BOOKFORUM
ARCHIVE | ART FORUM | CONTACT | SUBSCRIBE | ADVERTISE

SUMMER 2006

Bound for Glory

TONI BENTLEY ON STORY OF O

"*Pecca fortiter*"—"sin with courage"—was a favorite maxim of Pauline Réage, the pseudonymous author of the most famous erotic novel of the twentieth century, *Story of O*. One might add that for forty years Réage's courageous "sin" resided in secret—not the sin, but the courage. Her identity was revealed, in what amounted to a deathbed confession, by British journalist John de St. Jorre in an article in the *New Yorker* ("The Unmasking of O") in August 1994. She was Dominique Aury, she was eighty-six years old, and she lived in a farmhouse an hour outside Paris. She died not quite four years later, but not before the French press had a field day with the story that ended a long literary mystery.

For many years, it was assumed that the book had been penned by a man: What woman could—or would—write with such love about female mortification? Albert Camus stated defiantly, definitively, "A woman could not write this book." As a male fantasy of domination, the story makes Sadean sense, but as a woman's fantasy, it would threaten two thousand years of prevailing notions about female sexuality—and upset numerous husbands. "Women are as immoral as men," says Aury in American filmmaker Pola Rapaport's fascinating documentary *Écrivain d'O* (Writer of O), newly released on DVD. "But," she continues, her eyes twinkling with girlish mischief, "no one has noticed."

Who is O? Her identity, her symbolism, has provoked much Freudian speculation: *eau* (water), orgasm, object, orifice, whole, hole, vagina, zero, nothingness, nonbeing . . . For those literate in s/m, there is the echo of the O-ring, the completion of the circle, the eternal attachment. But O, we learn from the author at long last, is simply short for Odile, abbreviated to protect from implication a friend of the same name (who, as fate would have it, was having an affair with Camus at the time). As for the endless conjecture, Aury dismisses it as "all nonsense." Such is art. Multiple meanings, numerous layers, mirrors of reflection, all unintentional. Well, maybe.

Histoire d'O (Story of O) is an erotic parable about more achieving less. It has far more in common with the travails of medieval saints than with the beleaguered female of modern-day pornography. The book tells the profound, and disturbing, story of a woman who wishes to exist without existing: "She lost herself in a delirious absence from herself." Through utter humiliation, O rises. Susan Sontag called the book a story of "an ascent through degradation." Such a woman today would, of course, be pathologized and, ironically, "healed" by more socially acceptable methods of control: institutionalization and medication.

The book describes in detailed, unsentimental, and elegant prose the ritualized training necessary for a woman's self-annihilation. O is penetrated in every orifice by multiple men at their sole discretion, most symbolically in the "after passage." She is chained, bound, probed, blindfolded, collared,

WRITER OF O DIRECTED BY POLA RAPAPORT. NEW YORK: ZEITGEIST FILMS. 80 MIN. $23. BUY NOW

cuffed, ransacked, ravaged, rendered, plowed, displayed, flogged, shamed, and, finally, branded with her master's initials and pierced through her center with two iron rings.

"It is only when you make me suffer that I feel safe and secure," says O to her master, Sir Stephen. This is not wisdom for the fainthearted. "One wearies of living always in the same skin," wrote Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, "and blind obedience is the only chance for radical transformation known to a human being." (Beauvoir knew of what she wrote, being in thrall, by choice, her whole life to Jean-Paul Sartre, her own little big man.) These Frenchwomen are incorrigible.

Now, in *Writer of O* we see the face of the woman who wrote of such infamous doings, and the film reveals that the truly great erotic love story is the one that lies, literarily speaking, behind the writing. Aury's twenty-year affair with the married Jean Paulhan, of the Académie Française, was the raison d'être of *Story of O*, and her story is more moving, if it were possible, than that of O herself. Written on a dare from Paulhan, an admirer of the Marquis de Sade, he provoked her, saying, "Women are incapable of writing an erotic novel."

"I wrote it alone, for him," says Aury, interviewed in her late eighties, "to interest him, to please him, to occupy him. I wasn't young [she was forty-seven, he was sixty-nine] nor particularly pretty. I needed something which might interest a man like him." How politically incorrect. How refreshing. How heartbreaking. Her literary seduction worked, and they remained lovers for fourteen more years, until his death at eighty-three. Of their age difference, Aury says simply, "Women always seek a father." (After his death, she "stopped everything"—though she lived for thirty more years.) Paulhan's intelligence, says one observer, was "a kind of obsession" for Aury, and thus she wrote a book about the obliteration of the body. Demonstrating the most potent paradox of eroticism, *Story of O* is about physical love distilled, through lust, to spirit, a hymn to mind.

Dominique Aury was a woman of considerable accomplishments. Born Anne Declos in Brittany in 1907, she amassed multiple identities over the years. Her fascination with the clandestine was born as a teenager when she discovered—and devoured—her beloved father's secret erotic library (her favorite book: *Les Liaisons dangereuses*). An attractive bluestocking, Aury lived with her parents and a son from a brief early marriage. She was well educated, earning a degree in English from the Sorbonne. She first met Paulhan, editor
of the highly regarded literary journal *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, while both were working for the French Resistance during World War II. By 1947, Paulhan had captivated Aury, and she never looked back—though they were never monogamous. He remained married to his second wife, and their affair was conducted in hotel rooms, "always with the watch on the wrist." "When you advance into my night," she wrote in a poem, "You are not you, I am other / This other knows not who I am / You know not that I am your own." Aury was well versed in erotic otherness, a quality legitimate relationships must sadly forgo.

After the war, Aury worked with Paulhan at the prestigious publishing house Gallimard as well as at *La Nouvelle Revue*. She moved in the highest of French literary circles, serving on reading committees with André Gide and Camus. She was the first translator into French of Evelyn Waugh, Virginia Woolf, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and T. S. Eliot, read all of Proust every year for five years, and was awarded the Legion of Honor for her contributions to French literature.

Initially published in an edition of six hundred copies in Paris in 1954, *Story of O* immediately provoked a scandal, leading to a police investigation and the threat of legal action. The renegade young publisher Jean-Jacques Pauvert, interviewed in *Writer of O*, was used to such attention, having

Pauvert, interviewed in *Writer of O*, was used to such attention, having already published the complete works of Sade and Jean Genet. With an impish grin, however, he states of Genet, "But homosexuality always had a lot of prestige"—unlike female masochism. After *Story of O* was rejected by Gallimard, Pauvert immediately saw the value of what he calls "a very decent book . . . without the slightest excess. . . . I knew it would be a revolution." The book has never been out of print.

The re-creations of scenes from *Story of O* interspersed throughout the documentary are pretty and promising if dissatisfying. Pénélope Puymirat is lovely to look at as O, appropriately French, not porn shorn, and, as a student of "philosophy and psychology," she is, one assumes, in the right frame of mind. Mostly, we see O languishing, naked, in becoming poses, constrained by leather cuffs, ensconced in red satin: static s/m, a contradiction in terms. The implication of a slow pan across a large case of brown dildos of ever-increasing size (party time for O!) is, ironically, emblematic of the softness of Rapaport's approach. Why must sex always be sentimentalized for public consumption? "To love is to live on the precipice," said Aury, reporting live from the ledge. Sentimentality removes the danger. "Profane love and sacred love are the same love, or should be," she wrote—a combination virtually impossible to film, requiring the unlikely partnership of Carl Dreyer and Bernardo Bertolucci, Joan of Arc meets Marlon Brando and butter in Paris.

All this aside, the interviews make *Writer of O* well worth seeing: Pauvert, hardly aged, amused by the ruckus; Henry Miller speaking French with a hilariously defiant American accent; and a glimpse of the petite Réage-wannabe Anaïs Nin. The still-glamorous woman of letters Régine Deforges casually mentions that Aury at one time liked to walk the streets of Les Halles dressed as a prostitute. Oh. The literary whore. Asked by Deforges how she would have felt if offered money by a lover, Aury responds quixotically, "I imagine I would have been quite pleased."

Story of O ends with an astonishing apotheosis, where O is displayed at a party in a Renaissance "cloister." She is naked but for a leash attached to the rings piercing her labia. The towering mask of an owl conceals her face, Athena personified. The crowd disperses as she enters; she is a living altar as much in her beautiful nakedness as in the pride that cloaks her. At dawn, she is laid on her back, unleashed, and, in her final triumph, "possessed" by the fortunate few. She is now beyond possession.

Aury, not knowing "how to end it," offers a second ending to O's story. Sir Stephen is going to leave her. Unable to bear the loss, she asks his permission to die. He consents. Declos-Aury-Réage was a woman who sinned with the best of them but with courage more than most. O is something rarely, if ever, seen: a woman's erotic core.

Toni Bentley is the author of *The Surrender: An Erotic Memoir* (Regan Books, 2004).