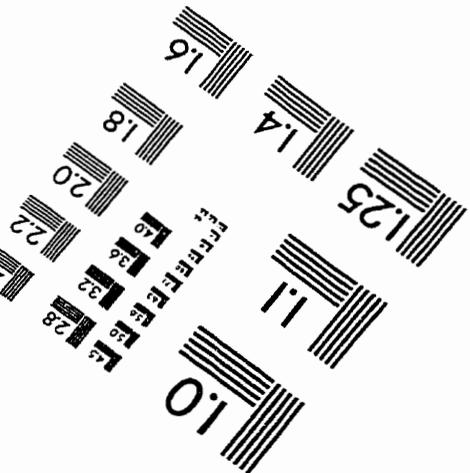
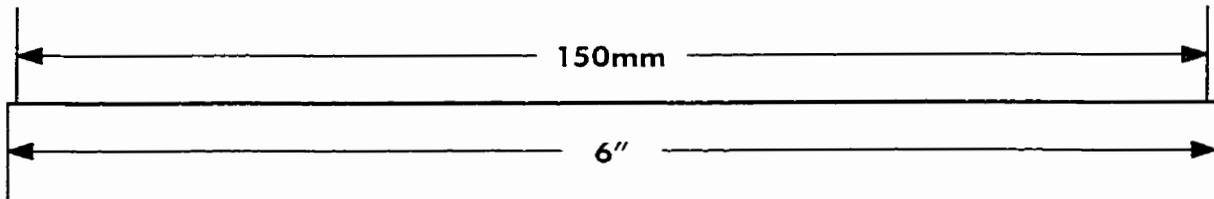
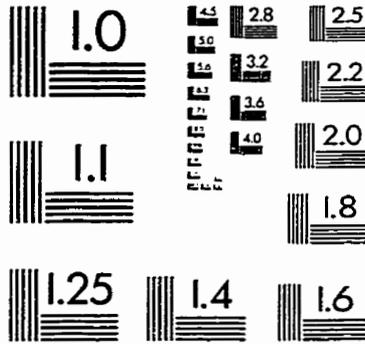
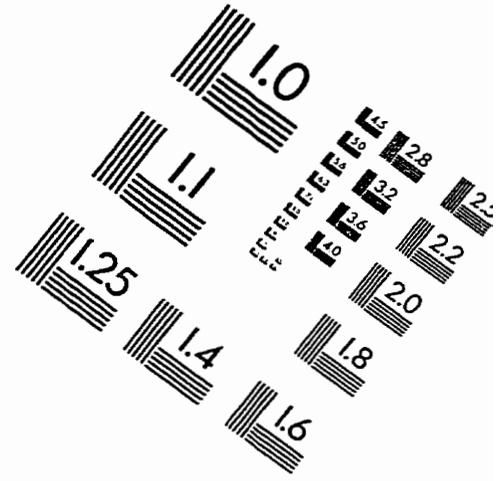
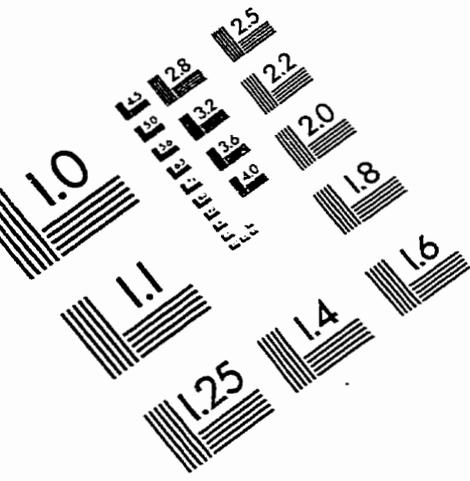
Wyatt, Jean. *Reconstructing Desire*. Chapel Hill: U North Carolina P, 1990.

Ziv, Amalia. "The Pervert's Progress: An Analysis of *Story of O* and the Beauty Trilogy."

Feminist Review 46 Spring (1994): 61-75.

Žižek, Slavoj. *Looking Awry*. Cambridge: MIT P, 1992.

IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



APPLIED IMAGE, Inc.
1653 East Main Street
Rochester, NY 14609 USA
Phone: 716/482-0300
Fax: 716/288-5989

© 1993, Applied Image, Inc., All Rights Reserved