

MANHATTAN

DOESN'T TURN ITS BACK ON SEX

BETWEEN *SEX AND THE CITY* AND CATHERINE MILLET,
WE PENETRATE NEW YORK CHIC WITH TONI BENTLEY AND DETOUR...VIA
THE NARROW DOOR¹

By IRÈNE FRAIN

At the moment where around Parisian drawing rooms, over cups of coffee in the office, everyone has their own take on the decline of France, finally a new voice speaks out to rebuild national morale: it's still an area where France remains in charge – sex. Or, to be more precise: writing about sex. Impressed no doubt by the publishing success of Catherine Millet, New York gives us her American clone: a good, strong writer like Millet, Toni Bentley, the slender forty-something, coach-built with the same finesse as the limousines of the same name. One understands quickly why: she is a dancer from the Balanchine's troupe. The first pages of her work, *My [sic] Surrender* are quite as gory as a T-Bone steak, and her allusion to the Marquis de Sade will undoubtedly disconcert some - a rare piece, skinned and bloody, which escaped the confession, born five years ago of our national institution: Millet, the inventor of the sexual introspection genre in her *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.* But of all the vaginal monologue writers, Toni Bentley affirms herself as the most original and for good reason: she has discovered for herself a mono-maniacal passion for another orifice, not always to the taste of women, that which [André] Gide with sotto voce called the narrow door. After following a, broadly speaking, conventional romantic path: lovers, husband, divorce, new lovers, little 'moresomes', beautiful Toni fell for an expert in the matter, who initiated her to her masochistic delicacies. For different reasons, due maybe to the sexual tastes of the American woman and the French woman (the New Yorker is only moderately conventional), the relationship between the two women's [approaches] is troubling: The same taste for a classic narrative style. The same way of living in the writing, rigor, elegance and precision. Dance has more influence in the case of the American woman, but as with Catherine Millet, Toni Bentley is not scared to compare herself to Thérèse d'Avila. And most significantly, both are obsessed with numbers: the 'reversals' which her initiator imposes on the beautiful Toni are, like Catherine Millet's partners, strictly accounted for, ranked and classified. And finally, both the one and the other are undiluted aesthetes. Very young, Miss Bentley read everything that was important: Nietzsche, Freud, Anaïs Nin, D.H. Lawrence, Henry James, Virginia Woolf.

She knows her Kierkegaard by heart, her Henry Miller word for word.

Slipping on his condom, she never fails to dream of William Blake or of Jackson Pollock; and while awaiting the next session with the lover who holds her in his thrall, she reconnects with the many things which signify that she belongs to the small closed circle of feminine intellectuals, the feminists of Manhattan, fervent readers of the *New*

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NE TOURNE PAS LE DOS

AU SEXE

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Yorker, pillars of the Chelsea art galleries, only buying their croissants at the TriBeCa Bakery, their tiny split crotch panties at Victoria's Secret and their alp-high heels from no one else but Sigerson Morrison in SoHo. Overall, her hymn to the 'Holy Fuck' remains from start to finish (if one can put it that way) extremely joyful. The emotional depression which ends up making Catherine Millet's confession tedious, did not prevail against the grand oceanic winds; and the further one progresses into Bentley's book, the more one rejoices to find in the beautiful American from the small world of Manhattan a rollicking pleasure-maker who at the same time is a sharp-eyed observer and is often very funny. Between two particularly matadorial, olé-olé-jousts, with her divine master of the back door, a visit to the gym to observe a rival, dinner at a sushi bar (whose good standing was reviewed the previous week in the Arts and Leisure section of the New York Times, and finally at a spa for neo-buddhist meditation, where one learns along the way that well conducted sodomy dissolves in karmic freedom, Toni Bentley never fails to ask herself where, in deepest America 'the unmentionable Greek vice' as the censors put it, is still proscribed in ten states. And to philosophize with a regular of the Café de Flore, that these states were recently able to vote in a law repressing the sexual relations between the men and birds... One will have understood that this *Surrender* is not simply an ultra spicy account served warm after 291 helpings from the casserole dish in a dark oven. But far more than *Sex and the City* revisited,

This! This is Paris.

And, on this side of the Atlantic, the once-said-dead rise again. Following La Fayette and Tocqueville, France still has something to astonish America: Where our social model may have failed, our literary and sexual model exports itself well!

My Surrender, by Toni Bentley, pub. Maren Sell, 265 pages €18