

READING OBSCENITY

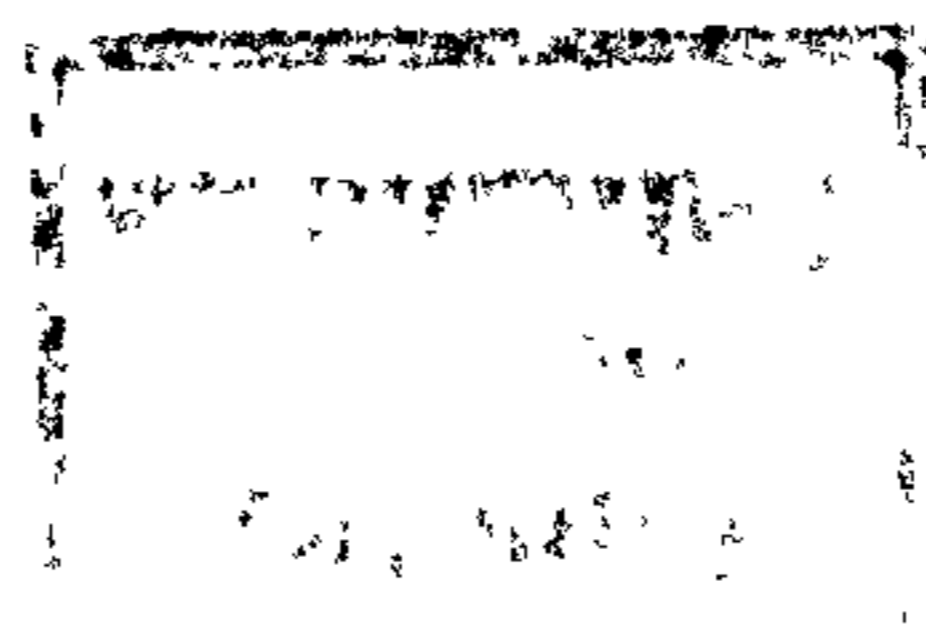
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ABSTRACT

A narrative tradition notorious for its depiction of sex and violence developed (most infamously with the writing of the Marquis de Sade) during the European Enlightenment. Although commonly labelled ‘obscene’, outside its legal definition, exactly what ‘obscenity’ encompasses – its psychology, etymology, social role – is seldom considered in relation to obscene texts. Yet, if we are to talk about obscene books and obscenity it seems that, rather than taking obscenity for granted, it is crucial to ask what *is* the ‘obscene’? Why are these books obscene? To what does ‘obscene’ apply and what reason(s) may explain *why* these books are intentionally obscene? These are questions which this thesis explores. It begins by considering what the obscene is and then uses Freud’s theory of the Uncanny to explain why obscenity evokes complex reactions involving fear, disgust and desire. It then applies these findings to six obscene books in order to explore how the obscene operates on textual and narratorial levels. Finally, it considers how these obscene texts fall into a tradition of Western erotic literature which portrays themes of education, revealing ‘truths’, and the motif of the female figure unveiled as a locus of ‘truth’. It considers how these texts use obscenity as a form of revelation and how this revelation articulates an uncompromising critique of the ‘progress’ of modern civilisation.

To illustrate this argument Chapter One provides an overview of different kinds of obscenity. Chapter Two considers the literary influences on the Marquis de Sade’s *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome ou l’école du libertinage* (1785) and in what ways Sade’s first novel is obscene. Subsequent chapters trace a connection between the obscene themes and motifs of five notorious later texts: Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus im Pelz* (1870), Georges Bataille’s *Histoire de l’oeil* (1928), Pauline Réage’s *Histoire d’O* (1954), J.G. Ballard’s *Crash* (1973) and Dennis Cooper’s *Frisk* (1991).

'Unto the pure all things are pure'
Titus 1:15

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DECLARATION

EXCEPT FOR MATERIAL QUOTED AND ACKNOWLEDGED THIS THESIS IS MY OWN ORIGINAL WORK. MINOR FRAGMENTS OF THE CHAPTER ON DENNIS COOPER ORIGINALLY APPEARED IN MY UNDERGRADUATE DISSERTATION, *TRANSGRESSION IN THE NOVELS OF DENNIS COOPER*. (University of East Anglia, 1997). WITH THIS EXCEPTION, I HEREBY DECLARE THAT THE CONTENTS OF THIS THESIS HAVE NOT PREVIOUSLY BEEN SUBMITTED TO THIS OR ANY OTHER UNIVERSITY FOR A DEGREE.

NOTE ON TEXTS AND TRANSLATIONS

To date, the University of York library is not well equipped for a study of this kind. It has, for example, no editions of Sade's works in French. It has no works on or by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (in German, French, or English), and, with the exception of Bataille, this list could extend to all the authors in this study, whether English or French language. The additional time, expense and effort required to obtain certain texts – especially foreign language texts – has meant that, where secondary texts are concerned, I have largely been limited to using English translations.

As regards the primary texts, if no translator is specified, translations are my own. For the convenience of prospective readers, throughout this study I quote foreign language texts in English. Usually these translations are taken from extant English translations. Where I feel – for reasons of accuracy – that an adjustment to the existing translation is necessary, I make this clear in the text or in a relevant footnote. Where the translation is straightforward or obvious I may not quote the original language passages alongside the English.

Quotations are given in English then, when a primary text is originally published in French or German, the original text is given. Page references contain two numbers divided by an oblique. The first number refers to the English translation. The second is to the original language text. The primary texts, translations and editions referred to in this study are as follows:

Marquis D-A-F de Sade, *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome ou l'école du libertinage, Oeuvres*, vol. 1. (Paris: Gallimard, 1990). English translation: *The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writing* (1966), trans. Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver (London: Arrow, 1989). English translation based on Maurice Heine's three volume translation of *Les cent-vingt journées de Sodome* (1931-35).

Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, *Venus im Pelz*, illus. Fritz Bucholz (Leipzig: Georg H. Wigand'sche Verlagsbuchandlung, 1890). English translation: *Venus in Furs*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, Intro. Larry Wolff (London: Penguin, 2000).

Georges Bataille, *Histoire de l'oeil, Oeuvres complètes: premiers écrits 1922-1940*, vol. 1 (Paris, Gallimard, 1970). English translation: *Story of the Eye*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982). English translation from the 1928 edition of *Histoire de l'oeil*.

Pauline Réage, *Histoire d'O et Retour à Roissy*, (1954/1969), (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1980). English translation: *Story of O* [Unattributed translator] (London: Corgi, 1992). English translation taken from the re-translation commissioned by Olympia Press in 1957.

James G. Ballard, *Crash*, (1973), (London: Vintage, 1995).

Dennis Cooper, *Frisk* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1991).

Introduction:
The Books ‘One Shouldn’t Read’.

WHAT IS THE FIRST THING that comes to mind when you hear the word ‘obscenity’? Something sexual? Rude gestures? Foul language? Porn films? The thought of old people having sex? Obscene amounts of money? Incredibly fat people? One person urinating on another? Dirty books which you shouldn’t read? These are some of the answers I have received over the course of my research. From them emerges some of obscenity’s complexity. We find that obscenity is ambiguous. There is no single obscenity. Obscenity means different things to different people. These observations are accompanied by questions: Are all these elements genuinely obscene? If so, what could possibly bind things as diverse as old people having sex, dirt, fat people, and vast amounts of money? Why is sex – something most of us perform and find pleasurable, something necessary for the continuation of our species – obscene? Clearly, much – sensations, images, words, gestures – can be obscene. In the following pages the various obscenities described above appear in one guise or another but it is obscene literature – the ‘dirty books which you shouldn’t read’ – that provides the frame and focus for my reading of obscenity. Partly, this is a necessary limitation to the scope of this thesis; partly it is because, as Charles Rembar observes, ‘It is in relation to books that obscenity has had its main meaning’.¹ This Introduction sets out the questions proposed and the focus of my investigation, the exact nature of, and reason for, the texts chosen. It sketches the structure of this thesis and considers certain limitations found within existing criticism and its interpretation of obscene literature. The Introduction ends by defining certain central issues within my approach and recognising some of the limitations of my reading of obscenity within the framework of obscene books.

‘Obscene books’ requires some definition. Indeed, the phrase ‘dirty books which you shouldn’t read’ echoes lines from one of Oscar Wilde’s plays. In this scene it is early evening. A light-hearted altercation is underway between two young bachelors. At the centre of the dispute is an inscribed cigarette holder. For fear of what it will reveal about his private life, one of the bachelors (Ernest) doesn’t want the other (Algernon) to read the inscription.

‘It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case’, pleads Ernest.

Dismissively, Algernon replies, ‘It is absurd to have a hard and fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn’t. More than half of modern culture depends on what

¹ Charles Rembar, *The End of Obscenity: The Trials of Lady Chatterley, Tropic of Cancer, and Fanny Hill* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1969), 493.

one shouldn't read.' Algernon reads the inscription. It reveals Ernest's secret (real) identity – Jack – and the previously undisclosed life of passion that Ernest/Jack lives in the countryside.¹

Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), from which the above scene is taken is not one of the texts at the heart of this thesis but the sentiments of Algernon's remark are one of the issues which are. In reading obscenity, I want to examine some of those books 'one shouldn't read'. I don't mean just any or all of the books which have, at various times in history and in various cultures, been deemed 'dirty' and texts one 'shouldn't read'. To consider all the books ever prohibited from early English translations of the Bible, scientific studies, exquisitely written novels to pornography and horror comics, would require an endless study. I mean those books which, if you like, one really, *really*, shouldn't read; the *really* 'dirty' books. To be more precise, books notorious for parading mutilated and sexually violated bodies; narratives more horrific than sensual or romantic in their portrayal of bodies, sex, violence and death; books which marry sex of a 'perverse' nature (anal sex, lesbianism, male homosexuality, coprophagia, bestiality, bondage and discipline) with violence, torture, and death.

For decades in Europe and America books with this content were banned under Obscenity Laws. In some cases obscene texts were regarded as so dangerous that this prohibition existed for over a century: the novels of the Marquis de Sade, for example, became legally acceptable in Britain only in 1983.² As such, the texts in this study must be distinguished from others which portray bodies engaged in sex and which have, at various times, been considered obscene. To begin with, the texts I explore are not obscene in the same way as D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* (1915), James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), or Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) were once considered to be. Books such as these, although once banned for allegedly 'legal' reasons, no longer retain an obscene reputation; they are among the accepted and acceptable texts of our literary heritage.³ In contrast, the books focused on in this study retain an obscene reputation. Consider how, writing within the last few years John Phillips talks of the 'extreme obscenity' of Georges

¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays*, ed. and intro. Richard Allen Cave (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), I. 128-132.

² David Coward, 'Chronology,' *The Misfortunes of Virtue and Other Early Tales* by Marquis de Sade, trans. ed. and intro David Coward (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1992), xlv.

³ At times it is necessary to clarify the distinction between the obscene texts – those which really *really* 'shouldn't be read' – and those that have been called 'obscene' in the past. For this reason, I occasionally refer to the texts which this study concentrates on as 'sexually extreme' or 'sexually violent' rather than simply 'obscene'.

Bataille's writing and refers to Sade's *La philosophie dans le boudoir* (1795) as an 'obscene tragicomedy'.¹ Nicholas Harrison refers to Sade's 'obscene literature'² and Susan Sontag describes Pauline Réage's novel *Histoire d'O* (1954) as 'clearly obscene by the usual standards'.³ Elizabeth Young talks of 'obscenity' in relation to Dennis Cooper's writing⁴ and to give an example from an earlier generation of criticism, Gilles Deleuze talks of Sade's 'obscenity of description'.⁵ But if we are to talk about obscene books and obscenity it seems crucial to ask what *is* this 'obscene'? What does the word mean? Where does it come from? Why are these books obscene? To what does 'obscene' apply and what underlying reason(s) may explain *why* these books are so intentionally and graphically obscene?

According to Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, 'there is little doubt about the meaning of the word [obscene]'.⁶ Certainly 'obscene' is not a word without definitions: law courts have (and had: see Chapter One, 'The Legal Obscene') a legal definition and under 'obscene' my dictionary lists a range of synonyms: 'loathsome', 'disgusting', 'repulsive', 'repellent', 'odious'. Yet, as we will see, the legal definition leaves much to be desired and no matter how many synonyms for 'disgusting' are strung together none fully encompass the meaning of obscene. There is much more to obscenity than disgust and laws. What of the definitions of obscenity given earlier which included fat people, foul language, and vast amounts of wealth? It quickly becomes apparent that all is not quite as certain as Frappier-Mazur's statement about the obscene implies. What does she mean by 'obscene': legal obscenity? Obscene speech? An obscene object, act, text or image?⁷ These are crucial questions to which I will return.

¹ John Phillips, *Forbidden Fictions: Pornography and Censorship in Twentieth-Century French Literature* (London and Stirling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 1999), 9; John Phillips, *Sade: The Libertine Novels* (London and Stirling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 2001), 67.

² Nicholas Harrison, *Circles of Censorship: Censorship and its Metaphors in French History, Literature, Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 26.

³ Susan Sontag, 'The Pornographic Imagination,' *Styles of Radical Will* (London: Vintage, 1994), 40.

⁴ Elizabeth Young, 'Death in Disneyland: The Work of Dennis Cooper,' *Shopping in Space: Essays on America's Blank Generation Fiction*, Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney (New York: Serpent's Tail, 1992), 236.

⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Coldness and Cruelty*, trans. Jean McNeil (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 133.

⁶ Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, 'Truth and the Obscene Word in Eighteenth-Century French Pornography,' *The Invention of Pornography*, ed. Lynn Hunt (New York: Zone Books, 1993), 204.

⁷ Frappier-Mazur herself is one of the most interesting contemporary writers on obscene literature (see Chapter One, 'Obscene Words'). I take her comment only as representative of the widespread idea that obscenity is not a concept that needs explaining.

Today, a significant amount of criticism surrounds obscene books. (For now let's accept my dictionary's definition and read 'repulsive' and 'loathsome'). By 'obscene books' from now on I mean those notorious, sexually violent books which one really 'shouldn't read'. This growing body of criticism indicates that reactions to the obscene contain a twin dynamic. Logically, a 'growing body' is not what one would expect if 'repellent' really, neatly, equated to the obscene. If obscene books were purely 'repulsive' no one would want to read them let alone write about them. Thus, to present the obscene as repulsive is to see only one side of the metaphorical coin.

It could be said that a cultural fascination with obscene books (let's concentrate on literature and exclude other types of obscenity for a moment) initially stemmed from their legal prohibition – and certainly, as Nicholas Harrison has pointed out, prohibition has influenced the reception, reputation, audience, production, and content of obscene literature.¹ After all, it is a commonplace that prohibition indicates (and propagates) fascination. 'Where there is a prohibition there must be an underlying desire' writes Freud.² In this sense, Algernon's statement regarding the absurdity of regulating written material ('It is absurd to have a hard and fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn't') contains an insightful observation. If not absurdity then certainly irony accompanies attempts to control what 'one should read and what one shouldn't'. Is it irony or absurdity that some readers (such as academics) are deemed immune to the evils of 'immoral' literature while others – invariably children, women or lower social classes – are not? Likewise is it ironic or absurd that someone, somewhere, has to read a book in order to decide whether society as a whole should not?³ Furthermore, if Ernest hadn't made such an issue about the cigarette case's inscription, Algernon's curiosity may not have been roused. The temptation to peek behind the fig leaf to see what's *really* there and *why* it is not allowed to be seen is often too strong to resist. This is true of academia as much as of wider culture.

¹ Harrison, *Censorship*, 11-15. I return to this point in Chapter One, 'The Legal Obscene' and 'Obscenity and Society'.

² Sigmund Freud, 'Totem and Taboo,' trans. James Strachey, *The Origins of Religion*, Penguin Freud Library, Vol. 13 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), 127. See Chapter One, 'The Psychology of Obscenity' and 'Obscenity and Society' for further discussion of this point.

³ Cf. Harrison, *Censorship*, 60.

French 'erotic and pornographic fiction',¹ including sexually violent works and works prohibited under obscenity laws, has accumulated a considerable amount of critical attention. Take the work of the Marquis de Sade for instance. His fiction is a keystone in the history of Western obscene literature and probably the best-known example of this kind of literature (for this reason I frequently use Sade as an illustrative example throughout this Introduction). Notoriously violent, sexually 'perverse', banned as obscene, in the twentieth century alone Sade's writing has long been the focus of influential and scholarly studies. The poet Guillaume Apollinaire (in 1909), the writer and critic Jean Paulhan (1946), the philosopher Pierre Klossowski (in 1947), writer and critic Maurice Blanchot (1949), feminist and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (in 1951), the philosopher/critic/writer, Georges Bataille (in 1957) and the hugely influential French surrealists (1922-ca.1960) all published now canonical studies on Sade's obscene novels in the years given.

Sade was not the only French writer of sexually 'perverse', explicit and violent fiction to be taken seriously. In 1954, the sexually violent tale, *Histoire d'O* appeared prefaced with a critical essay by Jean Paulhan. Although officially banned until 1970, this novel, which Sontag calls 'obscene', won a minor French literary prize in 1955 and became an international best-seller.² The verse of nineteenth-century French poet, Charles Baudelaire (1821-67) and the sexually graphic fiction of Jean Genet (1910-86) both of which had been banned in various countries (including for Genet, Britain in the 1950s),³ were the subject of essays by the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (in 1952) and Bataille (in 1957). Bataille himself was a writer of explicitly sexual and violent fiction and his own works proved influential in literary and artistic circles. During the latter half of the twentieth century other eminent French intellectuals continued the serious exploration of obscene texts. Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes produced now canonical studies on the work of Sade, Sacher-Masoch and Bataille. This is not to mention references made by other influential French scholars (including Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva and Jean Baudrillard) who admit the influence on their own work of obscene literature.

This quick sketch of the reception of these obscene texts illustrates that even though many of the books they were writing on were banned, or banned in other countries, by the

¹ I will not attempt, and do not think it necessary for this study, to separate the terms 'erotica' and 'pornography'. Later, I do however, consider certain areas of divergence and convergence between the pornographic and the obscene (see Chapter One, 'The Legal Obscene').

² Phillips, *Forbidden*, 88.

³ Allan Travis, *Bound and Gagged: A Secret History of Obscenity in Britain*. London: Profile Books, 2000), gives more on the banning of obscene books in Britain. Information on the reception of Genet can be found on pages 110-18.

late 1970s, in France ‘what one shouldn’t read’ was treated as a valuable contribution to literature, philosophy, psychology. Through the ‘sciences’ of sociology, psychiatry, pathology, psychoanalysis and medicine the ‘scientific’ importance of obscene literature was evoked as a significant means to understanding culture and humanity.¹ Many more names could be mentioned but the point I wish to make is that by the late 1970s – and since then critical interest in obscene literature has not waned – a large body of criticism had grown up around a relatively select group of obscene texts. Obscene literature, it seemed, influenced some of the most important twentieth-century European cultural criticism and art. Today it is available in every High Street book shop. It is simultaneously celebrated in some quarters as deeply moral (while in others as deeply immoral). Yet *still* these works are called by both their defenders and denigrators ‘obscene’. If not already evident, by what we have seen so far, it is becoming increasingly difficult to accept my dictionary’s definition of ‘obscene’ as something ‘repellent’, in other words, something which drives one away. Perhaps, in France at least, there is more than an element of truth to Algernon’s observation that ‘half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn’t read’.

Turning attention away from France, maybe we can find evidence of obscene literature’s ‘repulsiveness’ – through critical neglect – on this side of the Channel or the other side of the Atlantic. But no. Although it could be argued that obscene literature took longer to receive the serious academic reception earlier established in France (it was little written about pre the 1960s), despite their illegal status in Britain and the United States, works by Sade, Bataille and others have been read here (and ‘there’) for about as long as they have in France. A 1966 piece of American criticism on *Histoire d’O* provides evidence of the dilemmas and anxiety early critics felt about the subject of obscene literature which, although written not so long ago, sounds rather quaint in today’s critical world:

Among the things one has to consider are the degree of embarrassment one need feel when caught by others reading it [*Histoire d’O*], the advisability of putting it physically into the hands of sensitive people ... whether or not to bring it later to the attention of one’s students and of whether or not to write about it, and if so in what way, and the question, too, of how much time it is reasonable to devote to it.²

Despite this critic’s anxiety, it was not long before his British and American colleagues began responding to obscene narratives in a serious way and with less reservations about

¹ Harrison, *Censorship*, 61.

² John Fraser, ‘A Dangerous Book: “The Story of O”,’ *Western Humanities Review* 20 (1966), 52.

how 'reasonable' it was to write about them. Following the French tradition, Susan Sontag's 'The Pornographic Imagination' (1967) was one of the earliest and still influential such works out of America. In it, Sontag argues for the necessity to include obscene texts among the established classics of Europe's literary heritage. Sontag's essay has since been followed by a tide of work on pornographic novels, films, and studies specifically focusing on the violently sexual writing of Sade, Bataille and others. This is not to say that obscene works – unlike, for example, *Ulysses* – have been fully assimilated into Western culture. Resistance remains to admitting obscene books and other representations of obscenity into our literary heritage and culture. As an example, take Roger Shattuck's recent condemnation of Sade's writing as 'the extreme attempt in Western culture to strip away the constraints of civilisation in order to return to barbarism'.¹

It is not my place, or the place of this thesis, to propose what should or shouldn't be studied. In sketching the extent of existing criticism on obscene literature and the fact that there is resistance to reading such texts my purpose is to show the twin dynamic retained at the heart of the obscene (in this case, in academic reactions to obscene literature): there is repulsion *and* fascination; those who condemn it and those that defend it. My second point is that, although it is a commonplace among academics to bemoan how much obscene texts are 'neglected' (for example, John Phillips opens his study, *Forbidden Fictions: Pornography and Censorship in Twentieth-Century French Literature*, with talk of 'the long neglected field of [French] erotic and pornographic fiction'),² evidence suggests that obscene texts have not been all that 'neglected'. Obscene books have never been out of print. They have gathered over one hundred years of serious critical comment and for centuries they have been at the centre of scandal, prohibition and legal cases which, outside academia, guaranteed obscene literature's place in the consciousness of culture. Thus, however it is viewed (condemned or celebrated) obscene literature – and, is it too soon to suggest that obscenity in wider terms? – has long constituted an influential vein in Western literature, academia, and 'culture'.

Strangely, despite the oft-used adjective 'obscene', the crucial role which obscenity has played in setting obscene books apart from other texts, in giving them a group identity, and even arousing reader curiosity, works on obscene fiction seldom consider or explore what they and others mean by 'obscene'. Not only has the meaning of the word 'obscene'

¹ Roger Shattuck, *Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 282. My own experiences include academic disapproval and discomfort at my chosen subject.

² Phillips, *Forbidden*, 1. Phillips goes on to describe how much *has* been written on this field and, to be fair, many of the books his study considers *are* examples of critically neglected French erotica.

and the operation of obscenity often been overlooked, but until recently academic studies often avoided detailed comment on the obscene content of obscene books. As recently as 1996, Frappier-Mazur noted that ‘most [writers on Sade] have been content to deplore, or even ignore this especially troubling aspect [i.e. its obscene content] of his work’.¹ Often, the obscene has been sidelined as unnecessary for deeper understandings of the texts. Consider Gilbert Lély, one of Sade’s earliest biographers, who thought Sade’s repeated portrayal of coprophagia a ‘disgusting practice ... the *quite unnecessary* superimposition of the ugliest departure from normality’.² Michel Foucault’s references to Sade and Bataille are others which contain little mention of the extreme sexual violence – one of the most immediate components of their texts’ obscenity – of either writers’ work. De Beauvoir, Apollinaire and other now canonical writers on Sade’s obscene texts also largely ignore the obscene content of his novels. For all their good intentions these, and other writers who defended obscene literature as a valuable topic of study, seemed willing to accept – or perhaps more accurately felt constrained to write about – only certain parts of it.

If and when written about, one aspect of their obscenity – the sexual violence of these texts – was (and sometimes still is) interpreted through psychoanalytic theory.³ As a tool for rationally understanding violent, sexual drives and ‘perversion’, the psychoanalytic approach is an understandable one to use. Perhaps for this reason it is often the favoured perspective from which to view obscene texts: Gilles Deleuze used it to read Sacher-Masoch and Sade; John Phillips for works by Sade and Bataille’s *Histoire de l’oeil*; Kaja Silverman for *Histoire d’O*; Elizabeth Young for work by Dennis Cooper. . . This list could go on. Yet, despite its popularity as a tool for interpreting all manner of texts, it is important to note that the psychoanalysis of sexual development is limited in terms of the conclusions it provides – especially in relation to obscenity itself.

In relation to obscene literature, psychoanalysis provides a way of writing about human violence and sexual behaviour but in a way which can simultaneously disinfect this type of obscenity – violated bodies, sexual organs and acts – through a process of abstraction. Thus, the psychoanalytic readings by Deleuze and Silverman do not contain detailed exploration of obscene fiction’s representational content and turns graphic, often

¹ Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, *Writing the Orgy: Power and Parody in Sade*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 11.

² Gilbert Lély, *The Marquis de Sade: A Biography*, trans. Alec Brown (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 307. (My emphasis).

³ John Phillips for example spends many pages citing examples of the sexual ‘perversions’ depicted in Sade’s novels relating each to Freud’s theories of sexual development – especially the anal stage. Phillips, *Sade*, 135-146. See Chapter Two where I return to this issue.

horrific sex and violence, into far-less bloody Oedipal dramas. (We can add that, in terms of obscenity, this type of psychoanalysis is not concerned with obscene language or others aspects of obscenity, such as its legal or moral levels).¹ Deleuze's *Le froid et le cruel* (*Coldness and Cruelty*, 1967), provides one example. Deleuze takes the books of Sade and Sacher-Masoch as insightful case studies into (respectively) sadism and masochism. He presents these stories of pain and punishment, sex and death, as set performances which act out the roles of oral mothers, Oedipal fathers, castration anxiety, maternal phalluses, fetishism and latent homosexuality. He suggests *why* Sacher-Masoch's male characters wish to suffer pain at the hands of women and concludes that 'masochism is a story that relates how the superego was destroyed'.² The male masochist 'in opposition to the institutional superego ... establishes the contractual partnership between the ego and the oral mother ... [and] the reflection of the ego in and through death produces the ideal ego'.³ Similarly, Sade's stories tell of how the ego 'is beaten and expelled, how the unrestrained superego assumes an exclusive role, modelled on an inflated conception of the father's role – the mother and the ego becoming its choice victims'.⁴ There *are* correlations in this reading between its psychoanalytic interpretation and the operation of obscenity: the obscene is associated (as will be seen) with death and with the atavistic, primitive and pre-social – all of which are echoed in the 'death' Deleuze mentions and the 'oral mother'. Yet, castration never occurs in the castration complex; actual physical wounding never has to be described. Although he acknowledges that they are obscene (but does not explain what he means by that term),⁵ nowhere in Deleuze's study does he quote any sexually graphic and/or violent – obscene – passages from Sade. There is no blood, no excreta, and, in contrast to Sade's books, there is relatively little obscenity involved in talking about the Oedipus complex. Via the psychoanalysis of sexual development, viscera become abstract – and this is a significant omission in terms of the obscene because an important part of the obscene (as will become evident) is the *material* reality – the physical, low, exactly *not* abstract – which it encompasses and presents. The narratives' obscene language, artistic intention and

¹ Deleuze, *Coldness*, 15-23. In his chapter on 'the language of Sade and Sacher-Masoch' Deleuze never once describes the exact nature of the obscene words which Sade uses.

² Deleuze, *Coldness*, 130.

³ Deleuze, *Coldness*, 130-31.

⁴ Deleuze, *Coldness*, 131.

⁵ Deleuze, *Coldness*, 17 and 25 for example.

relation to contemporary artistic fashions, purpose, style, and specific social-historical context is reduced (or limited) to a handful of wishes and repressed desires.

My purpose here is not to poke holes in Deleuze's exemplary work. His purpose never was to explore obscenity. I use his study merely to illustrate certain limitations to using that particular psychoanalytic approach to read obscenity. When it comes to interpreting obscene literature the psychoanalytic theory of psycho-sexual development (the theory of castration anxiety, anal and oral stages etc.) is limited in other ways too. Firstly, although today most scholars recognise that pornography is *not* (as Steven Marcus wrote in the 1960s), 'nothing more than a representation of the fantasies of infantile sexual life, as these fantasies are edited and reorganised in the masturbatory daydreams of adolescence',¹ to use the psychoanalysis of sexual development is to interpret texts precisely *as* centred around 'infantile sexual life' and 'fantasies'. Secondly, other problems of interpretation in reading a fictional text as a psychological case study lie in the fact that psychoanalysis is 'the talking cure'. Its accurate method of diagnosis depends on analysands participating in their analysis to answer questions, explain associations and give details. There can be no such participation in the psychoanalytic criticism of a text. Instead, images, details and comments within the text are taken as fixed values. How is it possible to analyse a character who is merely marks on paper and who can't answer searching questions? How can it be accurate to use a method of analysis which interprets dreams and fantasies to analyse a text which relates neither its author's dreams nor fantasies?² It could be said that psychoanalysis is capable of reaching unconscious drives and 'truths' through interpreting language/words alone and that words can be written, they don't have to be spoken. Yet, as Harrison has pointed out, this approach is fraught with contradictions: the unconscious is *always* inaccessible whether through language or not and language itself is an entirely social, not personal, method of communication – a fact which renders the insight it provides into *individual* (or an individual's) 'truth's' immediately suspect.³ Finally, although he frequently ignored his own modest admissions, even the 'father' of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, states on several occasions that psychoanalysis is not an adequate tool for

¹ Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), 286.

² See for further comment on the limitations of reading fiction through psychoanalysis, T.E. Apter, *Fantasy Literature: An Approach to Reality* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 7-9 and 130-151 and Lucie Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic* (London et al.: Arnold, 1996), 40. Fredric Jameson, 'On Interpretation: Literature as a Socially Symbolic Act,' *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), 62-67 points out the tension in Freud's theory between seeing it as a historically specific formation and the metapsychological, universal struggles of which it speaks.

³ Harrison, *Censorship*, 147-8.

divining the intentions of creative artists. 'Before the problem of the creative artist,' he wrote in 1927, 'analysis must, alas, lay down its arms'.¹ All this, of course, is not to say that psychoanalysis *cannot* be a useful interpretative tool in exploring the obscene. Often it has been used to good effect. Personally however (and partly *because* it has been used so frequently as well as its limitations) I avoid the psychoanalysis of individual psycho-sexual development and the view that these texts are about 'nothing more than' 'infantile sexual life'. I say this because no matter what other conclusions it can reach, for me the psychoanalysis of sexual development and 'perversion' is not an adequate tool for exploring obscenity and explaining *why* the portrayal of certain acts is obscene.

The theories of psycho-sexual development are, however, only one form of interpretation which psychoanalysis offers. Furthermore, when it comes to considering how obscenity operates and how it evokes the deep-seated emotional responses which it does, a method of understanding the human mind is more or less indispensable. Necessarily therefore, psychoanalysis provides this tool. Yet, when we come to consider the psychology of obscenity (see Chapter One, 'The Psychology of Obscenity'), it emerges that it is less Freud's theory of infantile sexual development which aids our understanding, than his theories of metapsychology and social anthropology as presented in the essays 'Totem und Tabu' ('Totem and Taboo,' 1913), 'Die "Unheimliche"' ('The "Uncanny"', 1919), 'Jenseits des Lustprinzips' ('Beyond the Pleasure Principle,' 1920) and 'Das Unbehagen in der Kultur' (translated as 'Civilisation and its Discontents,' 1929). Consequently, it is this aspect of psychoanalysis which I have chosen as the theoretical framework for this study (the reasons for doing so are discussed in more detail in Chapter One).

I began this explanation of my choice of interpretative tool by noting the relative absence within critical interpretations of the obscenity in obscene books. It is this relative absence that I wish to return to.

Unless it was from those, like feminists such as Andrea Dworkin, who regarded the graphic description of sexual and sexually violent (let us say for now that these descriptions alone comprise the 'obscene' content of these texts) as good reason for their censorship, until the 1970s the obscene content of obscene literature was seldom spoken about in an academic context. Exceptions of course were when it appeared veiled by philosophical or psychoanalytic theory. Indeed, it is partly due to the damning attention which radical feminists heaped on these episodes that academic interest shifted towards them. Changing

¹ Sigmund Freud, 'Dostoevsky and Parricide,' *Art and Literature*, trans. James Strachey, Penguin Freud Library, vol.14 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), 441.

ideas of what is permissible to study and a changing legal attitude to the relationship between art and the obscene (see Chapter One, 'The Legal Obscene') have also meant that obscene literature's obscenity is no longer the unspoken it once was. Critics today, unlike, for example, the writer on *Histoire d'O* mentioned earlier, rarely feel quite so constrained regarding whether they should write about obscene texts. As one contemporary writer on obscene cinema notes, 'obscenity and pornography proper – defined legally in the mid-1960s as near-worthless forms of explicit sexual representation – ... [have become] increasingly respectable objects of study'.¹ Despite this increasing respectability and their continued use of the terms 'obscene' and 'obscenity' (to add more examples to those already given, we can find references to French pornography as combining 'obscenity with slander',² talk of 'representations of the obscene'³ and Sade's 'systematic obscenity'),⁴ *still* the general consensus seems to be that many writers concur with Frappier-Mazur and accept that the 'obscene' is a given. We all know what obscenity is, so why bother to define or explore it? On the other hand, the role played in obscene literature by obscenity itself and how this literature operates on an obscene level often remains overlooked. Although, for a few decades now, scholars have felt able to explore representations of the body, its gender and sexualities, this discipline has frequently exhibited a tendency to gloss the more obscene depictions of dirty physicality. The body as an excreting, decaying, fragile and bloodied form is not The Body which many scholars write about. As Jonathan Dollimore has observed, this tendency suggests not only evasion, but also the lingering presence within the supposedly 'liberal' humanities and today's 'permissive' societies, of an aversion towards the 'real' physical, sexual body.⁵ This is the body we find in obscene literature.

Naturally, I am talking of a majority, not all. Definitions of the obscene are not wholly absent from writing on obscene literature – Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, Marcel Hénaff, Peter Michelson, Patrick Ffrench, Lucienne Frappier-Mazur and John Phillips provide insights into the 'meaning' and operation of the obscene in obscene literature – but

¹ Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"*, 1999 ed (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1999), 90.

² Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York and London, W.W. Norton, 1996), 86.

³ Lynn Hunt, 'Introduction: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800,' *The Invention of Pornography*, ed. Lynn Hunt (New York: Zone Books, 1996), 12.

⁴ Peter Cryle, *Geometry in the Boudoir: Configurations of French Erotic Narrative* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 261.

⁵ Jonathan Dollimore, *Sex, Literature and Censorship* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 48-54.

even here the tendency is sometimes to follow earlier precedent and to interpret sexually violent acts in terms of the psychoanalytic theory of sexual development. Pointing out this lack is not meant as pedantic criticism; often the arguments proposed by these writers do not require detailed consideration of the nature of the obscene. For many of them the obscene is not the principle focus of their argument. They may talk about obscenity's history, the role of obscene language and repeat the oft-cited legal definition of 'obscenity' as that which 'depraves and corrupts' (see Chapter One, 'The Legal Obscene') but they do so as a stepping-stone on their way to exploring something else. Some of these writers, however (Hénaff, Michelson, and Frappier-Mazur most notably) do what others do not: explore – *really* explore – a fascinating and complex topic: the obscene *in terms of the role of obscenity in obscene literature*. Even in two of these cases, however, the exploration is largely in terms of obscene language. Obscenity is more than language, more than the printed word.

Although not in terms of the obscene texts which are at the heart of this study, writers in other fields and contexts have provided explorations of different facets of the obscene. Such discussions can be found in anthropology, psychology, sociology and law. Gathering these different obscenities together this study aims to explore the obscenity of obscene literature and address some often unanswered questions – What does the word mean? Where does it come from? To what does it apply? How does it operate? Exactly in what way(s) are obscene books obscene? – in a way which has not been done in relation to the books you 'shouldn't read'.

By gathering in one place some of the conclusions and definitions which have been made about obscenity and obscene literature with the associations the obscene has collected, I seek a network of common themes which bind Western attitudes towards obscenity and underlie the operation of the obscene – in terms of the style, language, content, and description of obscene literature. Despite its negative connotations, therefore, we will see that obscenity is more than an equivalent to disgust. It (indeed, like disgust) has a role, purpose, value. It need not be viewed negatively. As Dollimore asserts, disgust – with which we can (for now) associate 'obscenity' – is an effective means of 'satirical [social] critique and political opposition'.¹ Besides social critique we will see that obscenity also has value as a force that defines society. Ever since the eighteenth century, obscene books have been equated with enlightenment and 'truth'. Obscenity is an instinctual, probably universal human emotion and in the literature of the obscene this universal force joins culturally and

¹ Dollimore, *Sex, Literature and Censorship*, 47.

historically specific influences and concerns which use obscenity as a morbid revelation of a destructive urge within mankind and 'civilisation'.

Talking about the obscene in this way anticipates the overview of obscenity which occurs in Chapter One. There, I discuss the associations, themes, and elements of the obscene. On the one hand this provides a fuller understanding of what is meant by 'obscene' and its different facets which allows us to consider how the obscene operates, in other words, what gives it its power on psychological and social levels. On the other hand this exploration is crucial in providing a foundation upon which to analyse obscenity in six notorious obscene books.

Chapters Two to Seven follow a historical trajectory and explore what the obscene means in six examples of obscene literature. Broadly speaking each chapter considers an individual obscene text from late eighteenth-century France to the late twentieth-century United States. In considering six obscene narratives in six separate chapters, ranging over two hundred years of writing and four different countries, this study seeks to explore the obscene in relation to obscene literature. It does so in a way which criticism focusing on writing from only one culture, writer, or narrative – or even two – cannot achieve. In doing so it introduces not just some of the most infamous works of obscene French literature but also indicates that, either today and/or in its past, every culture has its own body of obscene writing. Although sexually explicit French novels have the alleged distinction of being 'dirtier' and more obscene than those of other countries (some suggest they are bloodier due to France's disruptive history),¹ without dismissing the reputation of France's obscene tradition, I introduce a few notorious narratives written by non-French writers. Thus, in recognition of the seminal status of what Sontag dubs the obscene 'French literary canon',² I include three of the best-known obscene French novels: Marquis de Sade's *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome ou l'école de libertinage* (*The One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom or the School of Libertinage*, 1785, but not reliably published until 1931-35), Georges Bataille's *Histoire de l'oeil* (*Story of the Eye*, 1928) and Pauline Réage's *Histoire d'O* (*Story of O*, 1954). The books by non-French writers (one Austrian, one British and one American) are Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus im Pelz* (*Venus in Furs*, 1870), J.G. Ballard's *Crash* (1973) and Dennis Cooper's *Frisk* (1991).

¹ Peter Michelson, *Speaking the Unspeakable: A Poetics of Obscenity* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 16. Michelson's study anticipates and has a far wider scope than my own. That said, it focuses less rigorously on what the obscene actually involves and is not limited to modern obscene literature. It presents obscenity as a form of 'poetics' and as that which is 'off the stage' – there are, however, other forms of the obscene.

² Sontag, 'Pornographic Imagination', 58.

Following recent critics (such as Peter Cryle, Annie Le Brun, Jean Goulemot and David Coward have recently done in relation to Sade), one thread of my argument is concerned with how the obscene content of these texts is produced from, and determined by, its cultural context. Through examining obscene literature we will find ourselves tracing issues which are not only in some way human universals but in others intimately related to the culture, time and the political and aesthetic environment from which each text emerges. In this way I explore how these books *use* obscenity for, as Robert Stoller notes, obscenity is not a passive 'object'. It has purpose and evokes a powerful kinetic response of attraction and/or repulsion. In terms of forbidden literature, for Stoller, obscenity constitutes 'a planned assault on an audience. It is exhibition, theater [which] works only when both sides know the rules'.¹ In its various forms therefore, I consider how obscenity is 'a planned assault' on the beliefs of culture and challenges the 'reality' and 'truths' that provide the foundations of modern European and Anglo-American civilisation. As 'exhibition, theater' we will see within these texts and within the operation of the obscene, that themes of sight, vision and unveiling – especially and recurrently in the literal and metaphorical form of the naked female figure – emerge as particularly central to these books.

Locating the visual as a central theme leads me to trace, at times, the relationship between the obscene narrative (many of which were illustrated) and visual art from the same time and culture. Thus, from Francisco de Goya, through the salons of nineteenth-century France, the early cinema and photography of Eadweard Muybridge, the surrealists and, finally, the AIDS-influenced art of David Wojnarowicz in 1980s North America, another strand of my argument considers parallels between artistic fashions and themes of the culture from which each book emerged and the motifs of these obscene books. There is a precedent to this approach. Bram Dijkstra's *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (1986) considers Sacher-Masoch's *Venus im Pelz* in terms of nineteenth-century artistic depictions of women. Rosalind Krauss's *The Optical Unconscious* locates Bataille's *Histoire de l'oeil* in the context of surrealism and Patrick Ffrench's *The Cut/Reading Bataille's "Histoire de l'oeil"* (1999) also considers Bataille's first novel in relation to the artistic milieu of surrealism and cubism and traces influences back to Manet and Goya's bullfight images. Similarly, Roger Luckhurst's *"The Angle Between Two Walls": The Fiction of J. G. Ballard* (1997) relates Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) to the themes of surrealism, especially Hans Bellmer's *Doll*.

¹ Robert Stoller, *Observing the Erotic Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1985), 90.

There are, of course, other ways in which this thesis has been anticipated and is indebted to existing studies. Although there is frequently a tendency in it to rely on Freud's theory of sexual development as the a central means of interpretation, recent writing on the subject (as opposed to most canonical secondary material) has begun to explore obscene literature's obscenity – the bodies, violence, and sex at the heart of these texts. The work of Frappier-Mazur, Peter Cryle, Peter Michelson, Robert Darnton, Nicholas Harrison, Jean Goulemot, John Phillips, Annie le Brun, Marcel Hénaff, and Caroline Warman (all written during and since the 1990s) has, in one way or another, explored the role of eighteenth-century French obscene literature – and, inevitably, the work of Sade – as a form of social critique. In some instances they explore how obscene words and obscene descriptions are crucial in this process. Chapter Two pieces together the findings of these critics which are relevant to reading the obscenity of Sade's first novel. It examines some of the roots of Sade's fiction particularly in relation to popular political satires of a lewd and sometimes fantastic nature and a plethora of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French erotica. If we see Sade as the first writer of obscene literature (obscene, that is, in the 'modern' sense and the terms I have already outlined: Aretino, Boccaccio, Ovid and Catallus were all literary forbears), we see that, along with Sade's work itself, the influences from which his work emerges provide the roots for later French obscene books, such as those by Octave Mirbeau, Georges Bataille, Jean Genet and Pauline Réage.¹

Besides exploring the origins of Sade's writing, in many ways Chapter Two introduces the method used in the chapters that follow. It focuses on the Marquis de Sade's first novel, *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*, a novel which, as Phillips notes, 'has arguably had more impact than any of Sade's other writings'.² Using obscenity – words and descriptions – in a way familiar to many of his contemporaries, Sade presented a political critique on his time. Thus, I consider how obscenity is presented and how it operates in Sade's first novel as a tool for unveiling darker, disavowed undercurrents to the 'civilised' progress of his time. This is not a theme unique to Sade. As we will see, Western society has a long-established history of regarding sexuality (frequently figured as the unveiling of the hidden or secret parts of the female sex), as something 'truer' beneath the mask or veil of social conventions (see Chapter One, 'The Psychology of Obscenity' and 'Obscenity and Society').

¹ Michelson, *Unspeakable*, 4, sees Sade as 'the first to synthesize the components of obscene poetics'. Michelson also sketches a 'lineage' which runs from Sade 'through Baudelaire ... the Surrealists to Bataille, Pauline Réage, and Genet' (11).

² Phillips, *Sade*, 61.

Although introduced in relation to the obscenity of Sade's first novel, the theme of unveiling a darker side to culture resonates through all the obscene books in this study. Chapter Three, therefore, continues this process by exploring how themes of vision and revelation are used in Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus im Pelz*.

I chose Sacher-Masoch's work from a large quantity of sexually explicit and often flagellatory French and English nineteenth-century writings, many of which are much more sexually explicit than *Venus im Pelz*. In fact, *lack* of graphic sexual description and obscene language is one reason why I chose Sacher-Masoch's novella for although (today) notorious as a portrayal of 'masochism', the obscene within *Venus im Pelz* is of a different register to that one might expect from obscene literature. Consequently, one purpose of Chapter Three is to locate and explore the exact nature of the novella's obscenity. It does this by considering the story's link to Freud's uncanny. In addition, commonly conflated with and compared to Sade's obscene books, part of Chapter Three takes Deleuze's *Coldness and Cruelty* as its model and compares the themes and motifs of Sade's *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* with *Venus im Pelz*. I test for shared intentions and following recent assertions made by writers such as Anne McClintock and Suzanne Stewart, note that, just as Sade's obscene narrative emerges from the French Enlightenment, so Sacher-Masoch's classic 'masochistic' tale reveals similarities to nineteenth-century Imperial fears and desires which were often articulated in nineteenth-century art and depictions of female sexuality. I show how *Venus im Pelz*'s obscenity emphasises issues that were common in art and how it places these themes into a far older Western tradition of valorising suffering and death. Although I build a comparison between the work of Sade and Sacher-Masoch which confirms significant differences, many of these differences stem from their origins in quite different cultures. Unlike Deleuze therefore, I focus on the texts' shared motifs – not least how they employ themes and motifs which coincide with what Freud termed the 'uncanny'.

Chapter Four focuses on the first of four twentieth-century texts: Georges Bataille's infamous *Histoire de l'oeil*. *Histoire de l'oeil* provides an opportunity to explore the most prominent themes linked to the operation and depiction of the obscene that emerge in the earlier texts. Comparing Bataille's novel to Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's surrealist film, *Un chien andalou* (*Andalusian Dog*, 1929), we find Bataille's novel leading us into a virtuoso display of the themes of sight, revelation, and the obscene. Secondly, following the work of Patrick Ffrench, Rosalind Krauss and Denis Hollier, I use *Histoire de l'oeil* as an opportunity to locate this novella's obscenity within Bataille's wider theoretical oeuvre as well as to consider the role which obscenity plays within that larger oeuvre. Once again we find parallels between Bataille's theories of obscenity and his contemporary, Sigmund

Freud. Both men depict obscenity's convergence with a potent cultural and individual fascination with, and inexorable sinking towards death.

Pauline Réage's best-selling *Histoire d'O* is the focus of Chapter Five. It provides an opportunity to explore a novel written by a female author. Continuing issues raised in earlier chapters, I consider how the body of the novel's central female protagonist is a figure who emerges from a long tradition of conflating the female and female sexuality with mysterious knowledge and hidden 'truths'. Comparing *Histoire d'O* to earlier texts as well as war-time and post-war surrealist art, I suggest that Réage's novel uses the cultural significance of the 'opened' woman and its relationship with 'truth' to portray a self-destructive urge at the heart of post-Second World War Europe.

The last two chapters illustrate how a notoriously French mode of writing has been adopted by the English-speaking world. Chapter Six considers *Crash* a novel by the English writer, J. G. Ballard. I explore *Crash* as a late twentieth-century re-articulation of older themes set within an urban, 1970s world of consumerism, capitalism, cars, and advertising. As contemporary as the novel's setting is, I explore how the book's central themes – the inscription of bodies, a search for truth in death, 'opening' bodies, and a death-drive – are anticipated in earlier obscene texts. Influenced by surrealism, and exhibiting parallels to the work of Freud and Bataille, I use Ballard's later novel *Empire of the Sun* (1984) to illustrate that although *Crash* differs in some respects from earlier obscene books, it remains thematically bound to them by using obscenity to portray regression and destruction within 'civilised' 'progress'.

Finally, *Frisk* by the gay, American author, Dennis Cooper, provides a late twentieth-century coda to the previous chapters. Cooper's novel offers a retrospective on the themes that have threaded their way through two hundred years of obscene literature. In *Frisk*, motifs and themes of revelation and unveiling combine in an elaborate literary feint. Whereas earlier obscene books open bodies and, with them the face of culture to locate dark 'truths' disavowed by the dominant social order, in Cooper's works, bodies are opened, but there is no 'truth'. In *Histoire d'O* and *Crash* a central motif emerges as the literal inscription of bodies but in *Frisk* even the gruesome physicality of the human body becomes only story. Inscribed bodies become, literally, text. Beneath the novel's satirical humour, a sense of futility prevails. I suggest this atmosphere reflects the demystification of the body and death rendered by the AIDS pandemic (and represented in the writing of the gay artist and writer, David Wojnarowicz). Even then, it becomes clear, that *Frisk* owes much to its obscene literary forbears and that it too intends to use the obscene to 'reveal' decay inherent within Anglo-American 'civilisation'.

Together these narratives illustrate some of the diversity within obscene literature. Through them this study traces themes, motifs and intentions that give this corpus of work a certain homogeneity. It contributes to existing understandings of obscenity as a powerful force and to readings of these narratives. It identifies themes that emerge in obscene texts which consequently evolve. Most importantly, perhaps, this study emphasises that at the core of these texts lies obscenity and that to understand this obscenity – or rather, these ‘obscenities’ – provides a key to understanding the cultural critique which lies at their heart.

Before continuing, having pointed out what this study sets out to do and, broadly speaking, how it intends to do it, it is important to detail what it does not do and to clarify certain problematic issues, certain tensions embedded in my approach and other limitations to this study. Firstly, some issues which require clarification.

Indebted to a large existing body of criticism, *Reading Obscenity* is original in certain respects, but, like all studies, it has limits. By focusing on ‘obscenity’ I do not set out to make obscene literature ‘easy’ to read. Nevertheless, an unintended side-effect of repeatedly exploring descriptions of violence and sex may be a leaching of their immediate power through over-exposure. I hope this has not happened. I hope to use obscenity as a starting point, analysing it, exploring it, and ultimately using it as the foundation for my conclusions. Doing so, I hope to show the obscene passages of these texts to be more central to an understanding of these books than is sometimes recognised. On another note, an exploration of particular texts automatically emphasises a group identity. However, we should not forget that the obscene defies conventional boundaries and definitions (a point which will become clear in the following chapters). Consequently, to contain these texts within a conceptual cage would perhaps be counterproductive. Although I have come to think of them as an (at times explicitly) interconnected group, I am wary of claims that an urge to define a literary genre underlies this study. There is, undoubtedly, homogeneity between these texts but any finite definition of ‘obscene literature’ as opposed to ‘pornography’ may ultimately prove flawed firstly because of the boundary-defying nature of the obscene and secondly because as long as modern culture exists, so obscene texts will continue to be written and to evolve.

A term which occurs at times in my interpretation and which may require some clarification is ‘disavowal’. Psychoanalysis has its own definition but by ‘disavowal’ I mean a less specialist but not unrelated concept.¹ Interpreting the obscenity of these texts leads me

¹ See Deleuze, *Coldness*, 31 for a discussion of ‘disavowal’ in relation to Freud’s theory of fetishism.

to suggest that their obscenity presents a critique of, or challenge to, civilisation's (or, more accurately to use Althusser's term's, 'the State's') ideology of morality and progress (see below for clarification of 'State' and 'ideology'). Disavowal refers to denying knowledge of, connection with, or responsibility for facts or (in Jonathan Dollimore's words) a kind of 'material reality'.¹ In relation to obscenity, following chapters will consider how the idea of a disavowed 'material reality' occurs on two levels. Firstly, obscene literature confronts us with our 'material reality' (our physicality, animality, and mortality) which, as we will see, (Chapter One, 'The Psychology of Obscenity') Freud observes is something mankind prefers to deny – disavow – knowledge of. Another form of 'material reality' occurs on the level already mentioned: as a challenge to ideologies of the State. Thus, the basic tenet of modern culture/civilisation, and what underlies its ideologies, is that it is good, opposed to barbarity, dedicated to progress, cultured pursuits, perpetual betterment of itself for itself and its citizens. A different perspective – one offered by, among other sources, the obscene texts in this thesis – presents modern culture/civilisation as glorified barbarity: destructive, hypocritical, driven by greed, lust and violence. Although daily evidence of war, cruelty, murder (etc.) supports this latter view, the ideological apparatuses which direct Western culture/civilisation do not admit this 'material reality'. They disavow it. Destructive urges (for example) are the result of various 'others'; not of itself. To avow this 'material reality' however, would, of course, be to destroy the fundamental justification for its (the State's, and, as the State is the controlling and perpetuating body of modern civilisation, civilisation's) existence. Simply speaking, this is the nature of the disavowed – and the definition of the word: a threatening fact, alternative perspective, almost a kind of open but unspoken secret, which is not admitted – referred to at times in the following chapters.

Another problematic issue which requires further comment: as I have already mentioned, where obscene books and their censorship or prohibition is concerned, 'truth' is a recurrent concept. It is a concept to which I refer – in inverted commas where appropriate – in the chapters which follow. Multiple reasons exist for the association between the prohibited (including obscene texts) and some kind of hidden 'truth' or knowledge. This association stretches far back in time (recall Adam, Eve and the Forbidden Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge). Perhaps the most recent articulation of this association between the prohibited and 'truth' returns us, as Harrison points out, to the tenet underlying psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis, what Fredric Jameson calls 'the most influential and

¹ Dollimore, *Sex, Literature, Censorship*, 64. Also see this reference for more on disavowal in relation to the work of Georges Bataille.

elaborate interpretative system of recent times',¹ locates and interprets 'truths' by seeking out what is unspoken or censored within or beneath the spoken. It presupposes 'a latent meaning behind a manifest one'.² We have already seen how psychoanalysis is commonly used to view obscene literature (commonly in terms of interpreting the sexual 'perversions' described there). Harrison adds that, in terms of relying on, and perpetuating a link between 'truth' and the prohibited, psychoanalysis 'aims to uncover that which has been censored, and the idea that that which is censored is more important, more *fundamental*, than the social conventions which marginalise, distort, and hide it, is both a starting hypothesis and a conclusion of this process'.³ As Harrison notes, because of their prohibited and/or censored status, just as psychoanalysis does with repressed drives, desires and memories, obscene texts are rendered not only more interesting than the non-prohibited but also more important and somehow more 'truthful'. Through prohibition their content becomes 'the reality of all reality, the fundamental reality which the artifices of superficial, social reality disguise'.⁴ This unveiled 'reality' can be equated to the 'material reality' mentioned by Dollimore (above). In terms of obscene literature, this material reality behind 'reality', often appears as a kind of literalised metaphor in the unveiling of man's material, physical – obscene – body. Aware of the effects of prohibition and the fascination with the prohibited – a fascination which no doubt circles back to the idea that the prohibited hides some kind of secret knowledge – writers of prohibited books sometimes actively present their works' content *as* 'truth': a message from beneath the illusory facades of society (we will see examples of this in the chapters which follow). Yet, despite this long-embedded association, as Harrison observes, 'censorship has no inherent relationship to truth'.⁵ Quoting the final words of Sade's novel, *Juliette*, Harrison concludes, 'the trajectory of *tout dire* [saying everything] does not necessarily carry one towards the domain of truth'.⁶ Despite Harrison's insightful and pragmatic observations the equation of the censored, the prohibited, the obscene and obscene literature with 'truth', a more 'real' reality, and forbidden, secret knowledge, endures. Consequently – in terms of obscene literature and the operation of the obscene, I retain the word 'truth' to convey how these books and the prohibited are commonly viewed

¹ Jameson, 'On Interpretation', 61.

² Jameson, 'On Interpretation', 60.

³ Harrison, *Censorship*, 210 (Harrison's emphasis).

⁴ Harrison, *Censorship*, 86.

⁵ Harrison, *Censorship*, 214.

⁶ Harrison, *Censorship*, 218.

and to convey the powerful attraction which any idea of 'truth' has for man. I am aware, however, of how any notion of 'truth' is, in terms of obscene literature, a problematic term. Not only do different individuals, cultures and times read and understand them differently (and have different ideas of 'truth') but, as Harrison notes, there is no inherent link between the forbidden/obscene (including literature) and 'truth' of any kind. Thus, if I did not wish to retain some of the power of 'truth' the concept could perhaps be better understood as simply 'what these books reveal' or 'their vision' without attributing to obscene revelation or unveiling any connotations of monolithic or universal authenticity.

Another tension exists in this thesis. Perhaps it is already evident that, on the one hand, I talk about Western culture as if it is a constant force. In itself, although common currency in all manner of criticism, the 'West' is a limiting and misleading term. This is a limitation of which I am fully aware. Western culture implies a monolithic, dominant, independent cultural presence. This is an artificial implication and a misleading belief. America is not Europe, Australia is not America, Britain is not Germany, and the West, either in its past or current state, cannot be regarded as ever being independent from other cultural influences, whether the East, the South, or the North. Indeed, without the East, the South or the North, there would be no West. At times therefore I refer less lazily to European culture, Anglo-American society, or Euro-America. This, however, does not dispel the tension which underpins this study's notion of culture. For, while I talk about culture as if it were a constant force, on the other hand I talk of locating the obscenity of these books within their specific socio-historical context. On one side is the trans-historical – 'civilisation', 'humanity' – on the other is specific cultural historicity – the late French Enlightenment, late imperial Austria, inter-war France, post-war France, 1970s Britain, and late twentieth-century North America. Furthermore how can I talk of one Culture when these texts come from ostensibly *different* cultures and very different times?

Firstly, a tension of this kind is not limited to this particular study or the approach it adopts. As Chapter One illustrates, the obscene spans the specific and the universal. On one hand are arguments that 'the statement "such-and-such a work is obscene" must always be subjected to specific historical and psychological analysis'.¹ On the other is the perspective that 'Obscenity is a permanent element of human social life and corresponds to a deep need of the human mind, or, for all we know to the contrary, of mind generally'.² As we will see,

¹ Stefan Morawski, 'Art and Obscenity,' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 26:2 (1967), 195.

² Havelock Ellis, 'The Revaluation of Obscenity,' *More Essays on Love and Virtue* (London: Constable and Co., 1931), 103.

neither attitude is wrong. To a certain extent obscene motifs shift with time. Certain obscene motifs change and evolve as do attitudes towards obscenity. A constant motif in all these obscene novels is the human body and its suffering, but, as commentators are now well aware, although the same motif, what the human body stands for and how it is represented changes in ways historically and culturally specific (see Chapter One, 'Obscenity and Society' and Chapter Five). A similar, unresolved tension exists in existing criticism of obscene works: this is especially true of Sade and Sacher-Masoch and the psycho-sexual 'perversions' which their writings are commonly taken to represent and which profoundly influence much secondary writing on their work. On one side sadism and masochism are regarded as universal stages in the development of human sexuality – stages which, in Freud's later writings correspond to a wider view of a struggle between the life and death instincts.¹ On the other, Foucault posits that sadism is culturally and historically specific: 'a massive cultural fact which appeared precisely at the end of the eighteenth century, and which constitutes one of the greatest conversions of Western imagination'² and Anne McClintock notes that 'masochism is a radically *historical* phenomenon'.³ In terms of obscene literature, in all these respects – obscenity, representations of the body, specific sexual acts and desires – to adopt only one perspective, either universal or the historically specific, is to see only one side of the coin. Suzanne Stewart is unusual in highlighting this dual nature in terms of masochism: 'From its very inception,' she observes, 'the term "masochism" represented both a fundamental developmental aspect of human sexuality and a diagnosis of a concrete historical configuration'.⁴ Thus, just as obscenity itself does, this study shifts between discussing obscenity and the body in terms of the historical context from which the text emerges, to interpreting this obscenity in universal terms of civilisation, human history and instinctual desires and drives. When considering the themes at the heart of obscene literature therefore, this tension – if it is still regarded as a tension – remains, necessarily (in my opinion) unresolved.

¹ Sigmund Freud, 'The Economic Problem of Masochism,' trans. James Strachey, *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, Penguin Freud Library, vol. 11 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 419. 'If one is prepared to overlook a little inexactitude, it may be said that the death instinct which is operative in the organism - primal sadism - is identical with masochism.'

² Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage, 1988), 210.

³ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 144. (McClintock's emphasis).

⁴ Suzanne R. Stewart, *Sublime Surrender: Male Masochism at the Fin-de-Siècle* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 39.

To talk of cultural or historical periods presents its own set of problems. As Fredric Jameson has persuasively pointed out, literary and historical interpretation must walk a fine line between ‘respecting the specificity and radical difference of the social and cultural past while disclosing the solidarity of its polemics and passions, its forms, structures, experiences, and struggles, with those of the present day’.¹ Anachronicity must be countered by historicising the text² yet historicising the text raises further problems of interpretation. Talk of historical periods inevitably involves ‘the isolation and privileging of one of the elements *within* that totality’³ and, as Jameson notes, to see history – or texts as emerging from history and culture – in terms of ‘a historical or cultural period tends in spite of itself to give the impression of a facile totalization ... [and] is fatally reductive’.⁴

Aware of the limits of interpretation, Jameson’s Marxist approach to the text (‘all literature ... must be informed by what we have called a political unconscious, that all literature must be read as a symbolic meditation on the destiny of community’⁵) chimes with the approach to obscenity, culture and history adopted in the following chapters. Thus, in relation to the tension between the historical and the specific, we find Jameson delineating how a text’s interpretation takes place on different historical and social levels: first in terms of its ‘political history’ then of its ‘society in ... the less diachronic and time-bound sense of a constitutive tension and struggle between social classes’ and, lastly, history ‘conceived in its vastest sense of the sequence of modes of production and the succession and destiny of the various human social formations, from prehistoric life to whatever far future history holds for us’.⁶ Jameson’s ‘social level’ in particular – of a class struggle and interpreting the text’s place within that struggle – draws parallels between the cultural struggle of high versus low and the other hierarchies upon which culture (‘in the vastest sense ... [of] human social formations’) depends and which it imposes on itself. These hierarchies need not be seen simply in terms of high versus low social classes. Where obscene literature is concerned, the struggle underlying the social can be between high and low art, the obscene and the aesthetically acceptable, the impure and the pure and – in a claim which resonates

¹ Jameson, ‘Interpretation’, 18.

² Jameson, ‘Interpretation’, 49.

³ Jameson, ‘Interpretation’, 28.

⁴ Jameson, ‘Interpretation’, 27.

⁵ Jameson, ‘Interpretation’, 70.

⁶ Jameson, ‘Interpretation’, 75.

with certain associations of obscene literature – what Jameson calls ‘the ethical binary opposition of good and evil ... one of the fundamental forms of ideological thought in Western culture’¹ (see Chapter One, ‘Obscenity and Society’).²

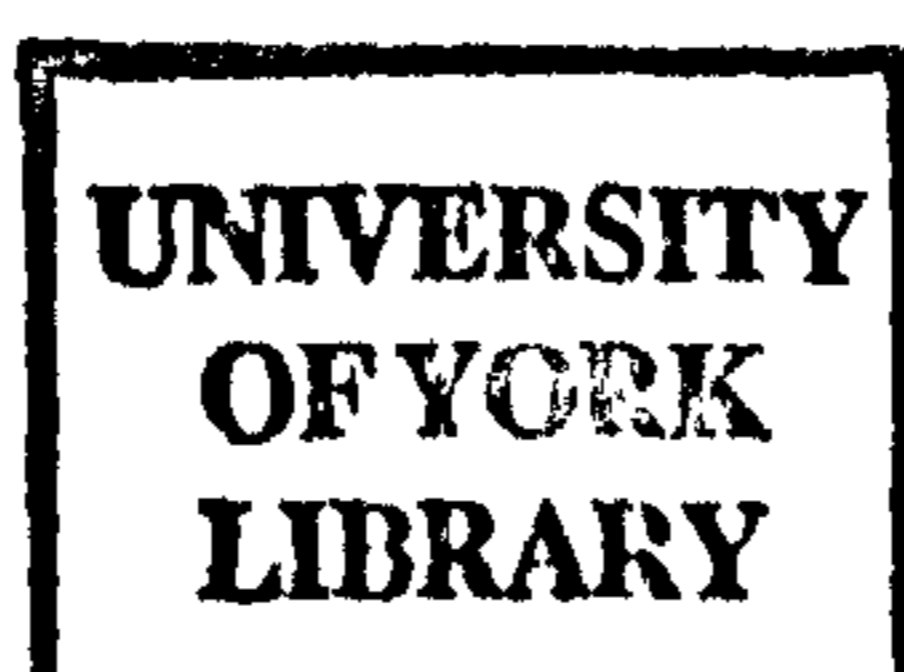
The inevitable limitations of interpretation which Jameson highlights (including the imposition of contemporary cultural values and the fact that texts are so often interpreted through previous interpretations, not on their own merits)³ are common to most works of literary criticism. Other limitations are more specific to this study. The central themes of these narratives – the body, sex, obscenity, revelation, vision, violence and death – mean that a truly comprehensive study would have to cover a vast field. ‘The Body’ alone is a topic that has elicited a huge amount of material over thousands of years of writing. *Reading Obscenity* contains only seven chapters and while ambitious in scope is simultaneously restricted by the length-requirements of being a thesis. Books could be written (and many have been) on each of the writers in this study so one chapter, unfortunately, cannot discuss every relevant issue for every writer. My exploration of the obscene is a summary of the most interesting and salient points, so the texts I have chosen are necessarily a limited selection. I focus on a very few novels and novellas, not poetry, drama or Internet related material. Likewise, the references made to art and film are very select.⁴ I closely consider neither the film adaptations of these books nor the illustrations which have often been part of these narratives. Although I position these works within their social-historical setting, this necessarily takes the form of a glimpse of, or gesture towards, a deeper relationship which others have explored or which is waiting for fuller consideration. In simple terms therefore, I focus solely on a strand – and within that strand some of the best-known works – of European and Anglo-American literature written and published post-1750; the obscene

¹ Jameson, ‘Interpretation’, 88.

² ‘Ideology’ is a term which recurs in this thesis. By ‘ideology’ I adopt the concept of ideology offered by Louis Althusser in ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation),’ *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970). In Althusser’s essay, social formation is presented as perpetuating itself through its own forms of production and labour power. The perpetuation of the State (I less accurately refer to (Western) ‘civilisation’) depends on teaching ‘submission to the rules of the established order, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class’ (132-33). Within this Marxist model ‘Ideology’ is necessary to the reproduction of ‘State Power’. Both figure as repressive forces (137-39) and both areas are sites of struggle. Althusser notes that ideology is ‘a dream’ without material form which is imposed on subjects within the State (165). As subjects, we are all always, even before birth, subject to a particular ideology (176) which ensures that we successfully reproduce existing State Power (181).

³ Jameson, ‘Interpretation’, 49 and 9.

⁴ Travis, *Bound and Gagged*, chapters 10 and 11, 255-318 considers issues surrounding the regulation of Internet and film content.



literature and art of 'Eastern', 'Middle-Eastern' (and other) cultures lie outside the scope of this study.

Furthermore, despite ranging over two hundred years of literature and culture, another limitation to this thesis could be said to be its heavy twentieth-century weighting. Moreover, compared to the vast amount of sexually explicit literature produced from Europe, only work from three European countries is represented. To some extent, both are emphases of my making. It is not as if the twentieth century saw a sudden tide of obscene material (although it could be argued that with the Internet the last few years of the twentieth century saw an unprecedented surge in the ability to access sexually graphic images). Huge amounts of obscene and erotic material appeared in Europe during the nineteenth century (not to say the seventeenth and eighteenth). As numerous as these novels, poems and periodicals were, many of these works have attracted little critical attention. Most obscene nineteenth-century texts have faded from cultural awareness. Consider for instance the largely forgotten but once-notorious and often prohibited books, Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Les diaboliques* (1874), Villiers de L'Isle-Adam's *Contes cruels* (1883), Paul-Jean Toulet's *Monsieur du Paur* (1898). Consequently, although these texts may merit critical resurrection, to date they have left little or no *critical* legacy to the twenty-first century. Furthermore – if one wishes to be pedantic – while sexually explicit, many of these texts are not brutal or violent enough to be included among the 'truly' obscene works that make up five-sixths of the works I have elected to explore. Consequently and in addition, I have concentrated on arguably the best-known works and works which have attracted sizeable amounts of secondary material. During the twentieth century, France and English-speaking countries showed comparatively little interest in, for example, sexually explicit Italian narratives (Mario Praz's 1933 classic, *The Romantic Agony*, is an exception).

Finally, my reason for devoting more space to twentieth-century obscene books than others is partly to capitalise on their proximity to 'now' and the unnerving – obscene – revelations they make regarding today's 'civilisation'. Twentieth-century texts also allow the exploration of a wider range of obscene literature, including work by female and gay writers which would have been impossible if I had only focused on the flagellatory and confessional texts of the nineteenth century. Even so, the four sexually extreme narratives, which represent the twentieth century are far from exhaustive. Works by Octave Mirbeau, Jean Genet and Jean de Berg from France must be set aside along with a number of obscene non-French works (by Samuel Delany, Stewart Home and A.N. Roquelaure). That said, I do not believe that these limitations seriously constrict my conclusions. Rather, limitation is

like distillation: it avoids what could be a repetitive process. Inevitably in a group of texts with similar concerns and motifs, the same themes recur even among the few texts I have chosen. Furthermore, the approach that I emphasise and the conclusions this study reaches can easily be applied to texts not directly addressed in this volume. The texts I have chosen are arguably the best known, of the highest literary quality, and (in terms of the first three novels) the most influential. Each text is a suitable frame in which to explore man's relation to, and the power of, obscenity and the West's tradition of obscene literature. The following chapter sets the foundations for what follows by exploring the question, 'What is the obscene?'

CHAPTER ONE

THE OBSCENE

IN 1931, IN AN ESSAY ON OBSCENITY, Havelock Ellis, discusses the ‘absurdity’ of attempts to define the obscene. He mentions an International Conference on the suppression of Obscene Publications at which, after much debate, the presiding officials unanimously resolved that “no definition [of obscenity] was possible”.¹ In 1956 Norman St. John-Stevas states that ‘the attempt to understand “obscenity” in the terms of a simple definition is fruitless and best abandoned’.² More recently, John Phillips has pointed out that existing legal definitions of obscenity are ‘dangerously vague’.³ Faced with conclusions such as these there is little wonder that many critics have not ventured too far into the complexity of obscenity. In this chapter, and later in exploring obscene texts, I don’t want to formulate a single, or even simple, definition of ‘obscene’. Ambiguity is not just a problem of (legal) definition, but an intrinsic part of the obscene. The obscene is ambiguous; ambiguity lends obscenity much of its threatening power. The very nature of the obscene is that it defies rational, simple, definition. As we have seen, in talking about the books at the heart of this study, ‘obscene’ is a word and a concept more often used than explored. Critics of obscene literature seldom (with notable exceptions) consider what the word means, what the obscene is and how it operates.

Where obscene literature is concerned, many writers on the topic settle for the legal definition. There are good reasons for doing so. Their identity as a corpus of obscene books, their reputation and their fascination are in part due to their legal history, the court cases, the obscenity trials and their prohibition. However, a variety of alternative viewpoints could also be adopted. There are the moral, religious, and political angles (all of which touch on obscenity’s legal history) not to mention the sociological, psychological, philosophical, ethical, and (especially when considering obscene images) aesthetic perspectives. Such a

¹ Ellis, ‘Obscenity’, 108-9.

² Norman St. John-Stevas, *Obscenity and the Law* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1956), 2.

³ Phillips, *Forbidden*, 5.

range, in itself, may indicate why writers on obscene books adopt the convenient legal definition while ignoring other possibilities. The potential for confusion and complexity is high. That said, it is not the court cases but obscenity itself which is the subject of this study and obscenity in more general terms – not yet in relation to specific obscene texts – the focus of this chapter.

As such, I set out to explore different aspects of the obscene, not just its changing legal definition but also its etymological roots, the nature and operation of obscene words, the forces underlying our psychological response to the obscene and obscenity's social role. Legal History, Etymology, Obscene Words, Psychology and Sociology equate to the subheadings I use below.¹ These divisions are for the purpose of clarity alone. Where obscenity is concerned, overspill is inevitable. Indeed, this is part of obscenity's complexity. The obscene defies and challenges rational boundaries. This can be illustrated by asking some simple questions – simple questions with at times complex answers. What really is obscene? Can anything be obscene in and of itself? 'Sexual stuff' is one of the definitions of obscenity which I have been offered in the course of my research. But are excretory functions and sexual acts and the words referring to these functions, products and acts really obscene? At first it might seem so. On closer inspection however, we realise that this is not true – or at least not true in all contexts. Sexual intercourse is necessary for the reproduction of the species; it can be an expression and experience of love and intimacy – not obscenity – and excretion is part of our normal living state. The same organs and acts can be acceptably and formally described using non-obscene words (in English for example, 'faeces', 'sexual intercourse', 'penis', 'vagina'). It seems therefore that obscenity's determinant(s) cannot be limited to these acts or words alone. There must be something more. It must also be 'something' powerful for when we designate something obscene or when we are confronted by obscenity, compared to most other concepts or words, it causes a powerful emotional reaction.² Furthermore, the emotions it evokes have an unnerving ability to reach deep into our being. As William Miller observes, it is not a reaction of pure anger or indignation – responses that we can distance ourselves from: we are angry or indignant with someone or something separate from ourselves we are outraged by someone

¹ As this study is overwhelmingly focused on texts not images, and to avoid further levels of complexity, I don't give the aesthetic aspect of obscenity its own sub-heading. That said, aspects of aesthetics and philosophy occur throughout my overall argument.

² Allen Walker Read, 'An Obscenity Symbol,' *American Speech* 9:4 (1934), 265.

else's behaviour.¹ The obscene, on the other hand, gets beneath our skin. There is proximity about it, something deep-seated, threatening, insidious and ambivalent. For where the obscene is there too is a sort of desire. (Of course, I am talking in general terms, not from the perspective of, for example, sociopaths whose emotional responses are abnormal or medical professionals for whom bodily excretions and dismemberment have a different meaning; who, in many cases, become habituated to these sights and overcome what is for most of us an instinctual reaction of repulsion). I am already anticipating issues discussed below, but to consider some more: we find that the obscene owes its existence (in more ways than one) to 'civilisation', to people's attitudes towards it and their use of it as cultural critique and propaganda. The fear which the obscene inspires also emerges from its ambiguity – although I too use a topographical metaphor of society (i.e. it has an 'inside' an 'outside'; a 'high' and a 'low'), where the obscene occurs it is difficult to demarcate in terms of boundaries inside and outside for the obscene is always within as well as without; it harbours desire and temptation as well as threat and fear. As Georges Bataille notes using violence rather than obscenity (obscenity can, and in many instances does, involve violence of some kind), 'Not only does "civilised" usually mean "us", and barbarous "them", but also civilisation and language grew as though violence was something outside, foreign not only to civilisation but also to man ... [yet] all civilised men are capable of savagery ... we must declare that violence belongs to humanity as a whole'.² So too, in similar ways, does obscenity.

1. The Legal Obscene

I begin with 'The Legal Obscene' as opposed to obscene's etymological origins for several reasons. Firstly, nineteenth-century legislation against obscenity has been one of the most important formative influences on contemporary definitions of the word – definitions, that is, on both legal and cultural levels. During the nineteenth-century, the definition of obscenity underwent a gradual narrowing down to refer almost exclusively to graphic depictions (these days principally visual depictions) of sexual acts. Secondly, it is because

¹ William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), 204.

² Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. Mary Dalwood (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1987), 186.

of obscenity laws and the now legendary trials in late nineteenth and the first half of twentieth century Europe and America – among them work by Sade and Genet, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, John Cleland's *Fanny Hill*, Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* – that the idea of a body of 'forbidden' literature – forbidden because of its obscenity and forbidden because of what it supposedly reveals and the threat to public decency which it has the potential to cause – owes its existence.¹ In this way, as Harrison observes, censorship and prohibition have never 'operated as a purely negative, repressive force ... Censorship, in other words, was an active factor in the reader's understanding of the text'.² Prohibition has shaped the content of obscene material as well as the type of audience it attracts.³ Firstly, obscene works, especially Sade's, accompanied as it has always been by the most notorious reputation, have perennially been seen as set apart from other texts. Secondly, in terms of influencing content, we find that legal prohibition led most obscene texts to exhibit false places of publication, prefaces which contained disclaimers and ethically questioned the content of the text which followed⁴ as well as causing most obscene novels to be published anonymously – an issue with implications for reading the text itself. Thirdly, although the obscene texts in this study were ironically *not* the subject of major, well-publicised legal hearings in Britain or America (perhaps they were deemed *too* threatening to be afforded that privilege), the legal definition of obscenity and accounts of various obscenity trials provide the backbone of most English-language encyclopaedia entries on 'obscene' just as they provide the focus of the majority of studies which concentrate on the obscenity of obscene literature. These studies – including Norman St. John-Stevas's *Obscenity and the Law* (1956), Charles Rembar's *The End of Obscenity* (1969), Walter Kendrick's *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (1987) and Alan Travis's *Bound and Gagged: A Secret History of Obscenity in Britain* (2000) – concentrate mostly on obscene literature's legal, historical and social reception and the events of legendary trials where art and freedom of speech battled (the metaphor of war commonly occurs) against a repressive totalitarian regime. . . or at least that is how it is often depicted. Consider, as an example, Charles Rembar's words: 'In the midfifties, anti-obscenity laws were attacked as

¹ Harrison, *Censorship*, 34-6.

² Harrison, *Censorship*, 11.

³ Cf. Harrison, *Censorship*, 2.

⁴ Harrison, *Censorship*, 127-8.

unconstitutional. The attacks were repelled. Freedom of expression, said the Supreme Court, does not extend to expression that is obscene'.¹ It is therefore with a brief overview of the central issues of prohibition and censorship and then the first recorded case of obscene libel that I begin. I then trace the shifting Western definitions and legal responses to obscene material before briefly considering the relationship between obscenity and pornography.

The regulation of books and their content has a long history. As Walter Kendrick asserts, 'There has been censorship as long as there have been signs and representations. At no time in human history has the power to portray the world in words or pictures been granted unrestricted exercise; some contrary power has always grappled with it, endeavouring to set limits on what may be displayed to whom'.² Censorship existed in Roman times but the 1559 Pauline Index – *Index auctorum et librorum prohibitum*, compiled under the direction of Pope Paul IV – is generally regarded as the first concerted attempt in what could be called a 'modern' Europe to comprehensively list forbidden books (in this case, those forbidden to practising Catholics). Published in 1948 the last (32nd) edition of the Index included 4000 titles (the 33rd edition of 1966 was suppressed).³ In most of Europe however, in terms of legal definitions and the prohibition of obscene literature, the Pauline *Index* was not influential. In more Protestant Germany, (modern) Britain and America – but also in traditionally Catholic France – courts reached their own conclusions based on concerns usually centring around social stability.

Before considering specific examples and how prohibition has evolved in the West, it is interesting to note the assumptions which lie at the heart of these prohibitions. On the one hand, with the Pauline *Index*, social purity movements, and contemporary Evangelical preaching in America, we find the traditional Christian attitude that men are, fundamentally, sinners. As such, mankind needs guiding, controlling and delivering from his weak tendency to crumble before temptation and the sins of the flesh. On the other hand, we have a very similar secular-political view that people – and some more than others (such as women and children) – need protecting from themselves.⁴ Neither perspective offers a particularly

¹ Rembar, *Obscenity*. Pages 3-14 detail how obscenity laws could be viewed as contravening The United States own First Amendment which guarantees free speech. Travis, *Bound and Gagged*, 4 also stresses how prohibition and freedom of expression must be balanced: we need to balance 'freedom of speech or expression with the need to protect the health or morals of the public from either real or imagined diseases.'

² Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York: Viking, 1987), 95.

³ Harrison, *Censorship*, 11.

⁴ Cf. Harrison, *Censorship*, 58.

optimistic view of humanity. Moreover, despite arguments about the need to protect freedom of speech and expression in 'democratic', 'civilised' countries, a necessity to control, at least in some ways, written, or other types of art, is generally accepted: until the magical age of eighteen children should not be exposed to certain material; politically, religiously, or ethnically inflammatory material should be restricted on the grounds that it may incite public disorder and hatred. Finally, most would agree that the readership of obscene books should not be totally unregulated. The fact that some *can* be exposed to obscene or inflammatory material without apparently falling foul of its content (generally the higher class and educated), but that others need controlling (the lower class, women, children, the mentally unstable); the fact that some materials need controlling and others not, indicate that in relation to the legal prohibition of obscene texts (for example) what Jameson calls the 'fundamental forms of ideological thought in Western culture',¹ the binary opposition of right and wrong, rapidly start to come apart. There *is* no fundamental, pre-ordained evil. Variables such as religious teaching, economic, political, and social reasons have all had a part in dictating what is evil, impure, and obscene and requires regulation, and what is not.² From this perspective there is no such thing as 'society' in a universal sense: in certain contexts children, women, other races, other classes, people with medical conditions are all set apart because they require special rules.

The earliest recorded case of a book being prosecuted as obscene concerns a French classic of erotic literature, *Vénus dans le cloître* (*Venus in the Cloister*, 1682). The case was brought in 1727, in England, using the law of 'obscene libel'. There was no law against obscenity itself: sexual images, indecency, lewdness, graphic sexual descriptions and the like were not regarded as, in and of themselves, worthy of litigation. Laws, however, did exist to protect political order and religion. It was because of these that *Vénus dans le cloître* was condemned. Because it was an immoral book it endangered the morality of society. Defending counsel made a motion for arrest of judgement. There had never been a precedent for such a ruling: how could an erotic book constitute a 'libel' – and besides, it was up to the spiritual courts to punish crimes against morality, not the venerable men of the Bar. According to Havelock Ellis, the prosecution in this case argued that to destroy morality was to destroy public order and, because it depended on good public order, the peace of government. In this particular case, Ellis observes, impiety emerged as a crime;

¹ Jameson, 'Interpretation', 88.

² Harrison, *Censorship*, 12.

'obscenity' in and for itself did not.¹ It was at this point in history however that the obscene, whether technically a crime or not, began gathering associations with sexually graphic literature.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the first book prosecuted under 'obscene libel' was French. As Robert Darnton, Jean Goulemot, and others have shown, by the eighteenth century, France had a well-founded reputation as a place where 'dirty' and 'forbidden' books circulated.² The police and Church authorities called these forbidden books *mauvais livres* ('bad books') while booksellers relied on the coded reference *livres philosophiques* ('philosophical books') to order and advertise forbidden texts.³

The latter is an interesting and in some ways accurate epithet, reflecting the nature of many forbidden books at the time. In eighteenth-century France, as Goulemot notes, there was little distinction between various forms of subversive publications from Jansenist literature to politically or philosophically radical texts and licentious satires. Elasticity in definition meant that all such texts could be termed *licencieux, obscène, lascif, or lubrique* ('licentious', 'obscene', 'lascivious' or 'lubricious').⁴ Like the English judgement against *Vénus dans le cloître*, it wasn't for lewd content that these works were condemned but on religious, medical, political, and social grounds. *Mauvais livres* exerted dangerous influence and, according to Goulemot were seen as leading 'to destructive excess, to the breaking of laws, to the sins of the flesh, to a sullyng of the self on both physical and moral levels'.⁵ That they may or may not have contained graphic descriptions of sexual acts was not the principle issue; however Darnton points out that not all *livres philosophiques* were treated equally. Eighteenth-century France had three categories of forbidden books: 'those that offended Church, the state and morality'.⁶ Books which offended public morality included texts very different from those of a sexually graphic nature. Nevertheless, unlike 'merely licentious' and 'erotic' literature, of all the forbidden books the police were more likely to confiscate 'works that they considered unambiguously obscene'.⁷ Exactly what eighteenth-

¹ Ellis, 'Obscenity', 113-14, 118-19.

² Chapter Two returns to the fashions within eighteenth-century French 'erotica' in the context of the literary milieu from which Sade's writing emerged.

³ Darnton, *Forbidden*, 7.

⁴ Jean Marie Goulemot, *Forbidden Texts: Erotic Literature and its Readers in Eighteenth-Century France*, trans. J. Simpson (Cambridge Mass.: Polity Press, 1994), 4-6.

⁵ Goulemot, *Forbidden Texts*, 35.

⁶ Darnton, *Forbidden*, 88.

⁷ Darnton, *Forbidden*, 88-9.

century policemen (or indeed Darnton) considered ‘unambiguously obscene’ and how ‘obscene’ differs from the ‘erotic’ is unclear (certainly with, as Darnton acknowledges, the difficulty we have today understanding exactly what readers felt when they read these books)¹ but in eighteenth-century France at least, it seems the ‘unambiguously obscene’ equated to the most forbidden of texts.

This fuzzy association between obscene literature and pornography and the immoral, and its strange yet powerful ability to offend against public order, were issues which did not diminish as laws against obscene material exploded during the nineteenth century. It was at this time that Western culture displayed a sudden and passionate desire to define and legally control obscene literature and imagery. In France in 1793, the Terror’s ruling committee of Public Safety declared that any author or printer of works damaging to the social *status quo* would face execution.² In 1819 and 1822 (updated in 1881 then again in 1882, 1898 and 1908)³ the French government passed successive laws legislating against material that offended not only public morals (as the early laws had controlled) but also public decency. In 1857 these laws brought court cases against Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* and Charles Baudelaire’s *Les fleurs du mal*. In the century which followed the same laws provided the grounds for prosecuting the publishers of Sade, Bataille, and Réage.⁴ The 1824 Vagrancy Act was the first in Britain to include prohibition directed at the publication, purveyance and purchase of ‘obscene’ material, where ‘obscene’ denoted work of a sexual nature. The same law also introduced the all-important caveat, ‘generally accepted standards’ of morality. The fundamental factors of ‘generally accepted standards’ (whatever that meant – the law did not define it – and whose standards were they?) in relation to sexually explicit material were retained in the 1857 Obscene Publications Act, the first of its kind in Britain to explicitly prohibit obscene (i.e. lewd sexually graphic) texts and other printed material. In 1868 the Hicklin Rule was appended to the original act. It defined obscenity as that with the ability to ‘deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall’.⁵

¹ Darnton, *Forbidden*, 85.

² Phillips, *Forbidden*, 15.

³ Carolyn J. Dean, ‘History, Pornography and the Social Body’, *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, ed. Jennifer Munby (London: Tate Publishing, 2001), 229. Also Harrison, *Censorship*, 25-87 on the history of censorship in post-Revolutionary France.

⁴ See Kendrick, *Secret*, 95-124 for more information on censorship and obscenity trials in Britain and France during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

⁵ Quoted in Anne Lyon Haight, ‘Appendix: Excerpts from Important Court Decisions,’ *Banned Books: Some Informal Notes on Some Books Banned for Various Reasons at Various Times and in Various Places* (London:

Perhaps it is an obvious point to make but legal definitions of obscenity – as we can see from the way its legal status changed from the early eighteenth to the late nineteenth centuries – have not remained constant. A perhaps less obvious and more interesting point to note is the way legal understanding of obscene literature which once judged it on causing impiety alone (with little interest in sexual content) shifted to focus almost entirely on the effects of ‘lewd’ and ‘indecent’ – i.e. sexually graphic – material. This issue is discussed more in ‘Obscenity and Society’. For now we can observe that the obscene became a powerful force which threatened the fabric and future of ‘civilisation’. Obscene publications could ‘deprave and corrupt’. They assumed disease-like contagious associations. Simultaneously however, prohibiting certain texts gave them an increased power and made them more interesting (Harrison notes that it was only *after* the publicity caused by the Pauvert trial in 1956 that twentieth-century public interest in Sade’s writing really began).¹

Prohibitions reflect, and in turn alter, social perceptions. One of prohibition’s paradoxical effects is that it tends to fuel interest and notoriety – rather than dispel or effectively suppress interest in and/or the offending material. This is a significant point when it comes to reading the obscene. To briefly pre-empt issues raised later (and repeat those mentioned in the Introduction), not only do obscene books revolve around a thematics of ‘truth’ and revelation through violated bodies, shattered taboos and perverse sex, but, within the West, the illicit and the suppressed (in cultural as well as psychoanalytic terms) has long been mapped as a place of ‘truth’ and knowledge.² The forbidden is, like the fruit in the Garden of Eden allegory, an irresistible locus of knowledge.

Before an English audience in 1885, watching Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the fascination and in a sense the value of the obscene can be seen as the impudent truth behind Algernon Moncreiff’s remark that ‘It is absurd to have a hard and fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn’t. More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn’t read.’ Spoken at the height of Victorian England’s bewitchment by the obscene, Algernon’s lines are directed at the social purity movements which vociferously and effectively dominated one side of the anti-obscenity debate in Britain, Western Europe and North America. On both sides of the Atlantic at that time,

George Allen and Unwin, 1955), 144. 144-157 lists all major legal decisions and comments in Britain and America since 1868. See also Travis, *Bound and Gagged*, 5-14 on the history of British Obscenity laws, 1857-1959.

¹ Harrison, *Censorship*, 168. 56-67 gives more information on Pauvert’s trial.

² Nicholas Harrison, ‘Reading Sade Through Censorship,’ *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* 23:1 (2000), 30-31.

social purity and ‘vigilance’ societies had achieved notoriety for policing and enforcing the censorship or destruction of books that they deemed unhealthy and objectionable for reasons of moral (and more often sexual) impropriety. In this respect we should not forget that almost identical legislation to that which emerged in France and Britain developed in the Austrian empire in the mid 1800s, Germany in 1870, and in the United States with the 1873 congressional law known as the Comstock Law which decreed that

no obscene, lewd, or lascivious book, pamphlet, picture, paper, print, or other publication of an indecent character, or any article or thing designed or intended for the prevention of conception or procuring abortion, nor any article or thing intended or adapted for any indecent or immoral use or nature ... shall be carried in the [Federal] mail.¹

Clearly, in nineteenth-century Western societies obscenity was a major issue – its importance reflected in the column space allotted the subject in encyclopaedias of the time: Larousse’s *Grande Enclopédie du XIX^e siècle* contains several hundred words on its etymological roots and their relationship to primitive social practice (see ‘The Etymology of “Obscene”’). Larousse’s 1984 edition has seven short lines: ‘something which someone does or says which overtly offends morality, above all through the representation of sexual or scatological acts’ [*se dit de qqn, de qqch qui blesse ouvertement la pudeur surtout par des représentations d’ordre sexuel ou scatologique*].

Katherine Mullin notes that among the plethora of texts which were found objectionable in nineteenth-century Britain and America, decadent foreign fiction gained a reputation as the most offensive. For this reason, vigilance societies reacted particularly strongly to Russian and French novels which described comparatively graphic sexual scenes. Novels such as these were regarded as a particular menace because they had been translated into English and were marketed as ‘classics’ and ‘art’ then (in the eyes of the social purists), once purchased, through their obscenity these sinister texts began polluting, like a disease (depraving and corrupting), impressionable readers and by extension the foundations – the ‘body’ – of civilised society.² Consider as an example of this disease metaphor this late-nineteenth-century comment on the evils of ‘the filth-loving herd of

¹ Quoted in Williams, *Hard Core*, 85. See Rembar, *Obscenity*, 17-36 and Kendrick, *Secret*, 125-157 for more information on American obscenity laws.

² Katherine Mullin, *James Joyce, Sexuality and Social Purity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3-11, 18-27. Also Kendrick, *Secret*, 101-2.

swine, the professional pornographers'¹ and their wares written by Max Nordau in his influential *Entartung* (*Degeneration*, 1895):

The systematic incitation to lasciviousness [caused by pornography] causes the gravest injury to the bodily and mental health of individuals, and a society composed of individuals sexually over-stimulated, knowing no longer any self-control, any discipline, any shame, marches to its certain ruin ... The pornographer poisons the springs whence flows the life of future generations.²

Of course, much can be said of the incredible power of the pornographic (read, for now, 'obscene'), the inexorable temptation it causes, and the seeming incapability of populations to control their own activities (see above and 'Obscenity and Society'). Furthermore, to return to the theme of a threatening/polluting other, we find the precedent for this attitude set much earlier. It is surely no coincidence that the first book legally defined as obscene was a *foreign* book judged by an English court. The impudent irony of Algernon's remark however, is its suggestion that not only are social purity societies utterly ineffectual, but that their *raison d'être*, perhaps more than anyone's, depends on prohibited literature.

It may seem as though the heyday of social purity was shaken off long ago by the 'modern' liberal attitudes of the twentieth century. Yet, a century after the heyday of social purity, the issues familiar to Wilde's late-Victorian audience are not so alien to today's European and Anglo-American societies. As Allan Travis observes, 'Victorian sexual hypocrisy continues to exert an influence even to this day'.³ The gradual narrowing of the definition which obscenity underwent during the nineteenth century continued to influence (and define) legal and social understanding of obscene material well into the twentieth century.

Principle among these influences is a duality not immediately evident from the legal definitions themselves. It was, however, of principle importance in the obscene libel trials of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century courts. This is the seemingly insurmountable distinction between art and pornography. Allison Pease offers reasons for the development of this opposition. She has shown that the mimetic power, the contagious ability to influence corruptible minds and behaviour, of obscene images and writing stood in direct

¹ Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, trans. from the second German edition [Unattributed translator] (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 557.

² Nordau, *Degeneration*, 557.

³ Travis, *Bound and Gagged*, 45. See also 4-5: 'The bedrock of Britain's obscenity laws remains a monument to Victorian respectability and prudery'.

contrast to eighteenth and nineteenth-century aesthetic philosophy. During this era, Pease argues, the appreciation of art became a significant social activity: ‘engagement with art was considered a rational, moral and civic minded activity; an activity that identified one as upwardly mobile if not already of the upper classes’.¹ Influenced by the theory of Kant, Hume, Burke, Hegel and Schopenhauer, this philosophy – which was practiced as more of a ‘how to’ guide to the ‘correct’ way to appreciate art – stressed that art’s true appreciation should be cerebral not emotive. When ‘properly’ considering art one was supposed to ‘remain outside of any personal interest, whether that interest signifies a bodily desire or ... an obligation through one’s [social] position’.² High art was supposed to appeal to, and represent, the cerebral not the base or material.³ Of course, the obscene was anathema to this attitude. It was vulgar, it appealed directly (and very effectively) to the physical; it aroused base emotions and appealed to the low parts of the body, not the high. It was not Art.

Long after the ‘correct’ appreciation of art as a form of social etiquette had faded, the same dichotomy of pornography (read – in legal terms – ‘obscene material’) versus art remained throughout the West. Obscene material could not be art. Art could not be obscene. This was the key battleground of most classic obscenity trials – and the situation wasn’t helped by the fact that, unlike obscenity, ‘art’ didn’t have a legal definition. The (acceptable, high, good) art versus the (unacceptable, low, and bad) obscene is probably also the reason why most canonical works of criticism on obscene literature contain little reference to these narratives’ obscene content. Anxious to establish the aesthetic credentials – and by extension the cultural worth – of books otherwise deemed obscene, as we saw in the Introduction until the 1960s most writers and scholars diminished, overlooked, or criticised obscene passages as irrelevant to what the books were *really* about. The approach adopted by writers such as Maurice Blanchot, Guillaume Apollinaire, Jean-Paul Sartre and Gilles Deleuze (among others) suggests that they were anxious to promote these books as art, a move which necessitated distancing them from the pornographic and the obscene. In doing so however, they disavowed these narratives’ most immediate and notorious component.

¹ Allison Pease, *Modernism, Mass Culture, and the Aesthetics of Obscenity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), xii.

² Pease, *Modernism*, 23.

³ Pease, *Modernism*, 1, 7-11, 25-29. Also Harrison, *Censorship*, 49 notes how, in the trial of Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* failure to comply with social and aesthetic rules was grounds for prohibition. In this trial the prosecution argued that ‘Art without rule is no longer art’.

Britain's 1959 Obscene Publications Act secured this artistic defence in the law: a work's literary or artistic merit could constitute a defence against the charge of obscenity. A work was only obscene if, 'considered as a whole [i.e. not on individual passages] its predominant appeal is to prurient interest'.¹ This ruling instantly decriminalised many books, including Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* and works by Jean Genet which had been banned as obscene. Because they had artistic merit, they could not be obscene.

This is a strange, mutually exclusive definition which, well over a century after the fading of the Victorian regime, continues to shape contemporary legal definitions and cultural attitudes to obscene material. It is also worth noting that this mutual exclusivity ignores an insightful observation made one November morning three decades before the 1959 revision of the Obscene Publications Act. It was 1928 and the event was the obscenity trial of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*.

As evidence of the fascination caused by prohibition and the obscene, during the opening day of the trial the courtroom at Bow Street Magistrates Court, London, was packed. Police constables were turning people away at the doors. Inside, Sir Chartres Biron was presiding. *The Well of Loneliness* was about to be banned because, in accordance with the 1868 Hicklin rule, the Home Secretary believed it to have the power to 'deprave and corrupt' 'innocent' minds. In other words, those who read Hall's book could be perverted from the standards generally accepted by 'civilised' British society. This was a serious offence, for if future generations were corrupted (recall Nordau's comment quoted earlier), the future of the Empire and civilisation itself might be destroyed. One reliable witness for the prosecution had been called and confirmed that Hall's tale of lesbianism was indeed obscene. And now the defence counsel had a crowd of eminent writers, editors, artists, critics, and sundry persons of letters queuing to swear that the book was brimming with aesthetic merit. If it had aesthetic merit, it could not be obscene. Although it would be another thirty-one years before British law formally recognised aesthetic value as a defence against obscenity it was the only viable defence that could be made. After all, art could not be obscene. . . right? But there was a problem. Besides the fact that this book was going to be banned whatever happened, what use was it to argue about aesthetic value? Sir Chartres Biron cleared his throat, put down his quill and declared that all these 'expert' witnesses for the defence were irrelevant. All that mattered was his opinion, and besides, 'the book may

¹ The Brennan Footnote in US Federal law quoted in Rembar, *Obscenity*, 123.

be a very fine piece of literature and yet be obscene. Art and obscenity are not disassociated. This may be a work of art ... but that does not prevent it from being obscene'.¹

As accurate as I believe Biron's statement to be, his observation has largely been forgotten. In the end of course, all those witnesses who never testified were proved 'right'. After 1959, *The Well of Loneliness* was not loathsome, it was not obscene; it was art. However, by positing that artistic merit negates obscenity, the revised 1959 Obscene Publications Act continues to confirm the division between the aesthetic and the obscene which Hall's defenders were also hoping to rely on.

Subsequent legal attempts to refine and update definitions of 'obscenity' have never really escaped from the same polarity. Over the past few decades, various committees have attempted to refine obscene's legal status – after all, not all written material deserves the defence that it is art. . . does it? In Britain, the most recent attempt (to date) was made in 1977 by the committee headed by Cambridge professor and philosopher, Bernard Williams. This concluded that obscenity is the portrayal of 'violence, cruelty, or horror, or sexual, faecal or urinary functions, or genital functions' in a way that explicitly and intentionally goes against socially acceptable standards of morality and behaviour.²

Statements such as this demonstrate how narrow both legal and social understandings of obscene material have become. As Linda Williams has noted, in the eyes of Euro-American law, what was once a relatively flexible definition taking in political and religious tracts, pamphlets, Bible translations and sexological studies, has, thanks to the Victorians and the late 1950s, been pared down to refer almost solely to what is known as 'hard core' pornography ('hard core' being a term which only entered English in 1957).³ Speaking today, in an Anglo-American and European culture 'obscene material' connotes books or images with a sexually explicit, perhaps sexually 'perverse' or sexually violent content, not impiety and not politically damaging material. Nowadays, for example, in the American Supreme Court, obscene material is *only* that which depicts lewd sexual acts that appeal to 'prurient interest'.⁴ Nothing else (at this time) can be legally called 'obscene'. Likewise, today, the Canadian Criminal Code defines the obscene as 'any publication a

¹ Diana Souhami, *The Trials of Radclyffe Hall* (London: Virago, 1999), 205. Cf. Dollimore, *Sex, Literature and Censorship*, 95-106.

² Sharon Grace, *Testing Obscenity: An International Comparison of Laws and Controls Relating to Obscene Material (Home Office Research Study 157)* (London: Home Office, 1996), 15. Also Travis, *Bound and Gagged*, 13.

³ Williams, *Hard Core*, 88.

⁴ Dean, 'Pornography', 229.

dominant characteristic of which is the undue exploitation of sex, or of sex and any one or more of the following subjects, namely, crime, horror, cruelty and violence'.¹ It seems that sex – or more accurately its representation as pornography – is a necessary component of obscenity. Although we may find them implicitly embedded in the psychology behind the definitions and prohibitions of the past, obscene's etymological associations (considered below which include that which is ill-omened, filthy, hidden for the sake of public life) find no place in the wording of acts and laws and seem to have largely disappeared from (conscious) contemporary responses to the obscene.

Some might say that contemporary discussions about obscene books are an anachronistic exercise. Studies like this rely on material that was prohibited in the past but today is freely available in any well-stocked bookshop. As Charles Rembar concluded in his 1969 study, 'obscenity as the term has been commonly understood – the impermissible description of sex in literature – approaches its end. So far as writing is concerned ... there is no longer any law of obscenity ... not only in our law but in our culture, obscenity will soon be gone'.² Writing nearly forty years after Rembar I would answer that although the nature of obscenity has changed (and will change), there will always be obscenity, censorship and prohibition; the dynamics of our culture depend on them. Furthermore, despite recent work in the area, the obscene content of obscene books remains an under-explored area (recall Dollimore's observation that even in the 'liberal' humanities today there is an aversion towards exploring representations of the 'real' physical, sexual body).³ Secondly, although it appears that in contemporary Western culture, obscenity laws and public concern generally overlook printed matter, censorship of obscene material – including books – continues in less overt forms. Firstly, as Harrison notes, 'Censorship ... has continued ...[and] despite the compelling rhetoric of freedom of expression, has in many cases been widely accepted'.⁴

Harrison points out that taxation of films has become a significant form of pre-censorship of obscene material – especially in France.⁵ Similarly, in the past, the cost of volumes of obscene literature was also a method of controlling their availability – only the

¹ Grace, *Obscenity*, 18 fn.5.

² Rembar, *Obscenity*, 493.

³ Dollimore, *Sex, Literature and Censorship*, 48-54.

⁴ Harrison, *Censorship*, 44.

⁵ Harrison, *Censorship*, 36.

social elite (regarded as less or strangely 'non' corruptible) could afford them.¹ Although now widely available in cheap editions, Roland Barthes has pointed out that another form of censorship has been to deem Sade's books 'boring': an adjective far less likely to drive people towards them than 'obscene' or 'forbidden'.² Similarly, since the 1960s when cheap editions of obscene books became available, many (in English and French) are printed with introductory essays that package the obscene text as a work to be read and understood in one particular way. Often these essays are those of pre-1970s, canonical works which focus on underlying philosophical arguments or psychoanalytic readings which rarely mention the text's obscene or lubricious content. Thus obscene literature today is marketed towards a specific, educated, academic (by extension therefore usually middle or upper class) audience.³ Patrick Ffrench, for example, notes that Bataille's *Histoire de l'oeil* appears in the extant English translation accompanied by essays from Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes.⁴

In terms of obscenity, contemporary concern actively focuses on films, videos, photography, and, increasingly, the Internet. Today books which, if published seventy years ago would have been banned as obscene, cause small-scale outbreaks of moral righteousness (often carefully orchestrated by publishers in order to cash in on that fascination which the public has for the obscene), but film-adaptations of the same works face censorship and legislation. Some examples illustrate the muddled nature of the legal issue of obscenity. David Cronenberg's 1996 film adaptation of J.G. Ballard's *Crash*, for example, remains banned from cinemas in the London borough of Westminster but in the same borough the book and the video are freely available.⁵ Although a best-selling novel, Just Jaeikin's 1975 film adaptation of Réage's *Histoire d'O* (which, incidentally, like Cronenberg's of *Crash*, is far less explicit and contains far less violence than the novel), remained banned by the British Board of Film Classification for 25 years. Similarly, although the Marquis de Sade's novels have been legally available in Britain since 1983, Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1975 film, *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* – an adaptation of Sade's

¹ Harrison, *Censorship*, 41. The high cost of volumes of Sade's writing was used by the defence in Pauvert's 1956 trial.

² Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyala*, trans. Richard Miller (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 36 fn12.

³ Harrison, *Censorship*, 60 notes how during the Pauvert trial, Sade's work was said to only really appeal to academics anyway. Again, audience is a factor in defining obscenity.

⁴ Patrick Ffrench, *The Cut/Reading Bataille's "Histoire de l'oeil"* (Oxford University Press and The British Academy: Oxford, 1999), 36, fn.

⁵ Travis, *Bound and Gagged*, 283-4.

Les cent vingt journées de Sodome – remained illegal in Britain until 2000 and in Australia until 1993 (where it was re-banned in 1998 and remains, to this day, illegal).

Today, it could be said that the visual is what is obscene, not the printed word. To say this, however, would be to forget that the obscene – especially when we consider it in legal terms as synonymous with the pornographic – is often accompanied by images in the form of sexually graphic illustrations¹ and to forget that words – especially obscene words (see ‘Obscene Words’ below) – are also visual, not least because they call specific images to the reader or listener’s consciousness.

To conclude this brief section on the legal history of obscenity I want to explore its relationship to pornography for the two terms – not simply, but often in legal terms – are frequently conflated. The law renders both types of material (if one accepts that they are two distinct types) a source of social disgust and danger in need of suppression or, at best, regulation. Like nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century lawyers, most commentators use ‘obscene’ and ‘pornographic’ interchangeably.² For others ‘there is a great deal of overlap between pornography and the obscene’ a recognition which suggests that they are distinct types of material which share common ground.³ Peter Michelson, for example, asserts that ‘hard-core’s [hard-core pornography’s] principal function is to evoke sexual obscenity’.⁴ Others, like St. John-Stevas, offer confusing attempts at defining two separate forms of material: ‘A pornographic book can be easily distinguished from an obscene book. A pornographic book, although obscene, is one deliberately designed to stimulate sex feelings ... An obscene book has no such immediate and dominant purpose’.⁵ Havelock Ellis defends the obscene and, curiously, dismisses pornography as ‘a vulgar, disgusting, and stupid form of obscenity’⁶ – ‘curiously’ because, well, isn’t *the obscene* generally, or at least in part, ‘disgusting’ and ‘vulgar’? And isn’t, in Ellis’s own words, pornography a ‘form of obscenity’? The layers of obscenity’s ambiguity and examples of its slippery ability to evade clear, accurate or universal definitions gradually mount. To address the

¹ Barthes, *Sade*, 26.

² For example: Pease, *Obscenity*, 35; Sontag ‘Pornographic Imagination’, 57, Morawski, ‘Art and Obscenity’, 193.

³ Frappier-Mazur, ‘Truth and the Obscene Word’, 205.

⁴ Michelson, *Unspeakable*, xii.

⁵ St. John-Stevas, *Obscenity*, 2.

⁶ Ellis, ‘Obscenity’, 135.

relationship between pornography and obscenity further demonstrates the obscene's ambiguous powers and some of the paradox underlying the legal association of one with the other.

These days it is a commonplace that what pornography is (and especially the line dividing 'hard-core' and 'soft-core' pornography) remains a contested question. Strict definitions of pornography remain elusive because, like fashion, morality, law, 'what one shouldn't read', and definitions of obscenity, they shift, not only according to individual taste but also through history and across cultures. Sexually explicit material legal in one country may be illegal in another. While it is legally not obscene in one country, individuals in both may call the same material obscene. As Peter Cryle confirms, 'Sex, or eros, or eroticism, cannot simply be taken to be the same at all times and in all places'.¹ As previously noted, issues of place, culture and text raise problems for a study which crosses centuries and cultures. Yet, in the modern West, culturally (generally speaking) and legally, obscenity and pornography carry negative connotations. Although less so today, in the past both terms have been used to justify the exclusion of texts from serious academic study. As we saw in the Introduction, this attitude is changing. Critics are increasingly realising that pornography 'matters' as an object of study. As Laura Kipnis notes 'Pornography is a form of cultural expression and though it's transgressive, disruptive, and hits below the belt ... it's an essential form of contemporary national culture'.² One could add that 'pornography' has been an essential form of expression in many cultures, not just contemporary ones. But, once again, what is pornography?

Despite, difficulty in reaching firm and universal definitions – in this sense there certainly *are* parallels with obscenity – most attempts to define the pornographic agree that it is bound by one common aim: to provide sexual arousal. Pornography, in the terms of writer and critic Angela Carter, is 'propaganda for fucking'.³ In its 'hard-core', cinematic form, pornography is, according to Linda Williams, 'the visual (and sometimes aural) representation of living, moving bodies engaged in explicit, usually unfaked, sexual acts *with a primary intent of arousing viewers*'.⁴ To paraphrase, today in Euro-America pornography is material which serves to sexually excite.

¹ Cryle, *Geometry*, 6.

² Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), viii.

³ Angela Carter, *Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (London: Virago, 1987), 15.

⁴ Williams, *Hard Core*, 30. (My emphasis).

'Propaganda for fucking' differs from the original definition of pornography. 'The notion of pornography,' writes Darnton, 'like the word itself, was developed in the nineteenth century ... strictly speaking, pornography belonged to the bowdlerisation of the world undertaken in the early Victorian era'.¹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates that it was in a medical dictionary in 1857 that 'pornography' as 'a description of prostitutes or of prostitution, as a matter of public hygiene', first appeared. (Given the subsequent close relationship between the two terms it is interesting to note the connection this definition forges between pornography and public hygiene and the model of 'obscenity' that emerged in the same year. Lest we forget, in 1857 'obscene' was also first legally defined). The definition of pornography soon stretched to the 'description of the life, manners, etc., of prostitutes and their patrons; hence, the expression or suggestion of obscene or unchaste subjects in literature and art'.

On closer inspection, interesting questions arise regarding the modern (i.e. nineteenth century to present) conflation of the pornographic and the obscene. The modern understanding of pornography is material that is pleasurable. It is 'sexually titillating'. The 'short-hand' modern understanding of obscenity is something that is loathsome. Although in the eyes of the law both terms have become synonymous, we find an interesting paradox.

For most people, something that repulses is not titillating. Of course, judging from the pornographic material available – spanking, bestiality, coprophagia, incest, old men and women, children, urination, rape scenarios (both male and female), straight, lesbianism, homosexuality, bisexuality, 'she-males', 'gang banging', S/M, bondage and discipline, animated porn, anal sex, 'fisting', and even tickling – contemporary humanity exhibits a vast range of sexual predilections, or, at the very least, a seemingly boundless curiosity about human sexual behaviour and the bodies of others. Although no one talks of (as far as I am aware) an 'obscenity industry', the 'porn industry', like any other, is governed by rules of supply and demand. Although it is unlikely that any one individual would find all of the above 'pornography' titillating, considering the size of the pornography industry it obviously appeals to someone. In 1996 North Americans alone spent more than \$8 billion on hard-core videos, peepshows, live sex acts, adult cable programming, Internet

¹ Darnton, *Forbidden*, 87-88.

pornography and pornographic magazines.¹ No equivalent record exists for the amount spent on explicitly violent films, videos, computer games, comics and books.²

Confirming the ‘dangerously vague’ definitions of ‘pornography’ and ‘obscenity’, it is occasionally (and accurately) noted that one person’s soft core is another’s hard core. One person’s source of titillation is another’s image of obscenity. We might also suggest that some may find images, acts, or objects simultaneously repulsive and titillating – repulsive because it is titillating or titillating because it is repulsive. And certainly there is the thrill of witnessing something prohibited. Whether an act visually represented or described in writing, erotic interest derives from the fact that what is being witnessed is something taboo, something private, and something hidden from the public stage, a secret.³ Debate continues over whether obscene books – the books in the chapters which follow – really *are* pornographic or not.⁴ In an attempt to impose a hierarchy within the ‘low’ material of pornography, Sontag’s ‘The Pornographic Imagination’ argues for different categories within the pornographic genre – divisions between ‘literary’ pornography and mass-market, pulp pornography.

Sontag’s essay is important but also misleading. According to Sontag, ‘what pornography is really about, ultimately, isn’t sex, but death’.⁵ This conclusion stands in stark contrast to the definitions given by the vast majority of other commentators (see above). To qualify her definition Sontag illustrates her argument with three particularly unconventional (‘unconventional’ in terms of pornography) and graphically violent texts – two of which provide the focus of later chapters: Bataille’s *Histoire de l’oeil*, Réage’s *Histoire d’O*, and Jean de Berg’s *L’image* (1956). Literary in style, these texts contain graphic descriptions of not only sex but sexual violence and murder. For these reasons can these books really be taken as representatives of pornography? Or are they a kind of sub-genre of pornography? And is there really hierarchy within the ‘low’?

¹ Figures from Alix Sharkey, ‘The Land of the Free,’ *Guardian Weekend* [London] 22 Nov. 1997: 14.

² Michelson, *Unspeakable*, xi: notes that although violence is often obscene it is ‘graphically pervasive in our society in a way that sex is not’. Thus, violence attracts less opprobrium and labels of obscenity than sexually graphic scenes or events.

³ Morawski, ‘Art and Obscenity’, 195. Morawski notes that although sex is inherently not obscene, viewing or portraying it for others – the private entering the public domain – makes it so.

⁴ Jean Goulemot, ‘Sadean Novels and Pornographic Novels: Narration, Its Objectives and Its Effects,’ trans. Jonathan M. Weiss, *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* 23:1 (2000), 64-66.

⁵ Sontag, ‘Pornographic Imagination’, 60.

Some of these issues are best discussed in relation to a specific example. Therefore, to leap ahead for a moment to the work of Sade, we could question his categorisation as ‘pornographic’ on grounds of (as Darnton points out) anachronicity. That said, as Frappier-Mazur notes, Sade’s writing is so indebted to the French erotic tradition of the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries, is it really accurate to set Sade’s work apart from it?¹ Certainly, some scenes in Sade’s writing are conventionally pornographic – but it is never long before these descriptions segue into extreme violence. These violent passages throw a questioning light back onto the more ‘titillating’ scenes. As we will see in Chapter Two, death in many guises does lie at the centre of Sade’s writing (as in all the obscene books in the chapters to come), but it is debatable as to whether death can be seen as central to pornography. Rather, death is part of obscenity and gives the obscene its power and fascination (Sontag notes in a different essay that death is ‘the obscene mystery of life’).² Of course, I am oversimplifying: obscene texts are more than simply ‘about’ death just as pornography is ‘about’ more than just sex. However, anyone with knowledge of pornography would agree that although sometimes present, violence, dead bodies and mutilation are hardly representational or conventional within the genre (Gilles Deleuze notes that in ‘pornography’ when ‘violence and eroticism meet they do so in a ‘rudimentary fashion’ unlike that presented by Sade and Sacher-Masoch’).³

If the texts Sontag bases her argument on are not conventionally pornographic then can Sontag’s interpretation be accurately applied to the aims of pornography in general? To call Sade’s work pornography denies the scenes of horror that fill large sections of his narratives. As one critic says of *Histoire d’O*, “‘pornography’ no more encompasses *Story of O* than “chivalric novel” encompasses *Don Quixote*’.⁴ It could be said that labelling Sade’s work ‘pornographic’ is misleading. However, even by today’s standard, it is difficult to define Sade’s work as (at least constantly) sexually stimulating. Moreover, a text or image which portrays graphic scenes of sex (and indeed violence) need not do so as a celebration of them. Thus, when she admits that he is ‘uncommon amongst pornographers in that he rarely, if ever, makes sexual activity seem immediately attractive as such’,⁵ cracks appear in Carter’s description of Sade’s writing as ‘pornographic’. According to Carter’s

¹ Frappier-Mazur, *Writing the Orgy*, 208 fn.8.

² Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor, AIDS and its Metaphors* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 56.

³ Deleuze, *Coldness*, 17.

⁴ David Mickelson, ‘X-Rated O,’ *Western Humanities Review* 31 (1978), 173.

⁵ Carter, *Sadeian Woman*, 24.

own definition of pornography ('propaganda for fucking'), Sade is no pornographer. The tone of Sade's work is set early on in *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* when one of the first scenes describes a priest whose passion is eating girls' snot (277/89). 'Nobody,' confirms Bataille, 'unless he is totally deaf to it, can finish *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* without feeling sick: the sickest is he who is sexually excited by the book'.¹ Jean Marie Goulemot echoes these sentiments: 'the tableaux presented are not generally intended as sensual. Blows, mutilations and the insistent recourse to coprophagy are not means apt to give rise to desire'.² This is not, as Denis de Rougement claims, a 'glorification of sex'.³ In fact, it is difficult to find in *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* – as with the other obscene books considered – glorification of either sex or violence. This is not to say that there isn't a form of desire buried within the obscene and it is certainly risky to impose generality on particularity in relation to the sexual or the obscene. Confirming this suggestion, Robert Stoller offers a less rigidly dualistic view – and one which chimes with the fascination which accompanies ostensibly repulsive obscene literature. The obscene is forbidden but because forbidden, it is tempting. For Stoller only certain things are obscene and these things are those which carry a socially unacceptable form of satisfaction. Part of the fascination, the thrill that the obscene exerts, is that it is deemed dangerous, part of the taboo world. Obscenity, says Stoller, 'is a form of unaccepted desire ... it (creates) a form of excitement, an anticipation of danger'.⁴ What we learn from this brief discussion is that where sexually graphic material is concerned simple delineations of repulsion and disgust versus titillation and attraction prove problematic.

Even if it is not important to this study whether obscene books are a sub-genre of pornography or deserve a separate classification, Stoller's is a useful model to keep in mind. By drawing attention to these tensions (tensions between the pleasurable and the disgusting), my wish is not to distance obscene material from the pornographic in a way which separates material 'worthy' of study from the 'unworthy'. The two – if we continue to call 'pornography' and 'obscene' 'two' – types of material are bound by the same 'low' (physical, sexual) motifs and negative connotations which culture gives them, negative connotations which, since the earliest obscene libel trials have been associated with

¹ Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1997), 121.

² Goulemot, *Forbidden Texts*, 78.

³ Denis de Rougement, *Love in the Western World*, trans. Montgomery Belgion (Princeton and New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 212.

⁴ Stoller, *Erotic Imagination*, 88-89.

morality. Perhaps it is worth noting that the reading which I wish to give is not a moral one. This study does not approach the obscene or obscene books from the point of view, or with the aim of reaching, a moral judgement. 'Obscene' and 'pornography' are useful categories but I believe to avoid moral judgements allows us to see obscenity as a changing aesthetic form, not as something inherently contagious or evil (although these are some of the ways in which obscene literature has been viewed).

Legal definitions have proved vital in shaping the reputation of obscene literature and the way it is viewed today as much as in the past. The law has shaped society's attitude towards the obscene and in turn has been influenced by the fears of successive cultures and eras. There are, however, limits to relying on, or regarding obscene books solely through, their notorious legal battles and the accompanying legal definitions. 'Obscene' does not mean just one thing. Certain things are obscene and still in the eyes of the law today (and, even two hundred years ago in Britain and France) we find the recurrent motif of the human body. But whether 'we' find these depictions of bodies in various poses engaged in certain acts obscene or not has always been a strongly subjective and relative judgement.

Summarising the legal obscene further illustrates the curious and complex dynamics at work behind the banning of 'obscene' material. It recognises that obscenity is powerful. Yet, if the obscene were really so loathsome there would be no need to legislate against it. Curiously, for something that society and accepted standards of morality are supposed to exhibit extreme aversion to, 'filthy', 'loathsome', 'disgusting', obscene material was deemed capable of corrupting entire generations of healthy, morally sound innocents. (At least, they were morally sound until they read the book . . . but then if morally sound *why* would they read the book? And if the book were really obscene – 'loathsome' – why would they *want* to read the book?). Underlying laws against obscenity is recognition that fascination accompanies taboos and that, as Stoller observed, obscenity is haunted by desire and the excitement of danger. Prohibitions themselves have increased interest in obscene books and influenced who reads them and how and why they are read (by being forbidden, obscene texts come to exert a mysterious fascination – of which more is said in 'The Psychology of Obscenity' and 'Obscenity and Society'). On another level, social mores change. What was once deemed threateningly contagious today hardly merits comment (at least in terms of its once scandalous obscene content). Books like Joyce's *Ulysses* and Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* and the even more 'obscene', violent, and explicit works of Sade once banned for having the power to 'deprave and corrupt' are now works of literary importance. Gradually, as Fredric Jameson has noted (he calls it a process of 'universalization'), in its struggle to maintain superiority and vitality 'high culture' – in

terms of art and class and acceptable social behaviour – frequently appropriates and assimilates into itself the culturally ‘low’.¹ Jameson talks about how ‘vernacular language’ is ‘reappropriated by the exhausted and media-standardised speech of a hegemonic middle class’.² So, we could add, the culturally low has long been assimilated into the ‘hegemonic middle class’ of academia. By not being explicitly prohibited the risk and temptation which obscene books once posed is gradually decreasing. That said, sexual (especially ‘perverse’) and violent practices have always been areas surrounded by a different kind of prohibition: social taboos. In this sense, depictions of these taboo acts will always maintain a level of forbidden temptation and will always appear as a domain of forbidden knowledge.

From a different perspective, it could be said that, as the changing legal obscene has shown, desire overwhelms disgust. Or, perhaps disgust simply shifts into fields anew (even the once-banned films mentioned above are now available to buy or rent. . . but at the time of writing, images showing the abuse of prisoners of war are deemed too graphic to show on TV. Could this imply ‘too obscene?’). Culture changes, so do its borders and beliefs. So does obscenity – at least in terms of its legal definition. But could there be a universal concept of the obscene? The obscene is revealing itself to be an ambiguous force so is it right to say that obscenity only changes in relation to time and culture? Is there a core, universal component to the obscene? Where, indeed, does the word ‘obscene’ come from?

2. The Etymology of ‘Obscene’

Initially, to trace obscene’s etymological roots confirms its ambiguity. These roots are unclear. St. John-Stevas’s study of obscene literature and the law goes so far as to call obscenity’s etymology ‘disputed and ... not enlightening’.³ I disagree. Not with the fact that various origins have been proposed but that these etymological proposals are unenlightening: they provide insight into the way culture has tried (and tries) to map out the threatening and ambiguous (ambiguous because, as we have already observed, it contains a

¹ Jameson, ‘Interpretation’, 86-7.

² Jameson, ‘Interpretation’, 87.

³ St. John-Stevas, *Obscenity*, 1.

twin dynamic; ambiguous because even its etymological roots are vague) region of the 'obscene'.

According to the apparently decisive definition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the English adjective 'obscene' is a Latin derivative (perhaps gained in the sixteenth century via the French *obscène*) from the word *obscænus*. *Obscænus* had a range of meanings: 'inauspicious, ill-omened, adverse' from which emerges the *OED*'s first definition: the 'synonyms' mentioned in the Introduction of 'disgusting, repulsive, filthy, foul, abominable, loathsome'. A second definition is given as 'Offensive to modesty or decency; expressing or suggesting unchaste or lustful ideas, impure, indecent, lewd'. Two further entries are noted as obsolete: 'obscene parts' (meaning the genitals) and a final, brief entry which returns us to the Latin associations: 'ill-omened, inauspicious'.

In fact, the further one looks the less decisive definitions and the etymology of the obscene become. *Obscænus* – 'ill-omened' – is only one of four proposed etymological origins. An entry in Larousse's *Grande Encyclopédie du XIX^e siècle* suggests that *obscænus* derives from *obscævare* and *obscævinus*, words created from the preposition *ob* ('in front of', 'for', 'on account of', or 'for the sake of') and *scaevus*, meaning 'on the left', 'perverse', 'ill-omened'. The *Larousse* entry describes how the left-hand side has always had sinister connotations and how, in primitive times, the left hand was destined for 'filthy usage' in a 'daily operation, which shall remain unnamed ... [and] which is no longer required, thanks to the grace of civilised progress and the invention of [toilet] paper'.¹ From these anthropological and etymological origins therefore, the obscene finds itself associated with primitive (uncivilised) practices and the left, the sinister and human excrement.²

Havelock Ellis alludes to two further possible origins of 'obscene'. In passing, he mentions a connection seldom evoked by dictionaries, encyclopaedias or, these days, by writers. Via the Latin *obscurus* ('dark, shady, hidden, indistinct, unknown, ignoble'), Ellis points to a suggested link to today's 'obscure' – defined by the *OED* as 'dark, dim' and the 'dark or invisible heat rays of the solar spectrum'.³ This, however, is not the definition which Ellis prefers. 'By the "obscene",' he states, 'we may properly mean what is "off the stage," and not openly shown on the stage of life'.⁴ In this final etymological root, Ellis

¹ Pierre Larousse, 'Obscene', *Grande Encyclopédie du XIX^e siècle*, *Traverses* 29 (1983), 135. As a point of interest, the same custom continues in Muslim countries today.

² Jean-Toussaint Desanti, 'L'obscène ou les malices du signifiant,' *Traverses* 29 (1983), 128-133. I am indebted to Desanti's article for its overviews of the etymology of the obscene.

³ Ellis, 'Obscenity', 103 fn1.

⁴ Ellis, 'Obscenity', 104. Cf. Michelson, *Unspeakable*, xi.

derives obscene from the Latin *obscænus* from *scæna* meaning ‘stage, stage setting, limelight, public life and outward appearance’. Ellis concedes that ‘stage’ itself is probably not an appropriate translation. After all, it has often been in the theatre – in Classical times as well as modern – that obscene acts have openly been shown. Thus perhaps instead of ‘stage’, the root *obscænus* could be rendered along the lines of ‘for the sake of public life’ or ‘on account of public appearance’.¹

It could be suggested that French and German culture (let’s not forget that three texts in this study are written in French and one in German) have different associations with the obscene. Perhaps in these languages the word for ‘obscene’ itself has different etymological origins. This, however, is not the case: the French *obscène* and the German *obszön* (like the Spanish *obsceno* and Italian’s *osceno*) share the same (ambiguous) Latinate roots. The *Larousse* has already been quoted; German encyclopaedias, dictionaries and the *Duden Etymologie* repeat the definitions with which we are already familiar. The roots are the same, the meanings are the same: *obszön* (dating from around 1700) means indecent, offensive and risqué [‘*unandständig, anstössig, schlüpfrig*’]; it is associated with shameful sexual and scatological [*Fäkalbiech*] acts; with that which is off the stage [‘*ausserhalb der Szene, Bühne*’] and, as French and English sources similarly state, its etymological origins are not clear [‘*dessen etymologische ... nicht eindeutig geklärt ist*’]. One interesting association found in the *Duden Wörterbuch* however defines *obszön* as that which provokes indignation. Yet, rather than images, words, or gestures, the *Duden* gives the example of violence and death, namely war [*Krieg*] as an obscene object.

What does this exploration of the obscene’s etymological roots tell us? Firstly, obscene as it is – and apparently has always been – understood is something which is intangible. It is an emotive response to filth or a foreboding premonition, something hidden, dark, away from public life. It is more than a feeling of offence to modesty or, as it has come to signify in narrow legal terms, ‘hard core’ pornography. In one sense therefore, judgements of the obscene emerge from a human emotive response. As William Ian Miller’s *Anatomy of Disgust* (1998) shows, disgust is far more than a simple emotion and even if inadequate in relaying all that obscene implies it is connected to the obscene. The roots proposed for the obscene lend it associations of threat and foreboding; a sense of darkness, otherness, impurity, sexuality, concealment, and primitive power (recall the reasons Larousse gives for its associations with the sinister left). There is more here than, to recall Frappier-Mazur, ‘little doubt about the meaning of the word [obscene]’.

¹ See also Desanti, ‘L’obscène,’ 130. *Ob*, if directly translated into English, does not mean ‘off’. In Latin, ‘off’ is usually rendered by the prefix *ab-* or the adverb *procul*.

This etymological attempt to map out the region of the obscene illustrates that it has always been more than a list of synonyms for disgust. Another crucial aspect to the obscene sets it apart from simple filth and disgust. This aspect tends to be overlooked by the word's etymological maps – or rather, this aspect could be seen as implicit in their definitions, but rarely emphasised. The obscene is 'for the sake of public appearance'; its roots, it has been suggested, reach back to primitive social and excretory customs and in the legal definitions considered earlier, obscene material is nearly always that which depicts or describes human bodies. Within these facets is an element of the uniquely human – whether human on a physical, subjective or social level. We cannot, for example, imagine animals judging something obscene or the sight of elephants involved in full penetration being obscene. Yet, let us be clear that something disgusting does not equate to something obscene. Judgements of the obscene derive from human responses; it seems that an element of humanity is also necessarily present in that which evokes the label 'obscene'. Let me illustrate.

Many things are disgusting: odours, the skin on cold coffee, the sight of carcasses at an abattoir, a dog turd on the pavement. Most people in Western culture would find these things variously disgusting, repulsive, filthy, unpleasant – or perhaps even (if confronted by them every day) indifferent – but not obscene. Now let me add something to the turd scenario: a man. He approaches the turd, picks it up and devours it. Now what is your reaction? Almost certainly more intense. I say 'almost' because, in the ambiguous realm of obscenity, little is certain. Yet, the simple and vital injection of the human to this scenario, the human in order to be *de*-humanised, pushes it towards, if not into, the obscene. By approaching the obscene this scene gathers threatening power. Our revulsion intensifies. The legal reception, the social outrage, and at times the academic indignation directed towards obscene books indicates how extreme and aggressive, perhaps even fearful, cultural reaction can be towards the *fictional* (not even real) portrayal of obscene acts such as the violation of taboos and human bodies.

Of course, not only does the obscene have different definitions and origins; different things can be described as obscene. So far the definitions considered concern sexual, scatological, or violent acts, bodies engaged in sexual or scatological practices, or bodies in the process of being violated. Ample examples of this kind of obscenity appear in the books I consider. As these scenes are explored in the chapters which follow I am not giving examples at this stage. However, in a study on *reading* the obscene we should not forget the words themselves.

3. Obscene Words

Most encyclopaedia entries on obscenity contain cursory reference to ‘obscene language’. Although obscene words and gestures may be easier to define than an overall concept of the obscene – as Frappier-Mazur notes ‘obscene language, more directly than ordinary language, relates to the body and to its drives’¹ – there is more to obscene words (just as there is to the obscene) than simple definitions. In relation to the universality of the obscene, it is perhaps worth noting that the concept of obscene words is not exclusive to Western cultures – Allen Walker Read for instance, talks about obscene words in the language of Mitakoodi Aborigines² – and they are not a recent social creation: in the Bible, Paul urges the Ephesians to engage in ‘Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient’ (Ephesians 5:4).

Nowadays it is a commonplace that language is what creates us (literally and grammatically) as subjects. It perpetuates ideologies and societies. It is, as Georges Bataille notes, ‘by definition the expression of civilised man’ and ‘civilised’ language shies away from articulating the non-civilised – violence, excess, the obscene.³ Expressing such things belongs to language’s vulgar or obscene register. This register operates in distinct ways, has its own history, is culturally specific, and makes specific demands on the reader. When considering obscene literature we need to explore the words themselves and how they are part of the obscene. After all, despite their notoriety and the scandals and trials which they have caused, what we understand as obscene literature is ‘only’ words (sometimes accompanied by illustrations) printed on paper. In terms of obscene literature therefore, it could be said that words and only words are the obscene. Further, in terms of obscene books translated into other languages we can find evidence of how culturally and historically specific obscene phrases are by noting how translators insert other kinds of obscenity into the text. Sometimes, perhaps influenced by the reputation of the original text, these insertions exaggerate the content of the original.

Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver, translators of the standard English edition of Sade’s work, provide frequent examples of one kind of ‘mistranslation’ by exaggerating

¹ Frappier-Mazur, ‘Truth and the Obscene Word’, 213.

² Read, ‘Obscenity Symbol’, 266.

³ Bataille, *Eroticism*, 186.

the profanation of the original through injecting extra obscene language. One example from their translation of *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* is illustration enough. ““Oh yes, by Jesus,” said he [one of Sade’s villains], “yes, by the Saviour’s fuck, you shall be spanked, my little rascal [...] Ah, by God’s balls, my friends, a pucelage!”” (510-11). Contrasting with these colourful invectives, the corresponding lines in the French Pléiade edition read, ““*Oh! Oui, parbleu, petite coquine, lui dit-il. Oh! oui, parbleu, vous serez corrigée, et de ma main encore [...] Ah! sacredieu, mes amis, voilà un pucelage!*”” (265-66). Although profanation, according to *Le petit Robert* ‘parbleu’ and ‘sacredieu’ (like ‘pardieu’) are intensifying exclamations which *Le Robert* and the *Collins* French-English dictionary translate as ‘By Jove’.¹ In other words, ‘parbleu’ and the like need not be rendered using the obscene slang which Seaver and Wainhouse choose.

Another example from the opening page of the English translation of Bataille’s *Histoire de l’oeil* illustrates more significant alterations – and additions – to obscene content. In this scene, a young female character lifts her skirt and sits in a saucer of milk which has been poured for a cat. The French reads, ““*Les assiettes, c’est fait pour s’asseoir, n’est-ce pas, me dit Simone*””.² The pun here is linguistic, one of many which occur throughout the novel which depend on (semi-)homonyms for their effect (see Chapter Four). Thus, in this line, the noun ‘assiettes’ (‘plates’) chimes with the vowel ‘s’asseoir’ (to sit) and roughly translated the sentence means ““Plates are for sitting in, aren’t they?” said Simone to me’. In stark contrast the most recent translator of the novel (Joachim Neugroschal) injects a very different pun, one far coarser and more vulgar. Demonstrating how scenes can be altered when crossing in translation from one language and society to another, Neugroschal’s pun operates around not word sounds but slang associations more familiar to English-speaking readers. Consequently, in the Penguin edition, the line becomes, ““Milk is for the pussy, isn’t it?” said Simone’.³ Thus, Bataille’s linguistic pun becomes Neugroschal’s ‘dirty’ joke.

The role of words in creating the obscene has been well illustrated in Barthes’s study of Sade. ‘Let us, if we can, imagine a society without language,’ writes Barthes. He continues,

¹ *Le petit Robert*, 1357; *Le Robert and Collins Super Senior French-English Dictionary* (Paris and Glasgow: Harpercollins, 2000), 670.

² Georges Bataille, *Histoire de l’oeil, Oeuvres complètes: premiers écrits 1922-1940*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 13.

³ Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, trans. Joachim Neugroschal, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), 10.

Here is a man copulating with a woman, *a tergo*, and using in the act a bit of wheat paste. On this level, no perversion. Only by the progressive addition of some nouns does the crime gradually *develop* ... The man is called the *father* of the woman he is possessing, who is described as being *married*; the amorous act is ignominiously *sodomy*; and the bit of bread bizarrely associated in this act becomes, under the noun *host*, a religious symbol whose flouting is sacrilege.¹

Barthes's example shows how words are more than simply words. As signifiers, they tie into webs of symbolic systems each with specific cultural associations. I do not want to venture deeper into the theory of structuralism and linguistics; it is sufficient to see from Barthes's example some of the ways in which language operates. Latin terms – such as *a tergo* – are respectable, the reserve of the educated, high-brow, the scientific and religious communities. Latin – *in flagrante delicto*, *a tergo* – frequently punctuates nineteenth-century sexological studies as a kind of code which could not corrupt the uninitiated. The same is true in English of all Latin derivatives: 'Vulva' entered English in the sixteenth century from Greek via New Latin. 'Penis', 'sexual intercourse', and 'vagina' (from the Latin for 'sheath') came from Latin words and entered the language in the seventeenth century. 'Faeces' entered English earlier, but again is a Latin term. None of these are obscene words. Thus, not all words which relate to the body and to its drives (or, we can add, bodily excretions) are obscene.

Indeed, obscene words have not always been an inadmissible part of language. As Read reminds us, although some dictionaries today do not have entries for obscene words, those of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries contained entries for 'fuck'. Only in the eighteenth century, for reasons of 'modesty', did Samuel Johnson decide not to include 'four-letter' words in his dictionary. It was a decision many congratulated him on. Not until the end of the nineteenth century, when the *Oxford English Dictionary* was in preparation (and probably due to its proposed, scholarly audience) were 'four-letter words' returned to the 'official' pages of English.² Even today, however, these obscene words remain absent from the pages of dictionaries used in English and American schools – an absence which, for some, stokes the mysterious aura of obscene words.³ Nevertheless, whether in dictionaries or not, obscene words remain set apart from other kinds of language. They are the vulgar register of a language. In terms of excretory functions, sexual acts and organs,

¹ Barthes, *Sade*, 156. (Barthes's emphasis).

² Read, 'Obscenity Symbol', 268-74.

³ Read, 'Obscenity Symbol', 267. Also see 'Obscenity and Society'.

obscene words are the opposite of the respectable 'High' words represented by Latin and its derivatives.

Slang is also a coarse, 'low' register but it does not always equate to obscenity. 'Wang', 'muff', 'butt', and 'shag' are slang. Like obscene words they conjure up with immediacy 'low' body parts and acts but they are not the same. 'Muff' does not carry the obscene weight of the word 'cunt'. Consider this example: 'He boinked her in the butt' compared to 'He fucked her in the arse'. The slang sentence lacks the hostile undertones of the sentence containing obscene words ('fuck' and 'arse').¹ Stoller reminds us that the word 'obscene' carries aggressive connotations: even our emotions are shocked, as if we had been physically struck.² In contrast to the obscene sentence also, the slang words convey a more comic tone – this could be the language of the risqué joke, not of obscene books. Dark humour (as we will see in the chapters to come) is present in obscene literature but obscene words themselves are not close to the comic. There is a fine but significant difference. They are closer, as Frappier-Mazur notes, not to comedy but 'to laughter ... to the preverbal semiotic than to the symbolic'.³

Frappier-Mazur's comparison of obscene language with the preverbal conveys a sense that obscene words cast back to a primitive pre-symbolic stage of individual and social development. This is a stage before the laws and demands of a culture have worked, through language, to control instinctual drives and inject the subject into the accepted ideologies of its culture. Of course, words change over time – and slang perhaps more rapidly than others. Allen Read notes that sixteenth-century obscene verbs 'jape', 'sard' and 'swive' have all disappeared from English.⁴ Nineteenth-century Americans demonstrated absolute aversion to the word 'leg' ('benders' being the polite term), something they no longer do.⁵ *My Secret Life* (1888-92), an English classic of nineteenth-century erotica/autobiography, contains slang like 'quim' (only occasionally used today) and 'gamahuching' (obsolete). Whether these words were regarded as slang by readers at the time, or as obscenity, is difficult to say. Considering that even today obscene books evoke different responses in different readers, judging how obscene a word was regarded is one of

¹ Frappier-Mazur, 'Truth and the Obscene Word', 204.

² Stoller, *Erotic Imagination*, 88. 'To experience something as obscene, we must *feel* shocked. A shock is a blow, as if we have been physically struck.' (Stoller's emphasis).

³ Frappier-Mazur, *Writing the Orgy*, 139.

⁴ Read, 'Obscenity Symbol', 276.

⁵ Read, 'Obscenity Symbol', 265.

the difficulties with judging obscenity in context. As Robert Darnton points out in relation to eighteenth-century forbidden French writing, ‘we can only guess at its effects on the hearts and minds of the readers. Inner appropriation ... may remain beyond the range of research’.¹

That said, unlike slang, most obscene words have remained constant for a very long time. Obscene words *are* older, more ‘primitive’, than their acceptable equivalents (although, ironically, not as old in terms of the Latinate etymological roots of their acceptable equivalents – rather, simply less ‘civilised’). In English ‘cock’, ‘prick’, ‘shit’ and ‘tit’ have Old English roots (in *cocc*, *prica*, *scite* and *titt*). ‘Cunt’ is a thirteenth-century derivative from the Middle Low German *kunte* and, one of the most recently acquired obscene words in English, ‘fuck’, is a sixteenth-century addition from the Middle Dutch, *fokken*. This word makes explicit the violent undertones of much obscene language for *fokken* actually meant ‘to strike’ as in ‘hit’.² ‘Breast’ is the only word (that I have found) which is both related to the body’s sexuality and derives from Old English (*breost*) but retains respectable overtones. Obscene words in French share these older roots. Ironically (and unlike their English equivalents) many French obscene words originate in the same language – Latin – which provides Western cultures with their respectable referents for body parts and sexual acts. Thus, ‘con’, ‘foutre’ (the verb), ‘cul’ and ‘merde’ all first appeared in the thirteenth century from the Latin – respectively *cunnus*, *futuere*, *culus* and *merda*.³ Other French slang and obscene words, such as ‘bite’, ‘téton’, ‘queue’ emerged in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries usually from older French words.

According to Frappier-Mazur, obscene words operate unlike the typical signifiers of culture’s symbolic system. Although Barthes is technically correct when he asserts that ‘when written, shit [the word] does not have an odour’⁴ the word itself is capable of conjuring up an imaginary image and odour. This example illustrates that obscene words have an immediacy about them. For any word to ‘work’ of course, it must be read, it must mean something to the reader in order to conjure in the reader’s mind that which it signifies. In this sense, obscene language forces the reader to imagine the object it denotes and not another. I say ‘forces’ but the irony of obscene literature – which many of its writers are

¹ Darnton, *Forbidden*, 85 and 185.

² Read, ‘Obscenity Symbol’, 268 notes that ‘fuck’ was first used in English in a Scottish poem written at the end of the fifteenth century.

³ According to *Le petit Robert*, ‘Foutre’ only gained vulgar connotations at the end of the eighteenth century.

⁴ Barthes, *Sade*, 137.

aware of – is that obscene words require a (perhaps involuntary) complicity on the part of the reader to visualise the ‘low’ acts and ‘shameful’ body parts to which the words refer. Unlike other signifiers, such as ‘house’, ‘boy’ or ‘flower’, ‘cunt’ (, with, I imagine, minor cosmetic variations – and setting aside Derridean slippages or dissemination) causes an image – the same immediate image – to appear in every reader’s mind. Obscene word and obscene image; signifier and signified are almost – not quite, but almost – the same. This is the point which Frappier-Mazur makes in relation to obscene literature where the recurrent unit, often the obscene word itself (although, as we will see, obscene literature does not necessarily contain obscene language and it also has the capacity to render ‘high’, Latinate terms, ‘low’), becomes a potent substitute for the object it represents. ‘The obscene word,’ she writes, ‘not only represents, but replaces, its referent. It acts as a substitute for, indeed sometimes as an improvement over, its referent ... Unlike other words, the obscene word not only represents, but is, the thing itself’.¹ Perhaps this is what Barthes also has in mind when he refers to Sade’s crude words as ‘pure’, stubbornly symbolising nothing but themselves like (and note again the link to the primitive) ‘a kind of Adamic language’.² Stephen Marcus makes a similar observation when he talks of how pornographic writing ‘tries desperately to go beneath and behind language; it vainly tries to reach what language cannot directly express but can only point toward ... This effort explains in part why pornography is also the repository of the forbidden, tabooed words. The peculiar power of such words has to do with their primitiveness’.³

Although we should not ignore the fact that, at times, obscene words become conventional manners of speech, rendered more or less meaningless by their frequency,⁴ in general, obscene words maintain an arcane kind of power. Language gives the symbolic order its strength and authority; it creates divisions between things: inside and outside, man and father, human and animal.⁵ In contrast, obscene words are like the return of a more primitive form of communication, shattering the decorum of civilised language and its politically weighted hierarchy of high/low, pure/impure. Consider for example how the appearance of obscene words in obscene literature causes an unsettling juxtaposition: the

¹ Frappier-Mazur, ‘Truth and the Obscene Word’, 221.

² Barthes, *Sade*, 134.

³ Marcus, *Victorians*, 280.

⁴ Read, ‘Obscenity Symbol’, 274-75.

⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 14.

revealing of the low within the discourse of the high for, conventionally and historically, books are the domain of High culture and reading them is a civilising pursuit, benevolent and educational. Obscene words (and literature) are the crude within the polite. The utterance of an obscene word by an aristocratic character constitutes another example of the shattering of decorum evinced by the obscene. In other ways too obscenity is constituted by moments when the world of respectable, civilised order, is fractured by the crude: my example of the dog turd is a moment when civilised man clashes powerfully with the low. Another might be when man's noble and discrete form is reduced to the formless, excrement and entrails.

It has been suggested that part of the power of obscene discourse is that it operates by speaking a kind of unspeakable linguistic truth. Obscene words are 'vulgar', 'dirty' words. In this, as Denis Hollier has revealed in relation to Bataille's use of obscene language, they 'say' what 'acceptable' language does not.¹ The obscene word cuts through the respectable. Michelson notes that in the context of pornography, 'dirty' words are both 'an aphrodisiac and a repudiation of social restrictions'.² Obscene words avow the impropriety, the 'dirtiness', of those human body parts and actions – cock, cunt, fucking – which, in their bid to maintain civilised propriety, medical and respectable Latinate words do not convey. Obscene words shock by reminding us of the inexorable proximity of the low, the vulgar, the uncivilised and the primitive even within the most 'civilised' societies and their social restrictions.

4. The Psychology of Obscenity

'The English word disgust', writes William Miller in his excellent study, 'and related ones like revulsion, repulsiveness, abhorrence, describe an emotional syndrome that in its *rough* contours is a universal feature of human psychic and social-psychological experience'.³ My reason for returning to disgust, which as we have seen is *part of* our reaction to the obscene,

¹ Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge Mass. and London: October Books, MIT Press, 1992), 106. Hollier's argument also contains reference to obscene words as the 'unspoken' and the 'uncivilised'.

² Michelson, *Unspeakable*, 48.

³ Miller, *Disgust*, 10.

is that people do not 'feel' the obscene. When they apprehend the obscene people *feel* disgust, repulsion etc., but that is not all. They also feel fascination and temptation. As Robert Stoller has noted, if the obscene was simply the unclean, it would be washed; if it was purely disgusting, our gaze would be averted: there would be no trials, no conferences, it would hold little public interest. 'Obsceneness and disgustingness ... are not synonymous. Disgust is in the nose, mouth, and gorge; it has to do especially with smells, tastes, and palpable qualities of objects. The obscene is more in the mind'.¹ Thus, the effect of these texts is not just physical; it is profoundly psychological too. Considering human emotional and psychological responses requires analysis of this psychology. In this way disgust gives an insight into *why* the obscene is so powerful. Why, after all, does the obscene evoke responses of disgust, aversion, fear, horror and fascination? (Confirming that obscene literature evokes these responses, Pierre Klossowski said of Sade's writing that, 'our [the reader's] impulses intimidate us in the form of "fear," "compassion," "horror"').²

Miller posits that disgust is a universal human response and one of the basic human emotions (he writes 'to feel disgust is human and humanising').³ If disgust is a universal emotion we could surmise by extension that equivalents to the obscene – that which causes extreme disgust *and* temptation – are also universal. Thus, Ellis writes, 'obscenity ... corresponds to a deep need of the human mind'⁴ and Sontag observes that in the writing of Sade, Bataille and Réage the obscene occurs as 'a primal notion of human consciousness ... much more profound than the backwash of society's aversion to the body'.⁵

As an emotion designed for survival, disgust distances the organism from potentially dangerous (in the sense of diseased, rotten or unhygienic) matter.⁶ Integral to this response is fear. Naturally, not everything which is disgusting evokes fear – I'm not afraid when I taste sour milk. Yet times exist when the two emotions are experienced together. As a linguistic example, Miller gives the common collocation 'fear and loathing'.⁷ Usually this confluence occurs when we feel intense disgust. On these occasions disgust is the

¹ Stoller, *Erotic Imagination*, 89.

² Pierre Klossowski, *Sade: My Neighbour*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 30.

³ Miller, *Disgust*, 11.

⁴ Ellis, 'Obscenity', 103.

⁵ Sontag, 'Pornographic Imagination', 57.

⁶ Miller, *Disgust*, 10.

⁷ Miller, *Disgust*, 26.

recognition of a threat to our bodily purity and our discreet being.¹ The disgusting threat is unlikely to be physical – under such circumstances we would simply feel fear and attempt to flee. More usual is something which taps into a primitive disquiet, something which fundamentally disturbs our notion of ourselves, our purity, our nature as civilised and safely bounded beings. This kind of threat evokes intense disgust. Intense disgust does not just evoke fear; disgust-imbued fear is intense fear: horror.²

Obscene accompanied by horror is not only induced by (in Sontag's words) an 'aversion to the body'. Although this association is the most prevalent, disgust is not always evoked by sexual or excretory functions and organs. As Miller observes there is also the disgust of extreme surfeit evinced in phrases such as 'obscene amounts of money' and our reaction to the vice of gluttony, engorged bodies and the obscenity of excess.³ Hugely overweight bodies have the potential to evoke disgust and the more powerful adjective, obscene – they can be 'obscenely fat'. But this is not the body in all its representations. Just as engorged bodies are not all bodies, so the obscene cannot be limited to an 'aversion to the body' in general. Far from it. Think of the classical nude in paintings, photography, statues, sculptures, nude dance performances etc.. These bodies are whole, un-violated and/or culturally 'high' bodies. They support an illusion of our own, safe, inviolability. In contrast, horror – evoked by the obscene – plays on a primal fear of our fragility and the fact that we are (although we usually labour under the illusion that it is otherwise) mortal beings. Sigmund Freud, writes, 'It is true that the statement "All men are mortal" is paraded in textbooks of logic as an example of a general proposition; but no human being really grasps it, and our unconscious has as little use now as it ever had for the idea of its own mortality'.⁴ This explains why images or descriptions of bodies being violated or a body's boundaries being invaded by something alien, something other, are common elements of the obscene. Although human secretions and excretions (semen, snot, faeces, vomit, saliva, menstrual blood, urine, sweat) are all different and carry subtly different associations, all are bound by the ability to evoke responses of disgust, if not, horror, danger and contamination. (Once again, these comments are meant 'in general' and do not encompass the responses and reactions of specific groups such as medical professionals).

¹ Miller, *Disgust*, 204.

² Miller, *Disgust*, 26.

³ Miller, *Disgust*, 120-22.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', trans. James Strachey, *Art and Literature*, Penguin Freud Library, vol. 14 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), 364.

Obscenity accompanied by horror or extreme unease accompanied by temptation raises the spectre of some psychoanalytic theories which attempt to explain man's response to objects which induce fear filled loathing: Freud's uncanny which in turn links to his social anthropological work on taboos is one; Julia Kristeva's abject another. Georges Bataille's work also places responses to the obscene at its core but I would like to reserve comment on Bataille's theory for Chapter Four where it can be read alongside his obscene fiction. Below I summarise the theories of Freud and Kristeva and consider their relationship to reading obscenity.

Freud writes in his 1919 essay, 'Das Unheimliche' ('The "Uncanny"'), that 'dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist ... all these have something peculiarly uncanny about them'.¹ Crucially, for Freud, the uncanny is not a wholly 'Other' force. It represents the appearance of something usually concealed ('Concealed, kept from sight, so that others do not get to know of or about it, withheld from others').² In Freud's model of the psyche, this 'unconcealing' principally takes the form of the recurrence of something once-familiar but since repressed. 'Uncanny,' he writes, 'is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression'.³ Thus, Freud observes that for men (male neurotics especially) the female genitals represent another source of the uncanny. Female genitals, often figured as 'a gaping maw, at times toothed, frighteningly insatiable',⁴ are a source of uncanny fear.⁵ On one level, Freud explains this 'uncanny' source (the female genitals) as fear of 'the entrance to the former 'home' of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning'.⁶ Another related factor which underlies the uncanny fear of the vagina is offered by Freud as

¹ Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', 366.

² Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', 344.

³ Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', 363-64.

⁴ Miller, *Disgust*, 102. Miller also makes the interesting observation that part of man's horror of the vagina is that it is the organ which received man's own polluting secretion – sperm (103). Although Kristeva argues otherwise (she says that sperm and tears are examples of two non-polluting bodily secretions 'neither tears nor sperm ... have any polluting value' *Powers*, 71), the number of instances in obscene literature where sperm is smeared across faces, stains, drowns and chokes illustrates that, at least in this context, it clearly carries negative and polluting, rather than positive, pure, connotations.

⁵ Miller, *Disgust*, 253. Miller notes that in Western cultures, that which is feared because of its supposed impurity is often figured as feminine: for example Jews and male homosexuals.

⁶ Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', 368.

castration anxiety.¹ Gouged eyes, blind eyes, eyes sewn shut, the female genitals, dismembered limbs and wounds, can all be classified as ‘uncanny’ and for Freud they can all also be seen as symbolic of castration. Yet (and in this I concur with Miller)² although of interest when considering the motif of female genitals, castration itself is only one particular representation of the body’s fragile status. Other factors – social rather than concerning individual sexual development – provide different explanations (as Jameson has noted it is necessary to interpret a text in terms of its social and historical context – see ‘Introduction’). Indeed, castration anxiety alone is not the only explanation for the uncanny which Freud offers.

The uncanny recurrence, whether initiated by the sight of blind eyes, female genitals or dismembered limbs, is the ghost of a repressed memory knocking on the door of consciousness. (In Freud’s words, ‘the frightening element [of the uncanny] can be shown to be something repressed which *recurs*’).³ This ‘ghost’ may be either individually specific – a repressed memory or fear from our infant years – and/or the remnants of primitive beliefs ingrained in our psyche, part of a primitive ‘universal’ human ‘consciousness’. As Freud writes,

an uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed ... these two classes of uncanny experience are not always distinguishable. When we consider that primitive beliefs are most intimately connected with infantile complexes, and are, in fact, based on them, we shall not be greatly astonished to find that the distinction is often a hazy one.⁴

According to Freud, the uncanny recurrence is part of a deeper psychic need to repeat what has gone before (‘whatever reminds us of this inner ‘compulsion to repeat’ is perceived as uncanny’).⁵ Freud introduces and explains this need to repeat in a different essay, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ (1920). To briefly summarise, Freud argues that all psychic activity is aimed at avoiding unpleasure and gaining pleasure. This is ‘the pleasure principle’.

¹ Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’, 354 and 365 notes the link between castration anxiety and the uncanny.

² Miller, *Disgust*, 27.

³ Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’, 363.

⁴ Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’, 372.

⁵ Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’, 371.

Unpleasure is caused by quantities of excitation which come from two sources: the threat of external danger and the return or the 'liberation of the repressed'.¹ Pleasure, therefore, involves a reduction of excitation. Watching a child play leads Freud to surmise that a primitive compulsion to repeat exists within man and that this drive is more powerful than the pleasure principle. He writes, 'there really does exist in the mind a compulsion to repeat which over-rides the pleasure principle' and the 'compulsion to repeat [is] something that seems more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it over-rides'.² In fact, Freud concludes, this 'compulsion to repeat' does not exist in opposition to the pleasure principle but is part of it ('repetition, the re-experiencing of something identical, is clearly in itself a source of pleasure').³ The exact nature of this drive, is an instinct '*an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things, which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces ... to put it another way, the expression of the inertia in organic life*'.⁴ This 'earlier state of things', to which life is inexorably drawn, is atavistic and morbid. This state, Freud reasons,

must be an *old* state of things, an initial state from which the living entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads. If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for *internal* reasons – becomes inorganic once again – then we shall be compelled to say that '*the aim of all life is death*'.⁵

In explaining his observation, Freud introduces his theories of the life and death instincts. The life instinct – a survival instinct and sexual too (in that it is driven by a need to propagate the species) holds the living being together and delays its inevitable death for as long as possible. Underlying the organism's 'compulsion to repeat' is the death instinct. Adopting a theory first proposed by a pupil of Freud's (Sabina Spielrein),⁶ Freud presented

¹ Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle,' *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey, Penguin Freud Library vol. 11 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 290 and 278-80. Cf. also what Stoller regards as the obscene as an 'unaccepted desire'. Stoller, *Erotic Imagination*, 89.

² Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', 293-94.

³ Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', 308.

⁴ Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', 308-309. (Freud's emphasis).

⁵ Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', 310-11. (Freud's emphasis).

⁶ Adrian Carr, 'The Psychodynamic Conception of the "Death Instinct" and its Relevance to Organisations,' *Journal of Psycho-Social Studies* 2 (1) 2003, 1-11 for a summary of the history of the death-instinct. John Kerr, *A Most Dangerous Method: The Story of Jung, Freud and Sabina Spielrein* (New York: Vintage, 1994) gives more information about Spielrein who was not only a pupil of Freud's, but one time lover of Jung.

a model of the psyche as held in tension (he explained these theories a few years after 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' in the essay 'The Ego and the Id', 1923). This was a state of perpetual 'conflict and compromise between ... two trends',¹ no longer just the ego, the id and the superego, but two opposing primal instincts, 'Eros' and 'Thanatos': the life-instinct and the death-instinct. For Freud 'Eros' is 'the preserver of all things',² it is the subject's 'sexual instinct proper ... and also the self-preservative instinct'.³ While the life instinct pulls the subject away from death, the death-instinct pulls the subject towards it; it drives the organism towards that earlier 'inorganic' state – death – when all tensions and unpleasurable excitations are reduced to zero. Although a dualistic model, according to Freud these 'two classes of instincts are fused, blended, and alloyed with each other'.⁴ Furthermore, although it carries the title of 'death', Freud's death-instinct is not simply a desire to cease to be. It is the most radical form of the pleasure principle, an urge towards a Nirvana-like state without any tensions or excitations. For Freud (in a way which chimes with elements of Bataille's theory, see Chapter Four), death is a state from which life emerges and to which all life desires to return:

life once proceeded out of inorganic matter ... [and] an instinct must have arisen which sought to do away with life once more and to re-establish the inorganic state. If we recognise in this instinct the self-destructiveness of our hypothesis, we may regard the self-destructiveness as an expression of a "death-instinct".⁵

In later essays (including 'Civilisation and its Discontents') Freud comments in wider terms on the death-instinct, suggesting that, at times, the instincts which lead towards self-destruction are frequently turned outwards in a display of individual or social destructive aggression.

I return to these theories at later stages in this study. For now, we can see that the experience of the uncanny is part of a tension which the subject experiences as it is driven one way by the life-instincts and the other by the death-instinct. The uncanny belongs to the

¹ Sigmund Freud, 'The Ego and the Id,' trans. James Strachey, *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, Penguin Freud Library, vol. 11 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 381.

² Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', 325.

³ Freud, 'The Ego and the Id', 320.

⁴ Freud, 'The Ego and the Id', 381.

⁵ Sigmund Freud, 'Anxiety and Instinctual Life,' *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans James Strachey, Penguin Freud Library, vol. 2 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 140.

same kind of primitive ‘compulsion to repeat’ and presents an unsettling reminder of the subject’s mortality.¹ For these reasons, Freud notes that a vital component of the uncanny is ‘the primitive fear of the dead ... man’s attitude to death’ involuntary repetition and the castration complex’.² Elsewhere, in a statement which reconnects the unnerving psychological effects of the obscene with one of its supposedly ‘obsolete’ meanings – ‘ill-omened’ – Freud talks of ‘the uncanny harbinger of death’.³

A few years before ‘Das Unheimliche’, Freud published ‘Totem und Tabu: Über einige Übereinstimmungen im Seelenleben der Wilden und der Neurotiker’ (‘Totem and Taboo: Some points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics’, 1913) a study on the social and psychological origins and functions of totemism and taboos. For Freud, the link between the uncanny and taboos, is explicit. ‘The meaning of “taboo”,’ Freud writes, ‘means, on the one hand, “sacred”, “consecrated”, and on the other “uncanny”, “dangerous”, “forbidden”, “unclean”’.⁴ Both the uncanny and taboos invoke responses of dread and horror and operate around a twin dynamic of attraction and repulsion. Taboo – extreme prohibition – is relevant to discussions of obscenity, after all, not only was obscene literature once prohibited (and hence, legally taboo), but as we have seen ‘taboo words’ and obscene descriptions shatter the social taboos which surround sexual and scatological acts, violence, and death.

Taboos themselves, notes Freud following the findings of various social anthropologists, are ‘principally expressed in prohibitions and restrictions ... [they are] the oldest human unwritten code of laws’.⁵ Taboos are part of what Freud calls human society’s “categorical imperative”.⁶ They recognise the dangerous power of certain persons and things and separate these persons and things off as not-allowed. This separates the socially acceptable from the socially prohibited. As such, taboos protect and maintain the complex framework of regulation and division upon which society depends. Freud’s study suggests

¹ Cf. Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge Mass. and London: October Books and MIT Press, 1994), 178. Krauss writes that all the elements of Freud’s uncanny ‘represent the breakthrough into consciousness of earlier states of being, and in this breakthrough, itself the evidence of a compulsion to repeat, the subject is engulfed by the idea of death.’

² Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’, 365.

³ Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’, 357.

⁴ Freud, ‘Totem and Taboo’, 71. Also 75.

⁵ Freud, ‘Totem and Taboo’, 71-72.

⁶ Freud, ‘Totem and Taboo’, 76.

that incest and murder – specifically patricide – are the two most fundamental and/or universal taboo acts in all human societies.¹ The nature of these taboos illustrates the common ground about which many taboos are erected: the prohibition of sexual acts and violence towards other humans. Yet, like the uncanny – poised between revulsion and the life instinct and the morbid, pervasive urge of the death-instinct – if taboos represent prohibition and fear, this prohibition and fear is accompanied by desire for that which is taboo. After all, as Freud notes, ‘There is no need to prohibit something that no one desires to do, and a thing that is forbidden with the greatest emphasis must be a thing that is desired’.²

Mankind’s attitude to death also lies at the core of Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject but, as presented in Kristeva’s *Pouvoirs de l’horreur (Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, 1980)*, the visceral, horrific and morbid elements of the abject assume a more immediate role than in Freud’s uncanny. Admittedly she does not explicitly mention the obscene but the sights and acts which Kristeva offers as inducing reactions of horror (and ‘repugnance, disgust, abjection’)³ are all sights and acts commonly deemed obscene and recurrent motifs in obscene literature. Thus, by exploring human responses to excrement, cadavers, wounds, decay, and blood, Kristeva’s abject provides a theoretical framework relevant to understanding the reactions which the obscene induces.

Kristeva separates the abject from Freud’s uncanny⁴ but the need to make distinctions (like that made between pornography and obscenity) implies the presence of common ground. Although it would be reductive to equate Kristeva’s ‘abject’ entirely with Freud’s ‘uncanny’, in terms of obscenity and obscene motifs there are significant similarities. Thus, like the twin dynamics of the life and death instincts which underlie the effects of the uncanny and render the morbid a source of attraction and repulsion, the abject too is a force of ‘fear and fascination’.⁵ As in Freud’s uncanny, the abject ‘is a universal phenomenon; one encounters it as soon as the symbolic and/or social dimension of man is constituted, and this throughout the course of civilisation’.⁶ Like the uncanny, the maternal

¹ Freud, ‘Totem and Taboo’, 85.

² Freud, ‘Totem and Taboo’, 126.

³ Kristeva, *Powers*, 11.

⁴ Kristeva, *Powers*, 5: ‘[Abjection is] essentially different from “uncanniness”, more violent too’.

⁵ Kristeva, *Powers*, 45.

⁶ Kristeva, *Powers*, 68.

and fear of the feminine plays a significant part in the abject.¹ The abject also induces fear by threatening our discreet identity (our ‘assurance of being ourselves, that is, untouchable, unchangeable, immortal’)² so death also has a special place among the sources of abject horror. Thus, Kristeva writes,

refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition, on the part of death ... Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – *cadere*, cadaver ... The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. ... It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.³

Although ‘death infecting life’ may lie at the heart of the powers of horror it is more than simply death as ‘death’ which is a source of this potent fear. It is not just cadavers but excreta and blood, urine, sperm, ‘body fluids ... defilement ... shit’ which threaten the subject’s discreet, integral self. Like death, they remind us that the skin is ‘a fragile container, [which] no longer guaranteed the integrity of one’s “own and clean self”’.⁴ The abject is an object of horror because it threatens boundaries: it is the non-I, a non-I worryingly not exclusively external, but also carried within us and occasionally voided to outside our physical limits (‘what I permanently thrust aside in order to live’).

While reminders of our mortality and the fragility of our identity and personal boundaries are certainly a source of fear, Kristeva argues that the powers of horror operate on levels other than the purely physical. Without repeating in detail Kristeva’s argument, one of these levels is the way that the abject threatens not only personal boundaries but (following observations made by Freud, and the anthropologists Claude Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas), the boundaries of society and society’s principle method of self-perpetuation: the symbolic order.

¹ Kristeva, *Powers*, 65, for example, Kristeva relates the abject to the ‘demonical potential of the feminine’. See later in this section on ‘The Psychology of the Obscene’.

² Kristeva, *Powers*, 38.

³ Kristeva, *Powers*, 3-4. (Kristeva’s emphasis).

⁴ Kristeva, *Powers*, 53.

Underlying this part of Kristeva's argument is her assertion that the abject is associated with the maternal. Abjection carries within it the memory of lack, of our violent separation 'from another body [the maternal body] in order to be'.¹ Thus, the abject involves a 'confrontation with the feminine'² and also the pre-Oedipal, the pre-symbolic. The symbolic order belongs to the phallic order, the acquisition of language, and it represses maternal authority in favour of paternal laws.³ It differentiates, orders, separates, creates boundaries like inside and outside. Yet, in its ambiguity, its threat to boundaries, its origins in a pre-civilised society 'where man strays on the territories of *animal*'⁴ and the pre-Oedipal/pre-symbolic stage of sexual development, the disorderly abject remains outside symbolic order. The abject is, in a sense, unnameable, pre-language. As such, in showing where rational language and representation break down, the abject (and here we recall observations already made regarding obscene words) constitutes a threat to the fundamental precepts of not only the symbolic order but also the social order and the individual – the speaking 'I' – which depends on the symbolic order, language, for its identity. 'Defilement,' writes Kristeva, 'is what is jettisoned from the "*symbolic system*.'" It is what escapes the social rationality, that logical order on which a social aggregate is based, which then becomes differentiated ... [and] constitutes a *classification system* or a *structure*'.⁵ In this way, the abject – excrement, death, decay, disease and excreta – represents a threat to identity and the order upon which the speaking subject and patriarchal society depend. The power of this horror comes from the threat to the ego by the non-ego, the self by the 'other', life by death.

In terms of reasons for our potent emotive response to the obscene we find, in short, fear mingled with desire. We experience a threatening fear of our own fragility our 'material reality' and mortality and the fragility and permeability of the structures upon which our symbolic and social system depends. We fear those things which cannot be contained, which are – like the abject, the uncanny (which involves simultaneous attraction and repulsion and the breaking down of categories and boundaries – discussed more in Chapter

¹ Kristeva, *Powers*, 10.

² Kristeva, *Powers*, 59. Kristeva uses examples from Mary Douglas to illustrate the large number of taboos which societies create to set the threatening feminine apart from the 'civilised', ordered, paternal domain.

³ Kristeva, *Powers*, 72.

⁴ Kristeva, *Powers*, 12. (Kristeva's emphasis).

⁵ Kristeva, *Powers*, 65. (Kristeva's emphasis).

Three),¹ and the obscene – ambiguous. Part of this ambiguity is the ambivalent reaction we have for that which is prohibited (and obscene acts and books are some of those which are prohibited). The obscene, like the uncanny and the abject, repulses but tempts and fascinates. In terms of these psychological explanations, what fascinates most of all about the obscene (like the uncanny, taboos, and the abject) is its morbid, regressive core.

5. Obscenity and Society

Previous sections have illustrated that the obscene is more than an individual judgement, response, or reaction. Obscenity (as violated taboos, threat to social order and the future of society) has repercussions for society. It also has a social function and political uses. This is not just true of obscene literature, for in relation to literature it is easy to accept what Jameson calls a need to recognise that ‘there is nothing [in terms of text] that is not social and historical – indeed, that everything is “in the last analysis” political’.² The obscene operates on social levels and there are specific ways in which obscene literature capitalises on its political function. Furthermore, in various ways, society *creates* the obscene. Sontag expresses this as causing repressed sexuality. She writes ““The obscene” is a convention, the fiction imposed by a society convinced there is something vile about the sexual functions and, by extension, about sexual pleasure’.³ Perhaps most interestingly therefore, I want to start by considering how society itself – the pure, the high, the good, the ‘civilised’ – plays a vital role in creating the obscene (and not simply in terms of repressed sexuality) and how, in some ways, the ‘civilised’ and pure depend on it.

Consider for example how, at times, societies have encouraged the dissemination of obscene material for political purposes and propaganda. During the Second World War, German, American and British governments approved the use of sexually graphic propaganda – leaflets, rumours, and radio broadcasts describing ‘perverse’ sexual acts, and combining images of sex and death – to undermine the morale of enemy soldiers.⁴ Peter

¹ Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’, 367.

² Jameson, ‘Interpretation’, 20.

³ Sontag, ‘Pornographic Imagination’, 57.

⁴ ‘Sex Bomb’, *Secret History*, narr. Jack Ellis, Channel 4 Television, 28th June 2004.

Michelson has noted that obscene language has played a constructive role in asserting political identity within 'mainstream' society for minority groups.¹ On another level, referring to the way that 'civilised' society keeps certain words hidden therefore imbuing them with a mysterious and potent aura, Allen Read writes that 'obscenity is an artificially created product'.² Miller observes that 'it is culture, not nature, that draws the lines between defilement and purity, clean and filthy, those crucial boundaries disgust is called upon to police'.³ Disgust, he notes, has an

intensely political significance. [It] ... works to hierarchize our political order ... Disgust evaluates (negatively) what it touches, proclaims the meanness and inferiority of its object ... It is thus an assertion of a claim to superiority that at the same time recognises the vulnerability of that superiority to the defiling powers of the low. The world is a dangerous place in which the polluting powers of the low are usually stronger than the purifying powers of the high.⁴

Mary Douglas offers a similar observation using the example of dirt/filth. 'Dirt,' writes Douglas, 'is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder ... dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment'.⁵ She goes on, 'Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements'.⁶ Kristeva echoes these sentiments in terms of the symbolic order. 'Abjection,' she writes, 'is coextensive with social and symbolic order, on the individual as well as on the collective level'.⁷ It is what we 'permanently thrust aside in order to live'.⁸ Although this is a point to which I return below, all these observations suggest that just as disgust, notions

¹ Michelson, *Unspeakable*, 28-31. See also Michelson's discussion regarding the use of 'motherfucker', originally an African-American obscene slang term (48-50).

² Read, 'Obscenity Symbol', 267.

³ Miller, *Disgust*, 15.

⁴ Miller, *Disgust*, 8-9. Kristeva, *Powers*, 66-67, 82 also notes how the concept of defilement holds society together.

⁵ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994 ed.), 2.

⁶ Douglas, *Purity*, 36.

⁷ Kristeva, *Powers*, 68.

⁸ Kristeva, *Powers*, 38.

of dirt, and the abject are social constructions which aid in society's self-definition, so obscene books with their connotations of dirt, impurity and disgust, can be seen as a creation of society.

Recalling the model offered by Freud and Kristeva of the self believing in its 'untouchable, unchangeable, immortal'¹ nature, we note that society too needs order and permanence for its self-image. In relation to this self-image it seems that the obscene – that which evokes extreme reactions of disgust – has an important function. Obscenity aids the social order by providing a domain of the inferior, impure, ambiguous, and 'other' against which the superior, pure, rationally ordered, and the 'same' of civilised society can be located and measured. It is a place where fears can be projected. As Freud notes in relation to taboos which were originally created to guard against demonic powers, spirits and demons are themselves 'only projections of man's own emotional impulses'.² Thus, the obscene 'other' originates from within. Ejecting certain aspects of itself, society gains a sense of cohesion in being united against a foreign 'other' – an 'other' ideologically jettisoned beyond accepted social boundaries.³ In this respect, Havelock Ellis observes that, prior to obscenity, society's jettisoned 'other' had been witchcraft:

As the obsession of witchcraft died down during the eighteenth century, another obsession, that of obscenity ... arose to take its place. It seemed that the prehuman thirst for fear must have something to feed on, and when witchcraft lost its terrors the new diabolic iniquity of "obscenity" was found to serve well.⁴

Whether defined against witchcraft, obscenity, or sexual 'perversion', society needs negative values for its self-definition. Simply speaking, to use the common topographical metaphor of society as a bounded space, inside the borders of society is purity; outside is a dangerous and contagious realm, home of the obscene, the socially unacceptable, the ambiguous, the non-human and those associated forces, the uncanny, the abject, dirt, filth, and death. By saying this, however, we should not forget that the same hierarchies operate in the same ways *within* society.⁵ Notions of impurity serve to create hierarchies between

¹ Kristeva, *Powers*, 38.

² Freud, 'Totem and Taboo', 150 and 77.

³ As we have seen – 'The Legal Obscene' – the idea of a 'cohesive', 'united' society is part of an ideological illusion which falls apart when considered in relation to prohibitions and obscene literature.

⁴ Ellis, 'Obscenity', 139-40.

⁵ Miller, *Disgust*, 237-8.

social classes (low and high) as well as around gender (women are 'lesser' than men), religion (Jews, Muslims), race, and groups with 'different' sexual tastes. Just as 'dirty' excreta and bodily products induce individual reactions of horror, so the (re)appearance of that which is 'dirty' and outside social order as close to or *within* the boundaries of society, evokes a strong social reaction. Society's order is threatened by disorder – by the obscene; the threateningly ambiguous. This threat – obscenity or witchcraft – must be kept 'outside' society's borders. There must always be, as Jameson notes, something against which the dominant order must struggle;¹ something which must take up the 'evil' side of 'the ethical binary opposition of good and evil ... [which is] one of the fundamental forms of ideological thought in Western culture'.² In the Marxist model of society, society is never stable and here, it seems, the ambiguous – including the obscene – is one such powerful and *necessary* adversary which threatens social stability.

The social need to police its boundaries returns us to Freud's writing on taboos. 'Behind all these prohibitions there seems to be something in the nature of a theory that they [taboos] are necessary because certain persons and things are charged with a dangerous power, which can be transferred through contact with them, almost like an infection'.³ Playing on the fear of our violability, belief in the 'other's' contagious nature enforces our fear of it (the 'other'). Rationally speaking there is nothing inherently contagious about either literal or metaphorical dirt but social values are supported by and perpetuate this illusion. As Mary Douglas notes, 'certain moral values are upheld and certain social rules defined by beliefs in dangerous contagion, as when the glance or touch of an adulterer is held to bring illness to his neighbours and his children'.⁴

Adultery, touch, contact, and (to recall Freud) incest and murder: just like with obscenity, in terms of social taboos we find the recurrent motif of sex and the human body. This is no coincidence. Surrounded by taboos of naming, ingestion, clothing, menstruation, excretion and, of course, sexual behaviour and treatment of the dead, the human body has always been a principle site of social regulation. Although specific taboos are no longer current in Western cultures, as Freud reminds us, 'the taboos of the savage Polynesians are after all not so remote from us as we were inclined to think at first'.⁵ Supporting a universal

¹ Jameson, 'Interpretation', 97.

² Jameson, 'Interpretation', 88.

³ Freud, 'Totem and Taboo', 75.

⁴ Douglas, *Purity*, 3.

⁵ Freud, 'Totem and Taboo', 75-76.

view of culture and history, we, like 'primitive' societies, remain governed by moral and conventional prohibitions, superstitions of the 'other's' contagion and, above all, legal and social prohibitions surrounding the practice or even depiction of sexual acts, violence and violation of the dead.

Given the twin dynamic of prohibition and fascination which, as Freud observes, operates at the heart of taboos ('There is no need to prohibit something that no one desires to do, and a thing that is forbidden with the greatest emphasis must be a thing that is desired') responses to the human body waver between revulsion and fascination. It is not always an object of beauty. Violated, it is an object of disgust or obscenity. The sexual organs are desired and capable of sensations of incredible pleasure but they are also polluting (I considered in 'The Psychology of Obscenity' the uncanny and abject associations of the vagina). They secrete viscous, odorous, substances, they are bestial in their hairiness, repulsive in their proximity to, or indeed nature as, excretory organs¹ – and these are only the physical attributes; I won't go into the centuries of religious teaching and misogyny which influences Western attitudes to the genitals.

Physical appearance and desire are not the principle reasons why these particular areas of the body are subject to prohibition. More importantly, on one level, it is because these organs – like the mouth, which is also a place of taboo – are orifices. They are vulnerable breaks in the body's protective boundary. On one hand they risk admitting dirt from outside which would violate our discreet, 'untouchable, unchangeable, immortal' state. On the other they are dangerous holes which emit abject vile matter and can admit potentially dangerous matter from outside.

There is, however, another reason why the body and its orifices are central to taboos and prohibitions. As is now commonly understood, the body does not simply stand for itself – a human body. It also symbolises the social body. Just as society is controlled by regulations so is the human body. As Mary Douglas influentially wrote, 'For symbols of society, any human experience of structures, margins or boundaries is ready to hand,' and she continues,

The [human] body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious ... the functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures. We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see

¹ Miller, *Disgust*, 99-108.

the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body.¹

Although Douglas's study focuses on anthropology her observation regarding human rituals is especially relevant to interpreting the central human motif of obscene books. (It is also an approach which chimes with Jameson's emphasis on the need to interpret a text in relation to society). Indeed, the body as a symbol of society was one which writers of seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century obscene literature were well aware of. Frequently the human body figured as part of a social critique or satire in which descriptions of bodies engaged in sexual or scatological acts served to represent society (or aspects of it) as sordid and corrupt. As Pease notes in relation to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century pornography, 'Early modern pornography was never simply solitary or homosocial male pleasure inspired by writing on or for the sexualised body. Rather, the body was always also configured as the body politic, the body of the people'.²

While the human body may be *seen* as a timeless symbol of the social body, in the 1970s, Michel Foucault influentially argued that the body itself (and the self), is not a 'universal' but a cultural construction that changes through time. In fact, to see the body as the body politic is just one way in which the body has been constructed. In *La volonté de savoir*, (*The Will To Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume One*, 1976), Foucault presents the body as a site over which cultural power relations – the '*anatomo-politics of the human body ... a bio-politics of the population*' – play.³ He asserts that the body is a surface given meaning by culture.⁴ Significantly, for Foucault, it is not only the body but that intrinsic aspect of the body – its sexuality – which figures prominently in culture's process of 'anatomo-politics'. Foucault's theory centres around what he recognises as a number of historical shifts which have occurred in Western culture. In terms of Western views of the body and sex, of particular interest is a change which took place during the eighteenth century and which expanded rapidly in the nineteenth. During this time, although rules of social decorum and morality were stringently and increasingly tightened, towards and throughout the nineteenth century (witness as evidence the proliferation of obscenity

¹ Douglas, *Purity*, 115-16.

² Pease, *Obscenity*, 5. See also Chapter Two.

³ Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume One*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1978), 139. (Foucault's emphasis).

⁴ Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,' *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 83.

laws during this period), a number of significant counter effects occurred. Foucault observes that one was ‘a valorisation and intensification of indecent speech ... But more important was the multiplication of discourses concerning sex in the field of exercise of [political] power itself’.¹ In short, as Foucault writes, ‘Toward the beginning of the eighteenth century, there emerged a political, economic, and technical incitement to talk about sex. And not so much in the form of a general theory of sexuality as in the form of analysis, stocktaking, classification, and specification, of quantitative or causal studies’.² As population – ‘population as wealth, population as manpower or labour capacity’³ – became increasingly politically important, so bodies, sex, and sexual activities came to be politically weighted issues in modern Western societies. Contrary to belief which saw Victorian society as prudish and repressive, Foucault observes that since the late seventeenth century Western culture (Foucault uses the monolithic ‘Western’ term) has witnessed ‘around and apropos of sex [and human bodies] ... a veritable discursive explosion’;⁴ ‘a discursive ferment that gathered momentum from the eighteenth century onward’⁵ and, ‘less ... a discourse on sex than ... a multiplicity of discourses produced by a whole series of mechanisms operating in different institutions’.⁶

Sex became a new kind of religion and the locus of a new kind of truth. ‘Sex, the revelation of truth,’ writes Foucault, ‘the overturning of global laws, the proclamation of a new day to come ... A great sexual sermon – which has had its subtle theologians and its popular voices – has swept through our societies over the last decades’.⁷ ‘What is peculiar to modern [Western] societies,’ Foucault goes on, ‘in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the secret*’.⁸ Sex and the body: interlinked, together they became (and have remained) ‘an immense apparatus for producing truth ... the truth of sex became something

¹ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 18.

² Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 23-4.

³ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 25.

⁴ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 17.

⁵ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 18.

⁶ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 33.

⁷ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 7.

⁸ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 35.

fundamental, useful, or dangerous, precious or formidable: in short ... sex was constructed as a problem of truth'.¹ 'Truth' was, literally, laid bare in the metaphor of a naked body.

Of many reasons for the nineteenth century's focus on the body as truth, Pease offers Darwinism. Charles Darwin, Pease suggests, had positioned

the desiring body as the ground of human existence, [so] sexologists saw the body as the node of one's being, that which revealed an "original" state of being, and consequently exposed the forces of culture upon that state ... the mind was perceived as too decentred and self-deceiving, simply too interested, to be held accountable for the truth of one's being. Instead, the body was constructed as the space of accountability. The sexual body became a site of knowing.²

Within this milieu of sex as 'truth', as knowledge, of the body as social symbol and political pawn, it is now time to locate obscene literature.

During the West's nineteenth-century era of increased prohibition *and* a 'discourse explosion' on obscenity and 'sex as truth', modern obscene literature was born. It was born into a world of paradoxes perhaps the most striking of which is what Harrison observes as, 'on one level [obscene literature was] marginalised but on another considered close to the core of human nature'.³ We find the contradictory dynamics of the time reflected in legal responses to obscenity, responses of fascination and repulsion: on the one hand fascination (speaking sex), on the other, prohibition (obscenity laws). The explosion of obscenity laws itself provides a thinly veiled indicator of the accompanying fascination evinced by the incitement to explore and confess the human body's material and sexual 'truth'. (Freud's observations about taboos remind us that 'a thing that is forbidden with the greatest emphasis must be a thing that is desired').⁴ Moreover, 'Laws against pornography, then, caught up in this circle,' notes Harrison, referring to a 'circle' of perceiving the sexual as something fundamental, 'truthful', threatening beneath ordained 'social reality' and writers of sexual obscenity as playing on this reputation, 'are part of what makes it [pornography] sexual, part of what makes it pornographic, and part of what makes it popular'.⁵ Because of their content, their indecent speech and revelations of sex and bodies (as well as violence

¹ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 56.

² Pease, *Obscenity*, 139.

³ Harrison, *Censorship*, 125.

⁴ Freud, 'Totem and Taboo', 126.

⁵ Harrison, *Censorship*, 86-7.

and death), obscene books added a morbid element to contemporary discourses of sex as truth.

Most critics agree that while erotic works existed for centuries, ‘pornography’ as we know it today (although it was not called that until the 1850s) emerged in Western Europe towards the end of the sixteenth century.¹ Initially it appeared in Italy and then France and England – Germany not developing its own pornographic corpus until the mid-nineteenth century)². Lynn Hunt is more explicit: ‘Pornography came into existence, both as a literal and visual practice and as a category of understanding, at the same time as – and concomitantly with – the long-term emergence of Western modernity’.³ We could mention the role of the printing press, the ‘invention’ of private and public space, of increased leisure time and the demand for reading material to fill that leisure time as well as supply and demand dynamics as crucial to a capitalist/consumer society and to the production of obscene material. Thus, Darnton writes of eighteenth-century France that ‘the [public] taste for taboo became translated into books’ which in turn became a very profitable industry.⁴ Although, by using Hunt’s quote (above) I am conflating obscene literature with pornography, I believe there is little doubt, that whether ‘pornographic’ or the more violent and morbid ‘obscene’, books of that nature suffered the same fate and evoked the same ambivalent response. If anything, the obscene would provoke a more potent response than conventional pornography.

Indeed, no matter what the incitement to talk sex – as we have seen, perhaps *because of* the fascinated incitement to ‘talk sex’ – modern civilisation consolidated its literary, social and personal boundaries, medico-moral concern enforced social and sexual decorum, and private life drifted apart from public life. Consequently, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries society’s reaction to obscene literature occurred in a way analogous to any other form of ‘dirt’ which offends and threatens. ‘Dirty books’ with their ‘dirty words’ and ‘dirty pictures’ – ‘dirt’ as Douglas reminds us being ‘the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter’⁵ – were pushed to society’s margins. There, like all that threatens, obscene books assumed the association of contagion and

¹ Cryle, *Geometry*, 14.

² Hunt, ‘Obscenity’, 23.

³ Hunt, ‘Obscenity’, 10-11.

⁴ Darnton, *Forbidden*, 22.

⁵ Douglas, *Purity*, 36.

disease (recall the connotations of contagion embedded in the 1857 legal definition of obscenity in England as material which will ‘deprave and *corrupt*’¹). As Pease notes, ‘When pornography was spoken of in public discourse in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, it was often figured as poison, or, like the lower [social] classes, disease’.² Marginalised since the eighteenth century, obscene texts have assumed – indeed, by prohibiting them society gave them – a threatening, dangerous position. Thus, their ‘secret,’ Gaëtan Brulotte astutely notes (illustrating the prevailing association between the prohibited and secret knowledge), ‘is concealed while our attention is also drawn to its existence’.³ Operating from beyond the officially acceptable margins of society, these texts were seen to speak, through sex, of dangerous truths and challenge what it is to be civilised.

It could be said that today, no longer prohibited, obscene texts have ceded their role as public enemy number one to other sources (perhaps today Internet images of child pornography) and no longer maintain either their fascination or their contagious associations. While certainly weaker than they once were, this is not the case. Pease’s comments of nineteenth and early twentieth century discourse figuring obscene literature as ‘poison’ and ‘disease’ continues. With all the same associations of disease, a corrupted body and contagion, a magazine article of the last few months declared that obscene material is as much a social ‘ill’ and operates in the same way as drug addiction.⁴ Over the last three centuries obscene literature has always found itself associated with whichever cultural demon is the ‘other’ of the day: blasphemy, Fascism,⁵ serial killing,⁶ misogyny and the exploitation of women,⁷ and (bizarrely and most recently) terrorism.⁸

¹ My emphasis.

² Pease, *Obscenity*, 49.

³ Gaëtan Brulotte, ‘Sade and Erotic Discourse,’ trans. Olga Gomez with John Phillips, *Paragraph* 23:1 (2000), 58.

⁴ Edward Marriot, ‘Men and Porn,’ *Guardian Weekend* [Manchester] (8 Nov. 2003), 45-47, 89.

⁵ Shattuck talks about Sade’s ‘potently undemocratic extremes of argument, narrative imagination and personal behaviour’, *Forbidden Knowledge*, 232. Pier Paolo Pasollini’s film adaptation of Sade’s *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* (*Salò o le 120 giornate de Sodoma*, 1975) sets the events of Sade’s novel in the Second World War Fascist Italian regime of Salò. Harrison, *Censorship*, 169 refers to Raymond Queneau’s association of Sade with the Nazi regime.

⁶ Donald Thomas, *The Marquis de Sade* (London: Black Swan, 1992), 88-89 talks of the presence of Sade’s books among those read by Britain’s notorious Moors Murderers.

⁷ Coward, ‘Introduction’, xxvii.

⁸ *Sites Related to Terrorism*, 18th Sept. 2003, <<http://www.sima.co.at/terror.htm>> contains two links to Sade and one to Osama Binladen.

Of course, for all their ‘marginality’ obscene books and obscenity remain culturally central. They maintain a level of fascination which is illustrated on the one hand by the fact that the books in this study have never been out of print, and on the other by the interest they continue to fuel (not least in academic circles). It seems, as Havelock Ellis noted in his comment regarding witchcraft, that culture’s fascination with the obscene betrays a cultural necessity that an impure, inferior ‘other’ must exist. Like dirt, it is absurd to see these notorious narratives as somehow wholly marginal or ‘other’ to ‘civilisation’ just as they cannot be seen as wholly distinct from or opposed to the laws which have banned them. Shot through with contradictions, prohibitions have shaped culture’s attitude towards obscene literature, increased interest in it, and helped form the content and readership of obscene books themselves. Furthermore, the obscene has always had a social aspect. It helps society order itself in terms of self and other, pure and impure, immoral and moral.

Obscenity is visceral, it carries a strong visual component – obscene words immediately inject ‘base’ images in our mind – and obscene literature, of course, is visual in that it must be read. Obscenity carries an aura of decay. Using the body and sex the obscene plays on a culturally-implanted notion of sex, the body and the obscene as carrying a kind of forbidden ‘truth’. This ‘truth’ is further emphasised by prohibitions which turn the forbidden into a place of knowledge. Crucially, in this respect, the obscene is not only impurity and darkness but also a space of revelation – or ‘truth’ – and, in this sense, ‘light’.

The obscene is more than disgust. It is ambivalent and ambiguous, uncanny and abject, horrific and fascinating. It is a great ambiguous and ambivalent domain: it is (both real and imagined) dismembered bodies and scatological acts; fear and disgust of the sexual organs, secretions, and, emphasised in psychoanalysis, fear of the mutilated mother; words, fears and, in Stoller’s words, ‘unaccepted desires’.¹

Obscenity operates between Eros and Thanatos but, and at its core, one potent source of its fascination, is the lure of Thanatos rather than Eros. Obscenity’s definition is socially created, its effects and content are mostly psychic (unlike disgust) but also profoundly political. It serves a paradoxical purpose as scapegoat and also necessary sounding-board to society’s self-definition. It is necessarily human in content and in response.

The issues this introductory chapter has raised will underpin and resurface in the following textual explorations. These chapters use the findings of this initial chapter to explore how the obscene appears – exactly in what way and why – and how it operates in

¹ Stoller, *Erotic Imagination*, 91.

six obscene texts. Considering these 'dirty' books it is important to remember that the history of obscene literature has accompanied and been formed by that of modern 'civilisation'. Obscene texts may be the books 'one shouldn't read' but as Wilde's Algernon Moncrieff so astutely and impudently observed, 'More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read'.

CHAPTER TWO

**SADE'S THEATRE OF OBSCENITY:
LES CENT VINGT JOURNÉES DE SODOME**

ONE WINTER; FOUR LIBERTINES; one book in five parts; one isolated château; four months; forty-six characters, thirty of whom are put to death; one hundred and twenty days. Written in 1785, this is Donatien-Alphonse-François, the Marquis de Sade's first and most notorious full-length work, *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome ou l'école de libertinage* (*The One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom, or the School for Libertinage*). In the words of writer and philosopher, Georges Bataille, this is 'the book that can be said to dominate all books'.¹ Arguably, as John Phillips asserts, it is also the work which has 'had more impact [on modern literature] than any of Sade's other writings'.²

Sade's best-known novels – *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* in addition to the three versions of *Justine* (1791, 1797, 1800),³ *La philosophie dans le boudoir* (*Philosophy in the Boudoir*, 1795) and *L'histoire de Juliette* (*Juliette*, 1797) – are incontestably obscene. Introducing *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*, Sade implies as much himself with the assertion that this novel is 'The most impure tale ever told' [*[le] récit le plus impur qui ait jamais été fait*] (253/69). Even sympathetic readers of Sade, not just his critics, refer to his novels' obscenity: recall Deleuze's reference to Sade's 'obscenity of description',⁴ Roland Barthes's mention of Sade's 'obscene' language⁵ and, more recently, Peter Cryle's discussion of Sade's 'systematic obscenity'.⁶ Yet how the obscene operates, on what levels, and exactly *why* Sade's work is obscene is another matter.

¹ Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, 108.

² Phillips, *Sade*, 61.

³ Coward, 'Chronology', xli-xliii. Michel Delon, 'Chronologie,' *Sade: Oeuvres*, vol.1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), lxxviii, suggests that the date 1797 may in fact be a false date from editions published in 1799 or 1800.

⁴ Deleuze, *Coldness*, 133.

⁵ Barthes, *Sade*, 135.

⁶ Cryle, *Geometry*, 261.

Over the past two decades (a relatively short time in scholarly interest in Sade), critics including Marcel Hénaff, Annie Le Brun, Caroline Warman and Lucienne Frappier-Mazur have explored aspects of the obscenity of Sade's work. Their findings, especially regarding Sade's use of obscene language, form the basis of this chapter. For this reason, this chapter continues the introductory process begun in Chapter One. Building on various aspects of the obscene – what it is and how it operates – and intertwining these with recent writing on Sade's novels, this chapter explores the obscenity to be found in Sade's *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*. For this study, *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* is an important starting point and an illustration of how obscenity operates in multiple ways within a single work of obscene literature.

At the core of this chapter are two questions. The first half of the chapter (the first two sections) considers what is obscene about Sade's first novel, in other words, *how* is it obscene; what makes it obscene? The section 'To Reveal Secrets Which Ought To Be Sunk In Obscurity' uses findings from the previous sections to consider, through a process of interpreting the text, what purpose Sade's notorious obscenity serves; *why* did he write this obscenity, what comment does it make on his society and how does it fit into the tradition of eighteenth-century French erotica?

Sade's notoriety is one reason why his work begins the closer, textual aspect of this thesis. Another is that, in some ways, modern culture's relationship to the Marquis de Sade – the figure and his work (the two are frequently intertwined)¹ – represents its relationship to obscene literature in general. Figure 1, a frequently reproduced portrait of Sade (it graces the covers of one recent academic study and the cover of the most recent biography) illustrates one common form of this relationship. Thus, in this nineteenth-century pen and ink drawing, Sade glares at the viewer from a throne-like chair. As if the fires of hell are near, clouds of smoke billow in the background. Sade appears well-dressed, stern and domineering. A whip lies on the floor across a manuscript called *Justine*. In his left hand is a riding-crop. Kneeling beside him, her wrists and ankles chained, breasts bared, a small crucifix resting between them, is a young woman. Two naked cherubs emerge from the shadows behind her, their whips raised: the dark side of love about to strike. The tip of Sade's whip presses against his captive's cheek and turns her head away. The symbol of Christ is apparently unable to protect her. All this woman can do is stare, fascinated, fearful, out of the corner of her eye at her cruel new Master. Here is Sade the pornographer and the Gothic villain come to life: amoral, satanic, cruel. Here is the figure or the force in which, it

¹ Harrison, *Censorship*, 134.

seems, so many *want* to believe: he is the threatening impurity expelled from the socially acceptable against which we can unite. In this way, Sade turns heads away in fear or disgust. Ultimately however, we are fascinated by that which is obscene. Like the victim in this portrait 'we' watch from the corner of our eyes in fear-filled fascination.



Figure 1: Nineteenth Century portrait of Sade from illustration by Eugene L'Orsay (ca. 1855).
Reproduced by permission of the Mary Evans Picture Library.

As obscene ('impure') as it avowedly is, Phillips notes that Sade's writing proved enduringly influential throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – not only to

writers of later obscene fiction like Georges Bataille.¹ In 1933, the Italian critic, Mario Praz suggested that ‘the shadow of the “divine Marquis”’ irrevocably altered the course of European literature.² Further examples could be found in the English poet Algernon Swinburne who sought satanic revelations in the Marquis’s writings.³ Similarly, across the Channel, the Goncourt brothers’ journal tells of dinner conversations with Gustave Flaubert. The latter was apparently ‘haunted by Monsieur de Sade’ and exhibited a reckless penchant for calling Sade’s work ‘the most amusing nonsense that I’ve ever come across’.⁴ Another entry recalls an evening spent at Flaubert’s, where the writer outrageously claimed that Sade’s work – with its repeated portrayals of blasphemy – was ‘the last word in Catholicism’.⁵ Meanwhile, Charles Baudelaire asserted that ‘One must always return to Sade to observe mankind in its natural state and to understand the quality of Evil’.⁶ By 1924, as Nicholas Harrison notes, Sade had been adopted ‘as some sort of mascot or role model for the [Paris-based] Surrealist group’.⁷ The list could go on – Sade’s work was an anathema to 1960s and 1970s radical feminists; it proved influential to the *Tel Quel* group (including Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva)⁸ – but I think my point about Sade’s influence and enduring fascination, despite or indeed because of his obscenity, has been made.

Finally, I begin with Sade because to do so takes this study back to France’s pre-Revolutionary period which is often identified as an era when, ‘Pornography came into existence, both as a literal and visual practice and as a category of understanding’.⁹ While pornography (like, or including obscene literature, depending on whether you see them as distinct genres) in general is seen as emerging alongside and in turn shaped by Western modernity (see Chapter One, ‘Obscenity and Society’), for some, Sade’s writing holds a significant place within this history of obscene literature and also literature in general

¹ Phillips, *Sade*, 61, sketches some of the direct artistic influences of Sade’s first novel.

² Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. Angus Davidson (London: Fontana, 1960), esp. 113-214.

³ Thomas, *Sade*, 296-97.

⁴ Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, *Journal: mémoires de la vie littéraire 1851-1863, Vol. I* (Paris: Fasquelle and Flammarion, 1956), 553-54.

⁵ Goncourts, *Journal*, 695.

⁶ Quoted in Thomas, *Sade*, 301.

⁷ Harrison, *Censorship*, 139. See also Neil Cox, ‘Critique of Pure Desire, or When the Surrealists Were Right’, *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, ed. Jennifer Munby, (London: Tate Publishing, 2001), 245-67.

⁸ Harrison, *Censorship*, 167-202 discusses the relationship between *Tel Quel* and Sade especially Barthes’s reading of Sade.

⁹ Hunt, ‘Obscenity’, 10-11.

(consider Praz's assertion above), and, for others, of Western modernity in terms of history and culture. Straddling the French Revolution, Sade's writing is frequently presented (albeit in different ways) as an influential punctuation mark in European culture. Maurice Blanchot called Sade 'master of the grand themes of modern thought and sensibility'.¹ In *L'histoire de la folie (Madness and Civilization)*, first published in 1961, Michel Foucault presents Sade's work as a product of modern culture. Confusing the boundaries between author, text, and psychopathology, Foucault claims that sadism is a 'a massive cultural fact which appeared precisely at the end of the eighteenth century, and which constitutes one of the greatest conversions of Western imagination'.² Echoing Foucault, Phillips has called Sade, 'the gatekeeper standing between the classical and the modern era ... Sade embodies the tension between classical and modern ways of thinking'.³ Clearly, Sade is a monumental figure – monumentally obscene, fascinating, notorious, influential, and significantly placed in terms of the history of Western modernity and the history of obscene literature. Regarding the latter, as Michelson notes, Sade is arguably the first writer of *really* obscene literature.⁴

Having explained *why* I begin with Sade, it should be noted that Sade's oeuvre is extensive, complex and often contradictory. As such it lends itself to opposing and fascinating interpretations. This chapter concentrates on *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* to the almost total exclusion of his other novels. This approach avoids – or perhaps does not fully address – some of Sade's complexity. Evasion is not the reason for exploring only one work. In aiming to move beyond Sade while still recognising his seminal status within the tradition of modern obscene literature, it has proved necessary to limit my focus to a single major work. *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* is my choice because, for over two hundred years, for many it remains the ultimate obscene narrative: powerful, horrifying, disturbing, yet simultaneously fascinating. Although in my view it is not Sade's best book – neither his cleverest, funniest, most eloquent nor most interesting – it contains the germinal themes of his later narratives. Of all Sade's novels, however, it is arguably the most relentlessly violent and sexual. Furthermore, although Sade's later novels appeared during his lifetime, the carefully concealed manuscript of *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* was lost during the Revolutionary storming of the Bastille. This loss meant that Sade never experienced the public's response to his first full-length novel, the work that his best-known English

¹ Maurice Blanchot, 'La Raison de Sade,' *Lautréamont et Sade* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1963), 47.

² Foucault, *Madness*, 210.

³ Phillips, *Sade*, 153.

⁴ Michelson, *Unspeakable*, 4: Sade is 'the first to synthesize the components of obscene poetics'.

translators, Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver call ‘this darkest of novels ... this book of purest destruction ... this unsurpassed novel of terror’.¹ Thus, as has been suggested, the novels which followed can be seen as attempts to refine and repeat what Sade had already created in his first, lost novel.² In addition, the rediscovery and retranslation of *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* sets it apart from Sade’s earlier, published novels. After all, its reappearance in France in the 1930s, edited by Maurice Heine and published in three volumes, was a significant factor in re-igniting French academic and artistic interest – the ‘impact’ of which Phillips speaks – in the works of the notorious Marquis.³

Finally, although the elements which fill *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* recur throughout his later works I am not suggesting that this novel reveals the ‘authentic’ Sade. Sade, as much as any writer, will remain indefinable and contested behind fiction’s complex screen – and Sade, perhaps more than others considering the reputation and the rumours and the multiple layers of interpretation and reinterpretation, the veritable mythology which now surrounds (and merges) the man and his work. The first sections begin the process by introducing this ‘darkest of novels’ and gathering the strands of recent arguments concerning Sade’s use of language and the acts he depicts to explore the first question, In what way(s) is Sade’s first novel obscene? The following section, ‘The Most Impure Tale Ever Told’ considers what has been said of Sade’s textual/linguistic obscenity; the second section, ‘Horrors Of Such Absolute Filthiness’ considers the acts described.

1. ‘The Most Impure Tale Ever Told’⁴

As he does in many of Sade’s works, the reader often features like a ghostly extra character in Sade’s first novel. One such moment occurs when, as the novel’s introduction draws to a close, Sade takes time to warn the reader before the plot-proper begins. As if with an ironic smile, Sade addresses the reader in the familiar ‘tu’. Doing so, we can suppose that Sade

¹ Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse, ‘Introduction’, *120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings* (London: Arrow, 1989), ix.

² Seaver and Wainhouse, ‘Introduction’, 185-86.

³ Neil Schaeffer, *The Marquis de Sade: A Life* (London: Picador, 1999), 383 describes the loss and rediscovery of Sade’s manuscript.

⁴ 253-4/69

was all too aware of what his '*ami lecteur*' might seek in a book entitled *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*. He seems to play on the knowledge that prohibition fosters fascination and that the warning itself will entice the reader further for the reader goes where 'he' too is warned against:

And now, friend-reader, you must prepare your heart and your mind for the most impure tale that has ever been told since our world began, ['*C'est maintenant, ami lecteur, qu'il faut disposer ton coeur et ton esprit au récit le plus impur qui ait jamais été fait depuis que le monde existe...* '] a book the likes of which are met with neither amongst the ancients nor amongst us moderns ... Many of the extravagances you are about to see illustrated will doubtless displease you, yes, we are well aware of it, ['*beaucoup de tous les écarts que tu vas voir peints te déplairont, on le sait*'] but there are amongst them a few which will warm you to the point of costing you some spunk, and that, reader, is all we ask. (253-54/69)¹

Sade goes on, 'It [his novel] is the story of a magnificent banquet: six hundred different plates offer themselves to your appetite; are you going to eat them all?' ['*C'est ici l'histoire d'un magnifique repas où six cents plats divers s'offrent à ton appétit*'] (254/69). From the out-set therefore, we are forewarned of obscene content which may cause displeasure as much as pleasure. For now, I want to consider how Sade's description of the novel as a 'magnificent banquet' introduces and prefigures what becomes one of its dominant themes: excess. Before ever reaching descriptions of a sexual or excretory nature, it is through excess that Sade first confronts the reader with the obscene. Thus, contrary to its reputation, *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* does not explode from page one with blood and semen. It begins with excess.

Excess, as Miller observed, is something which evokes the response of disgust;² it is opposed to and threatens to overwhelm socially accepted standards of control, decency, and moderation, in other words those ideological 'boundaries' which regulate society. Frappier-Mazur observes that 'the obscene is something *in excess*'.³ Others have dubbed Sade's first novel an 'encyclopaedia of excess'.⁴ Indeed, although the events of the novel

¹ The Wainhouse and Seaver translation reads 'Cost you some fuck'. I have translated the French *foutre* – which can be both noun ('cum/semen/spunk') and verb ('fuck') – to the more accurate (current) English sexual slang of 'spunk'.

² Miller, *Disgust*, 120-22 (also see Chapter One, 'The Psychology of Obscenity').

³ Frappier-Mazur, *Writing the Orgy*, 140

⁴ Marcel Hénaff, 'The Encyclopedia of Excess,' *Sade and the Narrative of Transgression*, eds. David Allison et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 142.

occur over the eponymous one hundred and twenty days, this four month, winter retreat – officially November the first to the last day of February – actually continues until March 20th. Thus, the plot occurs over not one hundred and twenty, but one hundred and forty days as if, in this book of excess, even content exceeds its title. I want to begin therefore with the assertion that excess is one of the core components of *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*'s obscenity. It is far from the only obscene ingredient in Sade's novel; the more conventional obscenity of 'perverse' acts of violence and coprophagia will be considered in due course. What the reader 'sees' first, however, is not so much conventionally obscene acts but other features which repel the reader from what 'he' sees: obscene wealth and obscene greed. On the one hand, there is the excess of wealth: characters have 'immense wealth' and single meals cost over 'ten thousand francs' (197, 196/21, 20). This gross material consumption is matched by, as well as displayed in, an excessive consumption of sumptuous foods. The meal, writes Sade,

began with a shellfish soup and hors d'oeuvres composed of twenty dishes; twenty entrees came on next, and soon gave way to another twenty lighter entrees made up entirely of breasts of chicken, of assorted game prepared in every possible way. This was offset by a serving of roasts; everything of the rarest imaginable was brought on. Next arrived some cold pastry, soon afterward twenty-six entremets of every description and form ... [then] a whole array of cold and hot sugared pastries. Desert finally appeared: a prodigious number and variety of fruits... [the list goes on] (280/93).

It is not only in their material tastes that Sade's libertines display excess: they each are the embodiment of consumption. Of the Duc for instance, Sade writes,

His prowess at the table outshone, if that is possible, what he demonstrated upon the bed ... He regularly ate three meals a day, and they were all three exceedingly prolonged and exceedingly copious, and it was as nothing to him to toss down his usual ten bottles of Burgundy; he had drunk up to thirty, and needed but to be challenged and he would set out for the mark of fifty. (202/24)

Consumption is one form of excess; another is physical size. Like Rabelaisian giants, sexual organs are often rendered exceedingly large. With penises 'eleven inches long and seven and fifteen-sixteenth inches around' (232/51) characters, or, more accurately *caricatures*, people this notorious novel, hefting members so huge, that, as Angela Carter observes, they

'cannot penetrate a woman at all ... and are so many meaningless appendages'.¹ This kind of excess is not restricted to men; one of the central female characters has a three inch clitoris, bigger and more virile than the penis of some of the male characters.² This is not to mention the novel's more conventionally excessive/obscene content: an almost continuous gorging not just on food and wine but sex, violence, faeces and other kinds of excreta. There is also a gorging (although this is perhaps a too physical verb to use) on words themselves: an excess in telling everything, in saying everything, in over spilling the pages of the book.

Text overflows respected boundaries in a number of ways. I have mentioned how content exceeds the title. Furthermore, printed with Sade's marginalia and notes to himself we find that the margins of the novel carry additional information. Sade's extensive use of footnotes (especially in *Juliette*, where there are one hundred and twenty-nine of them) at a time when the device was rare in fiction, indicates that Sade's use of the textual margins to address his reader, to support his characters' argument, or to give self-reflexive commentary, provides further illustration of this kind of textual overflow/excess.³ In a similar way, the narrator's direct address to the reader opens the borders of the textual world and the obscenity of his book, to the 'real' 'external' world.⁴ This 'address' is not limited to a conspiratorial naming. At times the reader's imagination is required to complete the narrative (of which more is said below). At others the narrator imparts educational advice: 'I mention this in passing so that should any amateur be disposed to make use of the formula, he may be firmly persuaded there is none superior' [*je le dis en passant, afin que si quelque amateur veuille user de ce secret, il soit fermement persuadé qu'il n'en est pas de meilleur*'] (472/237). Textual excess therefore could be said to overflow the boundaries of the book.

Textual excess is the focus of work on Sade produced by Barthes, Klossowski, Hénaff and Frappier-Mazur. These critics explore how excess operates within the 'story' and Sade's use of language. To understand and illustrate what these critics argue (I return to their findings below) it is necessary to locate these issues within *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*. I begin therefore with a summary of the novel's plot and consideration of its

¹ Carter, *Sadeian Woman*, 112.

² Carter, *Sadeian Woman*, 112.

³ John Phillips, 'Sade's Footnotes,' *French Studies: A Quarterly Review*, 56:2 (2002), 153.

⁴ Hénaff, 'Encyclopedia', 153 talks of the reader as the 'Other' of Sade's text, complicit with the libertines. Elsewhere Hénaff refers to the reader's role as serving to limit the events of the text (more will be said of this in pages to come). I see this direct address as another way in which Sade's text overflows or exceeds conventional textual boundaries.

language. Both begin in the stately setting and conventional style of eighteenth-century French classicism:

The extensive wars wherewith Louis XIV was burdened during his reign, while draining the State's treasury and exhausting the people, nonetheless contained the secret that led to the prosperity of those bloodsuckers ['*sangsues* '] who are always on the watch for public calamities, which, instead of appeasing, they promote or invent so as, precisely, to be able to profit from them the more advantageously. The end of this so very sublime reign was perhaps one of the periods in the history of the French Empire when one saw the emergence of the greatest number of these mysterious fortunes whose origins are as obscure as the lust and debauchery that accompany them. It was towards the close of this period, and not long before the Regent sought, by means of the famous tribunal which goes under the name of the *Chambre de Justice*, to flush this multitude of traffickers, that four of them conceived the idea for the singular revels whereof we are going to give an account. One must not suppose that it was exclusively the lowborn and vulgar sort which did this swindling; gentlemen of the highest note led the pack [*à sa tête de très grands seigneurs*]. (191/15)

The setting is specific; the narrator's tone grandiose (yet, perhaps ironic – it is difficult to imagine 'sublime' as a serious description of Louis XIV's austere and flawed reign). The background is fashioned in eloquent strokes which proclaim that this story is grounded in historical fact. This is France, during the early years of the Regency (a *Chambre de Justice* was indeed founded by the Regent, first meeting on the 6 March 1716)¹ and it is a society which Sade's narrator – and here I stress that, although commonly done, it is naive to conflate the identity of Sade with the voice of his narrator – represents as corrupt from the top down ('gentlemen of the highest note led the pack').

Exaggerated accounts of aristocratic corruption, privilege, hypocrisy, gluttony, and excess are the mainstays of Sade's novels as much as they were common currency throughout seventeenth-, eighteenth- (and nineteenth-) century European pornography and the French satires which influenced Sade's writing (see 'To Reveal Secrets Which Ought To Be Sunk in Obscurity'). Thus, in keeping with this popular literary tradition, by the third line of Sade's description the social status and character of his four principle protagonists is revealed. They are aristocrats, the country's privileged; they are libertines and they are compared to not just animals, but low, crawling, invertebrates: leaches; 'bloodsuckers'. The identity of those specific to this tale are revealed in sentences which follow: The Duc de

¹ Michel Delon, 'Notes et Variants,' *Sade: Oeuvres*, Vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 1135, fn 3.

Blangis; his brother, the Bishop of X***; the ‘celebrated’ Durcet (a banker), and the Président de Curval (a retired judge).

Subsequent pages sketch the criminal pasts of these men (including betrayal, matricide, murder and incest), their power and extraordinary wealth. This ‘immense’ wealth exempts them from the law and allows them to lead lives of rigidly ordered debauchery. Each week, the narrator tells us, the libertines stage a series of five orgies: one devoted to men and sodomy, another to sex with aristocratic women, another to the lowest class of whore, the fourth to deflowering virgin girls aged between seven and fifteen, and the last, week in and week out, to violating kidnapped damsels. These libertines, Sade is at pains to illustrate, have no exclusive sexual object – men, women, old, young, low class, high class – each has its appeal and each of these groups is represented in the story that follows.

The libertine-villains’ background, predilections and intentions made clear, the rest of *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*’s introduction describes the year long preparations undertaken for the coming winter: the location of four storytellers, six kitchen staff, thirty-two ‘lust-inspiring objects of either sex ... eight young girls, eight young boys, eight men endowed with monstrous members, for the delights of passive sodomy, and four [elderly and criminal] female servants’ (222-23/43). The events of the story take place at the Duc’s isolated château, Silling. Here, four whore-storytellers describe to the libertines ‘in the greatest detail and in due order, every one of debauchery’s extravagances, all its divagations, all its ramifications, all its contingencies, all of what is termed in libertine language, its passions’ (218/39). Several pages relate the Duc’s announcement to the gathered participants of thirty-five statutes and regulations, appropriate punishments, and a daily timetable of activities which will govern their extravaganza. Despite their reputation, these ‘one hundred and twenty days’ do not present a Bacchanalian mélange of flesh and body fluids. Down to a strict bedtime of two a.m., all acts are rigidly organised (even if not – and here too there is excess – always obeyed).

It is not only the scenes within the novel that are rigidly controlled. The introduction reveals the strict structure of the novel itself. At its core – and at the château’s centre – is an auditorium where the storytellers deliver their narratives. Although the figures of the Duc and his criminal gang may dominate the novel, prompting comparison with Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and Scherezade in *The Thousand and One Nights*,¹ it is the stories and the storytellers (Duclos, Champville, Martaine and Desgranges) and not the activities of

¹ Michel Delon, ‘Notice,’ *Sade: Oeuvres*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 1124.

the libertines, who give the narrative its structure. Each whore-storyteller relates her life's story and

within the adventures of her life all the most unusual perversions in her experience of debauchery, and to do so in such an order that, for example, the first storyteller would include in her life's story one hundred and fifty of the simplest, the most ordinary, the least complex sexual deviations; the second, using the same framework, an equal number of more unusual passions involving one or more men with one or several women; the third in her narrative will include one hundred and fifty of the most criminal perversions, and those which most outrage the law, Nature and religion; and as all these excesses [*tous ces excès*] lead to murder and as these murders committed through debauchery are infinitely various ... the fourth storyteller shall include in her story a detailed account of one hundred and fifty assorted examples of them [the murderous passions]. (219/39-40)

So it is that the novel's structure of six hundred 'passions', five told each day, each numbered, dated and/or presented with a subheading open up the château's enclosed space to a range of different locations and an entire sub-culture of French society – victims, libertines, criminals, perverts, animals. Of the 'passions' themselves, some are mere summaries; others are intricately described and many pages long. With the exception of the final 'hell passion', the longer descriptions and the occasional 'philosophical' discussions which accompany them end abruptly at the close of the first month. After this the narrative is pared down into note form: virtually nothing remains save the five daily stories, each related in a calculated, considered tone. From here, the novel's gradual breakdown from eighteenth-century eloquence to lists of perverse practices and, ultimately, columns of numbers representing victims and survivors, can be seen as a fine example of form reflecting content.¹

From this brief summary, we can see that at the centre of *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* is – literally and metaphorically – the story, or to make a small distinction at this stage, story-telling. The whores' stories create the backbone and the structure of the novel and at the centre of Silling is the story-telling room, the auditorium where, every day, all the characters gather. With 'story' so central to this Sadean tale, it is little wonder that the story

¹ Debate surrounds whether Sade's first novel is in fact complete and was ever intended for publication. Lost during the storming of the Bastille, the novel was not 'rediscovered' and published until the early twentieth-century. If not intended for publication, the textual breakdown which I discuss was not intended to be part of the novel. That said, Sade's use of footnotes in *Juliette* suggests that he was not averse to using the textual margins to address the reader. Furthermore, many contemporary critics tend towards the view that the manuscript of *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* is largely complete and was intended for publication. See for example Schaeffer, *Sade*, 538 fn25 and Phillips, *Sade*, 59 (who pragmatically notes that the narrator's frequent address of 'the reader' alone suggests the manuscript was meant to be read).

itself, in terms of style, tone, and Sade's use of classical (the acceptable, high language of court and Church) versus obscene (vulgar) language have emerged as areas of special interest where discussion of Sade's obscenity is concerned. Thus, Barthes observes that Silling is a 'sanctuary not of debauchery, but of the "story"'.¹

Below I summarise what Barthes, Klossowski and Hénaff have found in their readings of Sade's language and the obscene excess in his first novel.

Barthes attributes a number of purposes to Sade's language. Although he mentions Sade's 'obscene language',² and, as we saw in Chapter One ('Obscene Words'), Barthes masterfully illustrates language's role in turning figures and objects into obscene scenes,³ Sade's obscene language and how this contributes to obscenity is not *per se* the focus of Barthes's interpretation. Instead, he notes how language implicitly contributes to the novel's violence. Language 'being analytical ... can come to grips with the body only if it cuts it up' in order to represent it.⁴ It is a point of interest how dismemberment (of sorts) operates on a linguistic as well as literal level within Sade's text but language's 'cutting up' is neither unique to human bodies nor to Sade's writing (describing a tree equally involves separating it into parts: leaves, bark, roots, twigs, trunk...). On a more influential level for Barthes, the most interesting part of Sade's language is its 'metonymic violence'.⁵ Sade 'juxtaposes heterogeneous fragments belonging to spheres of language that are ordinarily kept separate by socio-moral taboo,' writes Barthes.⁶ The language of pornography and obscenity clashes with the refined classical style of the eighteenth-century novel, philosophical discourse, and the Church style of sermons. Consider for example the passage translated as, 'O thou whose filth is as old as the hills [*Toi dont la saleté remonte au déluge*], thou who since baptism hast not wiped thine ass, and whose infamous cunt breeds a pestilence three leagues on every side, come bring all that to my nose's delectation, I beg thee [*apporter tout cela sur mon nez, je t'en prie*]' (449/221).

¹ Barthes, *Sade*, 35, 37 (Barthes's emphasis). Harrison, *Censorship*, 184 points to Barthes's play on the double meaning of *histoire* in French ('story' and 'history'). See 'To Reveal Secrets Which Ought To Be Sunk In Obscurity' where I pick up the second meaning.

² Barthes, *Sade*, 135 and 33.

³ Barthes, *Sade*, 156. (Barthes's emphasis).

⁴ Barthes, *Sade*, 127.

⁵ Barthes, *Sade*, 33.

⁶ Barthes, *Sade*, 33-34.

Juxtaposition caused between obscene words and the refined language and style of classicism is not the only instance of juxtaposition to be found in *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*. A recurrent form of obscenity in Sade's novel (and a core element within the obscene in more general terms) is the violent rupture of, or lack of respect for, the high-low division. Consider for instance the story of a young woman who washes the faecal matter collected around her anus in a bidet of champagne (which the attendant libertine then drinks) (327/129-30).

Following Barthes, I use the term 'juxtaposition' but in this example it seems that juxtaposition may be slightly misleading. To juxtapose means to place two things separate from each other, as Barthes writes, 'side by side'.¹ Yet, like the faecal matter in the champagne Sade less juxtaposes than mixes images, objects and the language of the 'High' and the 'Low', the acceptable and the unacceptable. Via the obscene (or rather, creating an obscene scene) he defies – *exceeds* – the accepted boundaries which divide them. Indeed, Barthes suggests as much when, a few lines later he says that 'Sade suppresses the aesthetic division of languages'.² If divisions are suppressed you cannot have two things separate, divided and standing side by side.

For Barthes, Sade's suppression of linguistic divisions has revolutionary implications: it attacks culture through its language. Thus, Sade's merging of the vulgar register with 'the high, pompous, cultural styles coded by centuries of orthodox literature' constitutes a 'verbal coup' an attempt to overthrow culture by ruining the mainstay of cultural: its language.³ 'The transgressions of language possess an offensive power at least as strong as that of moral transgressions', writes Barthes.⁴ Sade, he argues, challenges culture through language by transgressing acceptable decorum and/through the rules of social language. Sade's work is obscene in that it doesn't abide by the rules: his writing exceeds them and ventures outside acceptable boundaries and categories (in Kristeva's words, 'what does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous').⁵ Sade conceives 'the inconceivable', he 'leave[s] nothing outside the words and ... concede[s] nothing ineffable to the world'.⁶

¹ Barthes, *Sade*, 149.

² Barthes, *Sade*, 149.

³ Barthes, *Sade*, 149.

⁴ Barthes, *Sade*, 34.

⁵ Kristeva, *Powers*, 4.

⁶ Barthes, *Sade*, 37.

Writing in 1947, Pierre Klossowski anticipates some of Barthes's observations. He discusses how the self – 'me', 'my' 'I' – is formed from a pre-existing institutional language but, unlike Barthes, Klossowski's reading is less explicit in attributing to Sade's language a politically subversive purpose.¹ He makes the important observation that no matter what it describes Sade's language conforms to the logical structure of classicism. According to Klossowski, Sade accepts logical, accepted, linguistic structure, then 'outrages it by conserving it only as a dimension of aberration – not because aberration is described in this logically structured language, but because the aberrant act is *reproduced* in it [...] the same process inscribes the presence of *nonlanguage* in language'.² On the one hand, writes Klossowski, there is the 'logical language, as the language of reason ...[the language] of "common sense." On the other hand, what the perverse gesture thus coded introduces into the language of "common sense" is the nonlanguage of monstrosity ... Here, between the rational language of norms and the anomaly, there is a sort of osmosis that Sade alone could carry off'.³ A crossing of boundaries (osmosis) occurs. Outrage – shock, anger, perhaps horror and fear (all emotions Klossowski attributes to reading Sade – Barthes's reading places less emphasis on the reader's emotive response) – are another effect of Sade's use of language. The introduction of the unspoken – that which is usually withheld from language, '*nonlanguage*' is another. This 'nonlanguage', in the sense that it is an inadmissible part of language (as we saw in Chapter One), includes vulgar and slang words for the genitals, breasts, and excreta (*cul, con, foutre, tétons, vit, merde, étron* – 'arse', 'cunt', 'fuck/spunk', 'tits', 'prick', 'shit', 'turd'). These words occur on almost every page of the story. From this we can see that it is not only the acts which Sade describes that contribute to his novel's monstrous reputation: it is also, for Klossowski, a linguistic monstrosity which uses the staid language of 'civilisation' to say those things it should not in its effort to 'say everything'.

'The obscene,' writes Marcel Hénaff, quoting the last words of *Juliette*, '... is formulated as the challenge to "say everything"'.⁴ Significantly positioned as the last words of Juliette's story, Sade signposts saying 'everything' as an important strand in his oeuvre.

¹ Klossowski, *Sade*, 36. This is not to say that Klossowski's reading of Sade is *not* political. The point I wish to emphasise is that in Klossowski's reading language alone is not the only politically active aspect of Sade's text.

² Klossowski, *Sade*, 40-1 (Klossowski's emphasis). Cp. Deleuze, *Coldness*, 22. 'Pornological language is aimed ... at confronting language with its own limits with what is in a sense a "nonlanguage"'.

³ Klossowski, *Sade*, 25.

⁴ Hénaff, 'Encyclopedia', 166.

Saying ‘everything’ is also fundamental to what Hénaff identifies as *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*’s obscenity. Echoing Klossowski, Hénaff posits that the novel’s linguistic excess says ‘everything that must be kept in silence’.¹ ‘Sade’s writing,’ writes Hénaff,

proves that the received language can materially say everything it is in fact not supposed to say ... there is no statement, however perverse it may be, that is ultimately unspeakable ... enunciation must go to the limit, must scrupulously extend itself to the lowliest things, recover the smallest differences, cover and release every signified.²

Saying everything exhibits what acceptable language represses, namely ‘violence and desire’.³ Herein, Hénaff locates Sade’s obscenity. ‘This unreserved space,’ writes Hénaff, ‘this boundless exposition, is precisely what defines the space of the obscene’.⁴ Excess on a linguistic and textual level therefore provides one layer to Sade’s obscenity. Yet, another closely related layer also exists.

We could say, as Hénaff and Klossowski do, that Sade’s obscenity gathers into the light that which is normally concealed. Now recall one of the Latinate definitions of obscenity which suggests that it literally means that which is ‘off the stage of public life.’ Over the past few pages, we have seen how for Barthes, Klossowski and Hénaff, Sade’s ‘saying everything’ and putting *onto* the stage is part of his obscenity evinced as using obscene language and description of the unspoken to transgress polite stylistic and linguistic decorum. Yet, within Sade’s text and the stories of Silling there is a more literal representation of putting that which is ‘off the stage’ into the limelight.

Recalling the structure of *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* – the storyteller telling stories in the auditorium at the centre of Silling – reminds us that a ‘literal’ stage and forms of play-acting are central to the novel and the fictional château. At the centre of the auditorium the storytellers assume the position of figures on a stage. They are ‘placed like an actor in the theatre’ [*placée comme est l’acteur sur un théâtre*] (237/56). Around them the libertines and their harem, who are obliged to wear (when anything) various costumes, in ‘Asiatic style ... Spanish ... Turkish garb ... Greek ... [and] the elders ... shall alternatively interpret the Graeae, nuns, fairies, sorceresses, and, upon occasion, widows’ [*soeurs grises,*

¹ Hénaff, ‘Encyclopedia’, 155-6.

² Hénaff, ‘Encyclopedia’, 158. Recall also Frappier-Mazur: ‘the obscene is something *in excess*’, *Writing the Orgy*, 140. Harrison, *Censorship*, 208-10 discusses the tension inherent in Hénaff’s reading and Sade’s project between wishing to say everything and saying too much, between, that is, totality and excess.

³ Hénaff, ‘Encyclopedia’, 155-6.

⁴ Hénaff, ‘Encyclopedia’, 161.

en religieuses, en fées, en magiciennes et quelquefois en veuves'] (245/62), are 'situated as if observing a spectacle in an amphitheatre' [*'et les auditeurs, placé dans les niches, se trouvaient l'être comme on l'est à l'amphithéâtre*'] (237-8/56). The characters become actors and their stories, although audible rather than (literally) visual, become vignettes; the words conjuring images in the minds of the audience ("I could not visualize a thing," complains Durcet when Duclos fails to fill her story with enough detail) [*'je ne pouvais me rien figurer*'] (272/84). This audience includes the reader and the reader's mind.

Significantly in this respect, when introducing them, the narrator points out that what the reader is going to *see* (*'que tu vas voir'*) (69, French edition only) comprises the most impure part of his tale.¹ So it is that the storytellers, positioned on a stage, bring other characters onto the stage of their stories to be 'seen': 'I shall have occasion to bring that actor back upon the stage' says the third storyteller, Martaine [*'j'aurai l'occasion de vous représenter encore une fois cet acteur - là sur la scène*'] (523/275).² Recurrent throughout this and Sade's other novels are motifs of role-playing, theatricality, and of being placed 'on the stage' rather than off. These are motifs which provide a literal frame that chimes neatly with the definitions of the obscene as that which is 'off the stage' except Sade does not leave it 'off'; he puts it firmly 'on' the literal and figurative stage of his novel.

Sade's stage/theatre motif however is not a simple metaphor of displaying the obscene. At times Sade lowers the stage curtain. Occasionally, referring to the graded structure of the novel, the narrator coyly apologises that 'circumstances compel us still to mask [/veil events] from the reader's view [and] we beg him to suffer the curtain to remain down' [*'Les circonstances nous obligent de voiler, nous prions nos lecteurs de trouver bon que nous tirions le rideau*'] (482/245). On one level, this extended metaphor of the theatre introduces a theme of specularity to the novel: sometimes events are revealed; at others they are veiled (*voiler*). At one point, one of Sade's marginal notes even reminds himself to 'veil' things better at the beginning of the story [*'mieux voiler (dans le commencement)*'] (163, French edition only: the translation reads 'Remember to be more guarded' which elides the motif of veiling, 372). As Caroline Warman has shown in relation to *Juliette*, combined with the conventional pornographic motif of voyeurism, this 'veiling' and

¹ Annie Le Brun, 'Sade or the First Theatre of Atheism', trans. John Phillips, *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* 23:1 (2000), 47, suggests that the 'only spectators are the actors themselves', an interesting point which overlooks the 'seeing' (*voir*) which the reader is said to do.

² The English translators exaggerate this theatrical aspect when they write, "It was once again I, Messieurs, who went on the stage in the play I am about to describe to you," says Duclos. On this occasion the words 'on the stage' do not actually occur in the French: "*Cet fut encoire-moi, dit-elle, messieurs, qui servis à la partie que je vais vous conter*" (468/234).

'unveiling' links to themes of revealing the hidden and mysterious truths which have long been associated with the prohibited and which were commonplace in eighteenth-century forbidden fiction (see below, 'To Reveal Secrets Which Ought To Be Sunk In Obscurity').¹

This is an issue to which I will return, but in passing, it is perhaps worth noting that the novel's occasional postponement of events questions Hénaff's assertion that, in telling everything, *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* 'abandons all suspense by putting its cards on the table from the very beginning'.² This is true in terms of plot but I would argue less so for content. In fact, it seems to me that the novel effectively builds suspense in a number of ways. Firstly, within the stories she tells, the first storyteller, Duclos, introduces characters the stories of whom we must wait for later storytellers to finish ('I shall introduce the man to you again, Messieurs,') interrupts Martaine, the third storyteller, at one point, and she is followed by the last, Desgranges who adds, "I expect my characterisation of him will be even darker") (529/279-280). In promising a graded narrative of sexual 'perversion' another level of suspense is created by the novel's structure itself. From the very beginning, as Hénaff observes, we are asked to wait for a grand climax. Thus, reading *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* for the first time part of the narrative's attraction is the dreadful expectation – or perhaps fascinated curiosity – that the final, most extreme sexual act (whatever that could be. . . and what *could* it be?) is waiting. Finally, of course, Sade's veiling of certain scenes reminds us that, although Hénaff and others focus on the obscene as saying everything (for Hénaff, the obscene is the novel's 'boundless exposition')³ frequently the novel neither says nor shows all; at these moments its exposition is far from boundless. From this, we can conclude that Sade's obscenity does not lie in linguistic excess alone.

In *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*, veiling takes a number of forms. Firstly, while Hénaff points out the libertine's command that Duclos give *more* detail, he doesn't mention that later in the story the libertines request that the storytellers only give certain details – the most lubricious – and neglect any form of emotions, or sentiment: 'I don't greatly favour mixing fine feelings with libertinage. Leave that element out of it [*moins de la délicatesse*],' commands the Bishop (557/301). Emotions and sentiments therefore are absent by request from the narrative. At other points the narrative is punctuated with ironic

¹ Carline Warman, 'The Jewels of Virtue: Sade's Claim to the Legacy of Materialism,' *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* 23:1 (2000), 94-5.

² Hénaff, 'Encyclopedia', 145.

³ Hénaff, 'Encyclopedia', 161.

addresses to the reader's imagination. Here we find comments such as, 'Tis for the reader to invent the combinations and scene he'd like best' [*'C'est au lecteur à faire sa combinaison, et à trouver agréable, s'il lui plaît'*] (502/259), 'I leave it to the reader to imagine the purity of those discourses and the loftiness of their moralising' [*'Je laisse au lecteur à penser si la morale en fut bien épurée'*] (281/93) and 'She tendered her cunning little ass, the Président glued his mouth to it, the intelligent reader will have no trouble guessing what he received therefrom' [*'le lecteur intelligent devine aisément ce qu'il en reçut'*] (527/278). At other times veiling takes the form of ironic narratorial ignorance: 'I've not the faintest idea what happened next ... [but] I am led to suppose that, very simply and very virtuously, his honour the judge had just committed incest' [*'Je ne sais ce qui se passa ... je crois que tout simplement et très vertueusement, M. le président venait de faire un inceste'*] (524/276) and 'Aline displayed I've no idea what, for I have never been able to discover what went on in those infernal closets' [*'Aline montra je ne sais quoi, car il m'a toujours été impossible de découvrir ce qui se passait dans ces infernaux cabinets'*] (514/268). The 'infernal closets' – rooms around the auditorium where suitably stimulated libertines can retire and indulge their sexual fantasies – are space within the geography of the text where the text itself does not venture.

Of course, paradoxically, to not say something – to *leave* it 'off the stage' – does not mean that it remains unsaid. Pointing out this paradox, Hénaff explains, 'This chamber beyond the scene constitutes the narrative's most astonishing ruse, to draw attention to the absolute horrors, even if it initially marks the failure of the narrative to circumscribe these horrors'.¹ Silence, as the saying goes, speaks louder than words. On one level this 'silence' of Sade's is part of a game of reading. It is a gesture which could be seen as pre-empting the rules of literary prohibition. In this way, it is not so much the author as the reader who becomes culpable in relation to obscene content. In other words at this moment when the curtain comes down, it is the reader not the text which is 'impure'. Indeed Harrison shows that, as a way of overcoming legal prohibition, nineteenth-century reading of obscene novels conventionally involved filling in conspicuous textual gaps, such as those left by Sade, in a way which is seldom required today. As Harrison writes, 'a nineteenth-century reader would have considered it relatively unproblematic to expand the text beyond its written limits according to shared presumptions and conventions concerning the appropriate demands of a writer's self-censorship, which made such extrapolations effectively part of

¹ Hénaff, 'Encyclopedia', 164.

the text'.¹ As true as this undoubtedly is in some contexts, if we consider what Sade at other times *allows* onto the stage of his novel, his occasional evasiveness cannot be ascribed to self-censorship *per se* – it is an intentional 'veiling'.

Hénaff sees these spaces of silence as marking the boundary of Sade's linguistic world. While elsewhere everything is said and *there* can be found the obscenity of excess, when confronted by those silent spaces, 'We readers,' writes Hénaff, 'stand before the door which, in the text, metaphorizes the limits of the obscene'.² He continues, 'In the secret chamber, the only thing that is successfully inserted in the narrative to indicate this horror is the *scream*. The scream is the pre-symbolic use of the voice, the voice before language takes charge of it'.³ Beyond language, in Hénaff's reckoning, is a place of horror, it is the limits of the obscene but is it the limit beyond which there is no obscenity? Or the limit beyond which lies the domain of the obscene? To read it the first way (as I believe Hénaff suggests) is to limit Sade's obscenity to his linguistic excess, his wish to 'say everything' and turns absence of language into absence of obscenity. Hénaff's persuasive argument indicates that linguistic excess *is* one obscene aspect of Sade's work. However, we need not follow Hénaff in equating absence of language with absence of obscenity. Hénaff for instance does not consider what personal horrors and obscenities the reader's mind may fill Sade's textual lacunae with.⁴ In this way these spaces could be compared to the technique of horror films: showing less is showing more; the most fearful moments (in Sade's novel, it could be argued the most obscene moments) are those when nothing is shown, the horror (the obscenity) is only suggested, the imagination given free-reign. The reader provides the rest. This is, as Phillips says, 'The power of the hidden in language'.⁵ In addition, as we saw in Chapter One, for several commentators, silence, nonlanguage and the preverbal *is the domain* of obscenity, not its limit. Thus, for Frappier-Mazur obscene language is closer 'to the preverbal semiotic than to the symbolic',⁶ and for Kristeva, defilement and the abject (recalling that Kristeva's abject corresponds to elements usually defined as obscene) 'is

¹ Harrison, *Censorship*, 46.

² Hénaff, 'Encyclopedia', 165.

³ Hénaff, 'Encyclopedia', 165 (Hénaff's emphasis).

⁴ Cryle, *Geometry*, 219 implies this point when he discusses Philippe Roger's view of the reader's relationship to the textual spaces of Sade's novels as a place where the reader's imagination can be liberated.

⁵ John Phillips, 'Sade and Self-censorship,' *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* 23:1 (2000), 108.

⁶ Frappier-Mazur, *Writing the Orgy*, 139.

what is jettisoned from the “*symbolic system*”¹ and ‘unnameable’² (see Chapter One, ‘The Psychology of Obscenity’ and ‘Obscene Language’).

To sum up, there exists in Sade’s fiction an obscenity of excess *and* of absence on a linguistic level. Following Hénaff, the obscene of Sade’s novel can be located in its excessive language and its details *as well as* (following Klossowski, Frappier-Mazur and Kristeva) in moments of nonlanguage, silence and veiling of details which cannot be explained as a form of self-censorship. Paradoxically therefore, on a textual level, obscenity appears in both what is present and what is absent. Once again we face obscenity’s threatening ambiguity; its ability to transgress simple categories.

Yet, obscenity in Sade’s text is more than simply text. That is to say, of course, on one level – that which we have looked at so far – Sade’s novel *is* simply text, words on a page and sentences made of language. As we have seen, obscenity operates on that textual level. Yet just as text, for those who can decipher it, is more than words, Sade’s obscenity is more than just saying everything or saying nothing. On a more immediate, conventionally obscene level for most readers, *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*’s obscenity is in the acts described, the images which Sade’s words conjure in the reader’s mind and the emotive responses they evoke. Without losing sight of the issues already raised I now want to explore this aspect of Sade’s obscenity.

2. ‘Horrors Of Such Absolute Filthiness’³

Frappier-Mazur reminded us that obscene language carries hostile undertones.⁴ Hénaff sees Sade’s revelation of what is normally repressed by symbolic language as ‘perhaps the most dangerous attempt and the least supportable aggression imaginable against the social order’⁵

¹ Kristeva, *Powers*, 65. (Kristeva’s emphasis).

² Kristeva, *Powers*, 35. Kristeva, *Powers*, 21 states that Sade is not abject because ‘everything is nameable for it [the Sadean text], the whole is nameable’. Frappier-Mazur, *Writing the Orgy*, 181 echoes this when she says that because it says everything, Sade’s writing is not ‘abject’. In fact, as the point I make here shows, Sade does not ‘name’ everything. Besides which the acts and objects (cadavers, faeces, blood...) recounted in Sade’s novel all, although named, clearly belong to that which Kristeva associates with the abject.

³ 411/193.

⁴ Frappier-Mazur, ‘Truth and the Obscene Word’, 204.

⁵ Hénaff, ‘Encyclopedia’, 156.

and, as we saw above, Barthes comments on the violent dismemberment of the body by language. This violence on a textual-linguistic level is matched by far more literal – and more conventionally obscene – violence in terms of descriptions. Consider, for example, the following passage: ‘he cuts off a young boy’s four limbs, embuggers the trunk, feeds him well and allows him to live; as the arms and legs were not severed too close to the body, the boy lives for quite a while’ [*Il coupe les quatre membres d’un jeune garçon, encule le tronc, le nourrit bien, et le laisse vivre ainsi; or, comme les membres ne sont pas coupés trop près du tronc, il vit longtemps*] (621/345).

There is vulgar (obscene) language here – *encule* – startling amid the syntax of ‘civilised’ language, but the most immediate obscenity is certainly what the words describe. For most, the notoriously obscene reputation of Sade’s novel(s) does not rest on its linguistic play but descriptions such as that of the dismembered and sodomized boy. Thus, while the linguistic level provides one interesting aspect of the novel’s obscenity, another level – descriptive obscenity – exists in descriptions of defilement, torture, sexual ‘perversion’ and violent death. These descriptions are not presented without comment; the narrative is fully aware of its repulsiveness (and its attraction). Like the characters in his novel, the narrator (Sade, if one chooses to name the narrator ‘Sade’) points out that what is described is impure, excessive, disgusting. This is, after all, ‘the most impure tale ever told’ in which ‘many of the extravagances you are about to see illustrated will doubtless displease you, yes, I am well aware of it’ [*beaucoup de tous les écarts que tu vais voir peints te déplairont, on le sait*] (254/69). Elsewhere acts are described as ‘unclean’ [*des saletés*] (465/232) and ‘horrors of such absolute filthiness’ [*des horreurs d’une saleté*] (411/193). A few brief examples serve as a limited illustration of Sade’s descriptive obscenity:

He has girls A and B shit. Then he forces B to eat A’s turd, and A to eat B’s. Then both A and B shit a second time; he eats both their turds.

[*Il fait chier une fille A et une autre B; puis il force B à manger l’étron de A, et A de manger l’étron de B; ensuite elles chient toutes deux, et il mange leurs deux étrons*] (579/315)

He would have a brother shit in his sister’s cunt, and he eats the turd; the sister then must shit in her brother’s mouth. He eats this second turd, too.

[*Il veut que le frère chie dans le con de sa soeur, et il mange l’étron, puis il faut que la soeur vienne chier dans la bouche du frère, et il y mange l’étron*] (580/316)

He fucks a cow, it conceives and gives birth to a monster which, shortly thereafter, he fucks.

[*'Il fout une vache, la fait engendrer, et fout le monstre'*] (604/332)

He embuggers, and whilst sodomizing, opens the cranium, removes the brain, and fills the cavity with molten lead.

[*'Il encule, et pendant qu'il sodomise, il enlève le crâne, ôte la cervelle, et la remplace par du plomb fondu'*] (653/367)

We could, of course, offer a Freudian reading of these acts. This might lead us, like Phillips to conclude that 'coprophagy in Sade has a strongly symbolic resonance, based on the unconscious association which Freud identified between faeces and money'.¹ While plenty of evidence exists to support Freudian readings such as this (often faeces and gold are explicitly linked in Sade's narratives), in my opinion a Freudian approach based on the stages of sexual development does not truly engage with Sade's obscenity and therefore could be limited as a method of exploring the obscene (rather than 'perversity'). To use Freudian symbolism, shit becomes a symbol of money and while the symbolism of psychoanalysis conflates the two, we should not forget that what Sade presents us with is people eating shit not people eating gold coins. Pragmatically, there is a significant difference. A woman being showered with fifty pound notes does not cause the same emotive response as a woman being showered with turds. Only by considering faeces as waste expelled from the body can we really explore all the levels of obscenity in passages such as those cited above. We also need to recall the findings of Chapter One. There we saw that descriptions of bodily fluids, corpses, wounding and excreta all remind us that the skin is 'a fragile container, [which] no longer guarantee[s] the integrity of one's "own and clean self"'.² Doing so allows us to explain *why* Sade's descriptions are obscene, rather than simply labelling them as such. That is the purpose of this section: to illustrate how these passages relate to the different facets of obscenity which emerged in Chapter One, in other words to explain what it is about Sade's descriptions which makes them obscene.

Firstly, we find plenty of evidence for that which 'disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite'.³ Previously we saw how Sade's use of language performed the same task on a

¹ Phillips, *Sade*, 138.

² Kristeva, *Powers*, 53.

³ Kristeva, *Powers*, 4.

linguistic level: it does not respect the borders or rules of decorum, the boundaries of the text, or appropriate content, instead it tells all – and nothing. Within the descriptions that language conveys, we find recourse to corpses, excreta and other bodily secretions – semen, blood, vomit, urine, and saliva – and their consumption. Herein lie further layers of obscenity.

On one level what disgusts the reader in these passages – or rather what the ‘average’ reader (although exactly what an ‘average’ reader may be is questionable I hope my meaning is clear) finds obscene – could be said to be their violation of social decorum accepted moral and sexual practice. Thus, when talking of the ‘perversions’ which Sade describes, Jane Gallop’s comment that ‘perversions centred on the breasts and female organs, are underrepresented in the Sadean tableau of “all passions”’¹ could be said to miss the point. The few listed passages above certainly support Gallop’s observation, but by definition ‘perversion’ *does not* usually include a centring on the conventional, reproductive, and socially acceptable objects of sexual desire, i.e. the breasts and vagina.² ‘Perversion’ is venturing *away* from the accepted and normal. It is fetishism, coprophagia, sodomy, necrophilia, lust murder and zoophilia; it is the non-procreative, non-socially acceptable – and that which appears again and again on the stage of Silling.

However, the sources of obscenity are multiple and ambiguity is a significant part of obscenity. In these passages it is not their representation of violated social and sexual taboos alone which contributes to the book’s obscenity. On another level, as we have mentioned, consumption of the body’s ‘products’ illustrates the disgust-invoking over-consumption characteristic of Sade’s libertines: this is another form of the obscenity of excess and represents, as Angela Carter asserts, their ‘excessive greed’.³ On a third level we find the dehumanising effect often present at the core of the obscene.

In *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*, dehumanisation occurs in a number of ways. Firstly, we find the violation of the human form (consider the dismembered boy mentioned above). Secondly, we have humans becoming numbers and machines (consider the columns of numbers with which the narrative ends and descriptions such as ‘He has girls A and B shit...’). Thirdly, literalizing what Kristeva called that horrific, abject region ‘where man

¹ Jane Gallop, ‘Sade, Mothers, and Other Women,’ *Sade and the Narrative of Transgression*, eds. David Allison et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 136.

² Gallop, ‘Sade’, 132, reminds us that the French word ‘sein’ which Sade often uses can mean both ‘womb’ and ‘breast’ – more ambiguity becomes evident.

³ Carter, *Sadeian Woman*, 88.

strays on the territories of *animal*¹ we find humans forcibly reduced to an animal state. This occurs predominantly in descriptions of zoophilia where the animal and human literally merge (as in the example involving the cow and the monstrous progeny, quoted above). Lastly, we find civilised human decorum suppressed, the clothes which in Western culture signify civilised status are exchanged for nudity and, at other times, society's foundation, language (as we saw in the previous section) is exchanged for the pre-symbolic: silence and screams.

The threat represented by entering the territory of the pre-civilised and the non-human is part of that threat we find when the self's (and by extension society's) boundaries are threatened by the non-I, in Kristeva's words, 'what I permanently thrust aside in order to live'. As we saw in Chapter One, what threatens is not just animal behaviour but also 'bodies ... defilement ... shit'.² In these ways therefore – by which I mean in terms of animal/uncivilised behaviour, nonlanguage, and the depiction of violated bodies, corpses and excreta – *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* forces the threatening 'non-I' back onto the stage of consciousness. Not only that, but it then forces the 'non-I' to violate the boundaries of the body in a way which further emphasises the body's fragility: 'He forces B to eat A's turd, and A to eat B's. Then both A and B shit a second time; he eats both their turds'.

Overwhelmingly therefore, the narrative focuses on the body's fragility (it is frequently wounded) and its permeability, its orifices – nostrils, mouth, anus, vagina, penis, eyes (many of the stories involve voyeurism – see below, 'To Reveal Secrets Which Ought To Be Sunk In Obscurity' – and in the final section, blinding becomes a favoured libertine torture). Considering that the stories are *told*, the aural orifices too are foregrounded – and of course all the body's secretions/excretions: snot, vomit and saliva, faeces and farts, menstrual blood, urine and semen, tears and (we could add on a more abstract level) the spoken word. A representative of this concentration of obscene acts through multiple layering of the non-I and images of the body's fragility occurs in this description of one man's personal penchant: he 'licked out every orifice in her old corpse: ass, cunt, mouth, nostrils, armpits, ears, he omitted nothing, and with each sucking the rascal swallowed whatever he obtained' [*la lécha ensuite dans tous les orifices de son vieux cadavre; cul, con, bouche, narine, aisselle, oreille, rien ne fut oublié, et le vilain à chaque sucée avalait*

¹ Kristeva, *Powers*, 12 (Kristeva's emphasis).

² Kristeva, *Powers*, 53.

tout ce qu'il recueillait'] (349/147). Death, excreta, orifices, engestion, omiting nothing: here all are present.

Representation of the fragile, permeable, body repels, threatens and this, I suggest, is the basis for Sade's descriptive obscenity. From it we can offer one further consequence of this violation, and one which would have provided further grounds for prohibition in predominantly Catholic eighteenth-century France. This is the connotations of Sade's portrayal of the body. Thus, Sade's detailed expositions of scatological acts, casual amputations, disembowelling and descriptions which use the crudest possible terms present a vulgarising of God's favoured vessel, a parody of Church teaching which preached that 'God dwells within'.

Sade's obscene challenge to boundaries extends to more than the physical. His descriptions invert accepted binary oppositions – both culturally ideological and natural boundaries – of, for example, excretion and ingestion; mouth and anus; food and excreta; man and woman; anus and vagina. Throughout the novel orifices and identities merge (daughter, mother, wife, virgin, whore); coprophagia turns excrement into food, and the same happens to human blood and vomit ('we might make a nice pudding of her blood for tomorrow's luncheon' says the Duc) [*faire du boudin de son sang pour le déjeuner*] (615/340); faeces replace the penis in the vagina; and in the weekly festivals, men are dressed as women and women as men ('the little boy was costumed as a girl, the little girl wore a boy's clothes' [*Tous deux étaient extraordinairement parés en habit de ville, mais en sense contraire, c'est-à-dire que le petit garçon était en fille et la fille en garçon*]) (345/143).

In relation to obscene acts (obscene because of the various reasons we should now be familiar with: excreta, the body's permeability, the low and sexual) sodomy holds a particular appeal for the libertines. Their principle underlying drive – to sin – explains this appeal. In this way, the significance of the 'Sodom' in Sade's title becomes clear: it not only refers to the capital offence of sodomy,¹ but also the city whose inhabitants commit one of the gravest crimes related in the Bible (Genesis 19), a breaking of accepted behaviour and taboo so serious that it calls forth almost apocalyptic divine retribution. Even today, 'sodom' carries such taboo weight that it refers to that most 'sinful' and 'unnatural' of acts: anal sex. Following this line of reasoning, Klossowski writes, 'For Sade, the sodomist act is the supreme form of transgression of norms'.² The events of Sodom called forth divine

¹ Schaeffer, *Sade*, 62.

² Klossowski, *Sade*, 28.

retribution – anger and punishment – but the disgust caused by the obscene is, as Miller reminded us, different from anger and indignation.¹ Amidst so many similar passages, Sade's sodomistic descriptions contribute to the novel's obscenity because, not only does it transgress laws – both biological and social – but as Klossowski observes, it 'introduces into existence the principle of the metamorphosis of beings into one another'.² Consequently, while at times the vagina becomes a shit-filled 'anus', the anus parodies the vagina. In all these instances, with an absence of order, dualities are shattered, ruptured, overcome by dangerous ambiguity and the 'dangerously ambiguous', the 'in-between'.³ In other words, through the acts of his libertines, the uncanny metamorphosis of the once familiar is another source of the obscene.

Of course, we should not forget that where the prohibited and obscenity are found can be figured (to use the topographical metaphor) as a taboo space of 'fear and fascination'.⁴ As Klossowski echoes, sodomy is 'always accompanied by a sort of magic fascination'.⁵ Indeed, the libertines of Sade's novel embody this attraction, the pleasure of the prohibited, the pleasure of the impure ('Far from being disgusted, repelled, upset by what greets his eye, our libertine is positively enchanted' [*Mais loin d'en être dégoûté, notre libertin s'extasie*] (358/153). In this respect coprophagia and sodomy are the descriptive parallels to Sade's linguistic excess – his telling all. Similarly, Sade's linguistic lacunae have a descriptive counterpart, a space/object also accompanied by 'a sort of magic fascination' but a space/object which remains veiled. This unspoken/silent descriptive space is the female's sexual organs.

Although no one from babies to bulls, aristocrats to beggars, virgins, whores, boys or men are spared the libertines' passions the majority of victims are women. Gallop calls woman Sade's 'privileged victim'.⁶ Throughout the novel the libertines relentlessly assault the female procreative and nurturing function and they are not the only characters who do this: men, animals, husbands, sons, women and daughters join the attack. All that is associated with female fertility is violated. The breasts of pregnant women are flayed; fetuses eaten, abortions forced. Most pervasive of all is the calculated negation of the

¹ Miller, *Disgust*, 204.

² Klossowski, *Sade*, 24.

³ Kristeva, *Powers*, 4.

⁴ Kristeva, *Powers*, 45.

⁵ Klossowski, *Sade*, 24.

⁶ Gallop, 'Sade', 123.

vagina. Sodomy can be seen as part of this negation (Klossowski notes that 'in being the simulacrum of the act of generation, it is [also] a mockery of it').¹ At moments however, more extreme points are reached. On occasions, the vagina is portrayed as sewn shut. This occurs most notably at the end of *La philosophie dans le boudoir* when Eugénie performs this operation on her mother (*Philosophy*, 363-65/217-8)² but this act is prefigured several times in *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* (611/337, 623/346). At other times the vagina is destroyed through pseudo-scientific experimentation: 'the Duc thrust his hand into her cunt and cuts through the membrane dividing the anus from the vagina; he throws aside the scalpel, reintroduces his hand, and rummaging about in her entrails, forces her to shit through her cunt' [*on lui enfonce dans le con une main armée d'un scalpel, avec lequel on brise la cloison qui sépare l'anus du vagin; on quitte le scalpel, on renforce la main, on va chercher dans ses entrailles et la force à chier par le con*'] (658-59/371). On one level, the obscenity – the threat – of scenes such as this derives from their portrayal of the fragile body as well as its reversal of accepted dichotomies and breaking down categories (vagina/anus). Also, following Freud, we could add another layer of obscenity, fear and fascination: an uncanny fear of the vagina.

Explicit mutilation of the vagina is not the only method of its negation. More usual is the repeated veiling – in the same way that the veil is lowered over certain scenes in the novel – of the female genitals. Indeed, one of the commands given to the women and girls on arrival at Silling is, 'Offer your fronts very little to our sights; remember that this loathsome part ... is always the one we find most repugnant' [*offrez-vous toujours très peu par-devant; souvenez-vous que cette partie ... est toujours celle qui nous répugne le plus*'] (252/67). In this way, 'Sade's text avoids contact with a specifically maternal organ',³ writes Gallop. Barthes adds, 'In their pleasures, all libertines share an overwhelming urge to hide the Female's sexual organs scrupulously'. Barthes continues, 'Woman is destroyed: she is wrapped up, twisted about, veiled, destroyed, disguised so as to erase every trace of her anterior features (figure, breasts, sexual organs); a kind of surgical, functional doll is produced'.⁴

¹ Klossowski, *Sade*, 24.

² References to D-A-F de Sade, *Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, Eugénie de Franval and Other Writings*, prefs. Maurice Blanchot and Jean Paulhan. Trans. Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver, (London: Arrow Books, 1991); *La philosophie dans le boudoir* (Paris: Boking International, 1994).

³ Gallop, 'Sade', 123.

⁴ Barthes, *Sade*, 123.

This absence has been interpreted using the psychoanalysis of sexual development. A chapter in Neil Schaeffer's recent biography of Sade presents *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* as mapping a retreat from the apex of 'mature' genital sexuality, to the anal stage of development. Using Freudian theory Schaeffer sees the libertines' denial of 'the procreative function of a woman's genitals and womb' as avoiding 'the horrifying possibility that she may have suffered castration, the Oedipal punishment; and it also denies the difference in the sexes'.¹

As we have noted, explaining these descriptions in this way risks ignoring specific cultural influences or implications. Although it points out what could be seen as the psychologically based 'intimate ambivalence that constitutes the relation of the human subject'² to the maternal, the libertines' 'denial' could also be interpreted as aggression towards the accepted sexual behaviour of their culture. One could also read these acts in relation to the accepted 'scientific' attitude towards women at the time Sade was writing – an attitude which appears misogynist and sexist from today's perspective.³ Furthermore, although the 'urge to hide the Female's sexual organs scrupulously' can be read as total denial, just as with Sade's linguistic spaces, that which is veiled is paradoxically rendered all the more conspicuous by its absence. Another twin dynamic (there are many where 'the in-between, the ambiguous' obscene is concerned) is established. On the one hand, denial of the vagina can be seen, as Frappier-Mazur does, as an attempt to 'control ... the "uncanny"'.⁴ On the other, for Phillips, the site of the female genitals becomes the representative of 'a transcendental absence', something outside and beyond the Sadean text 'that it cannot consciously acknowledge, and that it must therefore appear to deny, disguising it as the taboo female genitals, the secret space of the impossible crime, *while all the time narrative and linguistic features of the text persistently draw our attention to it*'.⁵ On the one hand, the vagina is 'this loathsome part ... the one we find most repugnant' but on the other, even when being destroyed or veiled, it and female breasts take central stage in many of the novel's passages: the carefully regulated depucelation of the eight young girls

¹ Schaeffer, *Sade*, 135. Likewise, Frappier-Mazur interprets the veiled vagina as the libertines' 'disavowal, or indeed the refusal, of castration', Frappier-Mazur, *Writing the Orgy*, 170.

² Gallop, 'Sade', 140.

³ Frappier-Mazur, *Writing the Orgy*, 40-42. Klossowski, *Sade*, 35 notes that within the contemporary scheme of Sade's day, compared to man who was associated with reason, woman was presented as 'abnormal', 'perverse', mad, and material.

⁴ Frappier-Mazur, *Writing the Orgy*, 89.

⁵ Phillips, 'Sade and Self-Censorship', 115 (my emphasis).

for example, mark significant points in the narrative. Thus, while Barthes notes that the ‘triangle [the woman’s pubic region] defines a site of horror’¹ we should also not forget that attraction is also at work. As one libertine declares, ‘there is in horror matter to produce an erection’ [*Il faut savoir prendre son parti sur l’horreur de tout ce qui fait bander*] (532/282).

The words in these quotes are significant: ‘the taboo female genitals’, ‘a site of horror’, a ‘functional doll’ – even Schaeffer’s reference to ‘castration anxiety’. They all lead us back to, as Frappier-Mazur noted, Freud’s “‘uncanny’”.² There is, after all, a curious dynamic of fear, fascination and denial which emphasises the presence of the uncanny within Sade’s text. It would seem that on another level what is found obscene and repulsive about Sade’s descriptive obscenity derives from its evocation of the uncanny. More specifically, I venture, we are reminded of that ‘obsolete’ definition of the obscene as ‘the uncanny harbinger of death’.³ At its heart, therefore, beneath these descriptions and acts, violence and defilement, it is the uncanny and (at its core) the uncanny’s reminder of death – that which is fear-filled and fascinating, that which plays on Freud’s universal death-instinct (*‘an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things’*)⁴ and which Kristeva, echoing Freud and Mary Douglas calls the abject or ‘death infecting life’⁵ – that I suggest, brings a fundamental threatening obscenity to *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*. In other words, the novel’s descriptive obscenity lies in portraying the transgression of social and moral laws, of the body’s physical boundaries, of dehumanising the human and violating women, but more fundamentally – more potently – the root of this novel’s obscenity occurs at the level it evokes what Freud (and Douglas, Kristeva and later Bataille) sees as a fearful tension at the heart of mankind: our unrelenting, morbid fascination with, and fear of, death. *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* forces the reader to face this desire and that which society represses, disavows, expels as Other, dirt, filth (see Chapter One, ‘Psychology and Obscenity’ and ‘Obscenity and Society’). On one level Sade’s libertines embody this socially unacceptable fascination. Acting on the ‘magic fascination’ which the prohibited exhibits, the libertines flout social regulations and act on their desires to find

¹ Barthes, *Sade*, 123.

² Dolls (and the ‘Double’) feature as examples of uncanny objects in Freud’s, ‘The “Uncanny”’, 353 fn1, 354-5. See more in Chapters Three and Six.

³ Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’, 357.

⁴ Freud, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, 308.

⁵ Kristeva, *Powers*, 3.

intense pleasure in the prohibited and the impure. Because of this, we could speculate, it was deemed necessary to prohibit Sade's novels. Characteristically satirical, one passage in the novel expresses precisely this view:

What punishment, both in this world and the next is he not deserving who all immoderately were to be pleased to divulge all the caprices, all the whims and tastes, all the clandestine horrors whereunto men are subject when their fancy is free and afire? [*à divulguer tous les caprices, tous les goûts, toutes les horreurs secrètes*] 'twould be to reveal secrets which ought to be sunk in obscurity for humanity's sake, [*Ce serait révéler des secrets qui doivent être enfouis pour le bonheur de l'humanité*] 'twould be to undertake the general corruption of manners and precipitate his brethren in Jesus Christ into all the extravagances such tableaux might feature in very lively colour and profusion. (471/236).

Sade, of course, reveals these 'secrets'. His novel shows the impurity of desires, the attraction of the prohibited, the ambivalence of attraction and (in Freudian and Kristevan terms) our attitude to the female, the female genitals and the maternal. It also shows the fragility of social and moral regulations which, in Sade's novels, become fluid, ambiguous, the boundaries suppressed. At a level which closely anticipates Freud – and other twentieth-century thinkers – Sade's text also reveals those 'secrets which ought to be sunk in obscurity for the good of humanity'.¹ (Frappier-Mazur notes, 'Sade describes the cycle of life and death in terms that Freud will come astonishingly close to echoing').² He (Sade) forces the reader to face the often disavowed: 'corruption, putrefaction, dissolution, exhaustion, and annihilation – these aspects of the phenomena of life'.³ As the eponymous Juliette explains, "In all living beings the principle of life is no other than that of death; at the same time we receive the one we receive the other, we nourish both within us, side by side" (*Juliette*, 769).⁴ *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* is obscene because, like the mirrors which surround the walls in Silling's auditorium, it holds an unsettling mirror up to the reader revealing his suppressed desires and what can be seen as an impurity within civilised mankind. Among these reflections occur those which emphasise man as fragile yet fascinated by that fragility and man as inexorably, fearfully, spiralling towards death.

¹ I have adjusted the Wainhouse-Seaver translation to include reference to *bonheurs* – 'happiness/good'.

² Frappier-Mazur, *Writing the Orgy*, 97.

³ Klossowski, *Sade*, 90.

⁴ Reference to D-A-F de Sade, *Juliette*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (London: Arrow, 1991).

3. 'To Reveal Secrets Which Ought To Be Sunk In Obscurity'¹

At the end of the previous section I suggested that the linguistic and descriptive obscenity of *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* holds a mirror up to the reader, a mirror which reveals the impure 'secrets' habitually disavowed by civilised language, the State's ideology and society (the two, as we have seen being intimately interlinked). Extrapolating from the individual (if you like, 'the reader'), Gilles Deleuze suggests that Sade's writing is aimed at a wider audience: society itself. 'Eroticism,' writes Deleuze,

is able to act as a mirror to the world by reflecting its excesses, drawing out its violence ... It is as though Sade were holding up a perverse mirror in which the whole course of nature and history were reflected, from the beginning of time to the Revolution of 1789. In the isolation of their remote châteaux, Sade's heroes claim to reconstruct the world and rewrite the "history of the heart".²

Barthes too plays on Silling's evocation of 'history'. Recall his comment that Silling is a 'sanctuary not of debauchery, but of the "story"'. Here Barthes plays on the French word *histoire* which he gives in inverted commas and which carries the dual significance of 'story' and 'history'.³ With all its attendant limitations, the concept of 'history', as Jameson reminds us, includes specific 'political history', the history of 'society' (as perpetually unstable and 'constitutive of tension and struggle between social classes') and, ultimately, 'history ... in the vastest sense' of humanity and the history and future of human civilisation.⁴ In this final section I want to follow Deleuze and Barthes and consider how Sade's obscenity may operate as a comment on society and 'history' (or the various 'histories' which Jameson mentions). To do this requires locating *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* within its socio-historical context. Doing so reveals that, although more extreme, the methods Sade uses to make this comment – and the comment itself – are not unique. In order to begin, however (and bearing in mind Jameson's observation that talk of historical periods inevitably involves 'the isolation and privileging of one of the elements *within* that

¹ 471/236.

² Deleuze, *Coldness*, 37.

³ Barthes, *Sade*, 35. Harrison, *Censorship*, 184.

⁴ Jameson, 'Interpretation', 75.

totality'¹ and risks facile reductionism) it is necessary to take a step back to refine certain details regarding Sade's cultural context.

Whatever the psychodramas and complexes, the individual passions and perversions which can be seen in his story, from its opening paragraph, while aspects of the obscene tap into apparently universal fears and desires, Sade embeds his 'impure tale' in a specific historical/social context. Jean Starobinski reminds us that Sade's historical period is significant as the 'birth' of the modern era – indeed, the term 'civilisation' as it is understood today was coined in France in 1768. At the same time Europe invented the modern concept of 'civilised progress'. 'The word civilization,' writes Starobinski, 'which denotes a process, entered the history of ideas at the same time as the modern sense of the word *progress* [in terms of scientific advancement, artistic culture etc.]'.² This era of civilisation from which Sade's writing emerged is (commonly called) the Enlightenment.

Charles Taylor notes that the Enlightenment was an eighteenth-century product of two societies: the French speaking and the English speaking (France, England, Scotland and America).³ Foucault reminds us that 'the Enlightenment' is a complex series of events and historical processes, including 'elements of social transformation, types of political institution, forms of knowledge, projects of rationalisation of knowledge and practices, technological mutations that are very difficult to sum up in a word'.⁴ Despite Foucault's (accurate) reservations about summing up so much complexity in a single word, 'Enlightenment' is the title used to characterise a Western era of optimistic belief in the power of reason and rationality and an era in which the perception of reason, power and rationality changed in a way which is recognisably 'modern'. In terms of a brief (and necessarily reductive) summary therefore, reason was believed capable of unravelling intricate abstract truths. Through calculated reasoning the universe could be understood, and, if the universe could be understood, then so too could the drives, desires and inner workings – the secrets – of mankind. Reason provided the path to the Enlightenment's goal and this goal was driven by belief in continual human progress. It was believed that

¹ Jameson, 'Interpretation', 28.

² Jean Starobinski, *Blessings in Disguise; Or, The Morality of Evil*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 5-8.

³ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 335.

⁴ Michel Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?,' trans. Catherine Porter, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 43.

civilisation developed towards an ultimate good; politics and administration can (and should) be just; universal liberty can be achieved; modernity and technological invention bring improvement to every aspect of human life. Simon Schama encapsulates these sentiments when he refers to the prevailing late-eighteenth-century ethos in France as ‘Enlightenment optimism’¹ and the process behind it as involving ‘the empirical gathering of data’ in ‘the first step towards a society that could progressively free itself from poverty, ignorance, and pain’.² Again stressing the ethos of optimism and progress, Robert Solomon notes about the Enlightenment that ‘optimism about the future of humanity was virtually the religion of the day’.³ In fact, some, like Starobinski have suggested that the value of rationality and reason became so embedded in the new concept of ‘Civilisation’ that they became a ‘secularised substitute for religion, an apotheosis of reason’.⁴ ‘Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’ echoes the 1779 American Declaration of Independence, in many ways a quintessentially Enlightenment document. Similarly buoyed up by Enlightenment ideology, a decade later, it was the turn of France’s Republican revolutionaries to chant, ‘*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*’. An ethos of optimism and progress, however, was only one facet of this era.

Those who championed Enlightenment ideals were matched by those who doubted its model of progress. Foucault observes that ‘the Enlightenment is the age of the critique’⁵ and so it was that the Enlightenment rationale of questioning and reasoning could be used *against* the newly defined ‘civilisation’ and the beliefs of established institutions. Civilisation seemed caught in a dialectic of its own making. While perpetuating belief in unlimited progress and the perfectibility of humanity, it simultaneously propagated a sense of imminent cultural collapse and fear of corruption from barbaric “Others” outside, or indeed within, itself.⁶ Some critics argued that civilisation was merely a brief apogee in a cycle of social existence that would, before long, return humanity to so-called barbarity and decadence.⁷

¹ Simon Schama, *Citizens* (London: Penguin, 1989), 314.

² Schama, *Citizens*, 186.

³ Robert C. Solomon, *Continental Philosophy since 1750: The Rise and Fall of the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 10.

⁴ Starobinski, *Blessings*, 3.

⁵ Foucault, ‘What is Enlightenment?’, 38.

⁶ Starobinski, *Blessings*, 23.

⁷ Starobinski, *Blessings*, 3-23 for an account of the mixed reception of “civilization” during the decades of its early inception. Despite these hugely influential intellectual discussions however, in reality, Enlightenment

The ethos of criticising old and new ideologies was aestheticised in various ways. One of the most prevalent according to Robert Darnton, was ‘the “philosophy” circulating through the channels of the underground book trade [which] differed considerably from the set of ideas commonly associated with the Enlightenment’.² These were the *mauvais livres* that fed ‘a public hungry for bawdy, slanderous, and seditious literature’.³ Consequently, in a society in which, according to Schama, ‘literacy rates ... were much higher than in the late twentieth-century United States’,⁴ *livres philosophiques* circulated clandestinely and ‘shook orthodox opinions by exploiting the power of the book; here was heresy laid out systematically as a series of reasoned arguments, here was Christianity exposed on open pages as a jumble of contradictions ... and all the books had the mark of respectability: frontispieces, title pages, prefaces, appendices, and notes’.⁵ Perhaps most forbidden – most obscene – among the widespread illegal texts of eighteenth-century France were those which shook orthodox opinion alongside and through explicitly sexual content. In them, as in *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*, the physical body was a central symbolic element.

Displaying fake places of publication or imported from Switzerland, Belgium and Holland, there was no dearth of material which combined sex and metaphysics and attacked the institutions and prominent personalities of eighteenth-century France. So widespread does this forbidden material appear to have been that Goulemot goes as far as to state that ‘the game of the [eighteenth] century is pornography’.⁶ Sensationalist reviews, salacious pamphlets and scandalous ‘memoirs’ of courtesans and actresses circulated widely and ‘dwelt lingeringly on the sexual politics of the court or scandals involving money and, if at all possible, the clergy’.⁷ Frequently – and, perhaps, adding to their power for, as the saying goes, ‘a picture speaks a million words’ – *chroniques scandaleuses* were often engraved with illustrations matching their textual content with satirical portrayals of the court and/or

progress and optimism had little effect on the majority of Europe’s population. There, a more-or-less feudal society prevailed, and poverty, disease, and starvation remained more immediate dangers than ‘barbarism’. See Olwen Hufton, *Europe: Privilege and Protest 1730-1789* (Brighton: Harvester Press and Fontana, 1980), 11-142.

² Darnton, *Forbidden*, 20.

³ Darnton, *Forbidden*, 39.

⁴ Schama, *Citizens*, 180.

⁵ Darnton, *Forbidden*, 70.

⁶ Goulemot, ‘Sadean novels’, 66.

⁷ Schama, *Citizens*, 178.

specific aristocratic and political figures.¹ Figure 2 gives one such example. Using as an example one regularly updated publication, *Essai historique sur la vie de Marie-Antoinette* (first published in 1781, again in 1783 with annual revisions thereafter), Schama illustrates how this popular satire of the queen used ‘standard tales of buggery, adultery, incest and promiscuity ... [as] a kind of metaphor for a diseased constitution ... the political constitution of France and the physical constitution of the monarch were, to the popular imagination, one and the same’.²

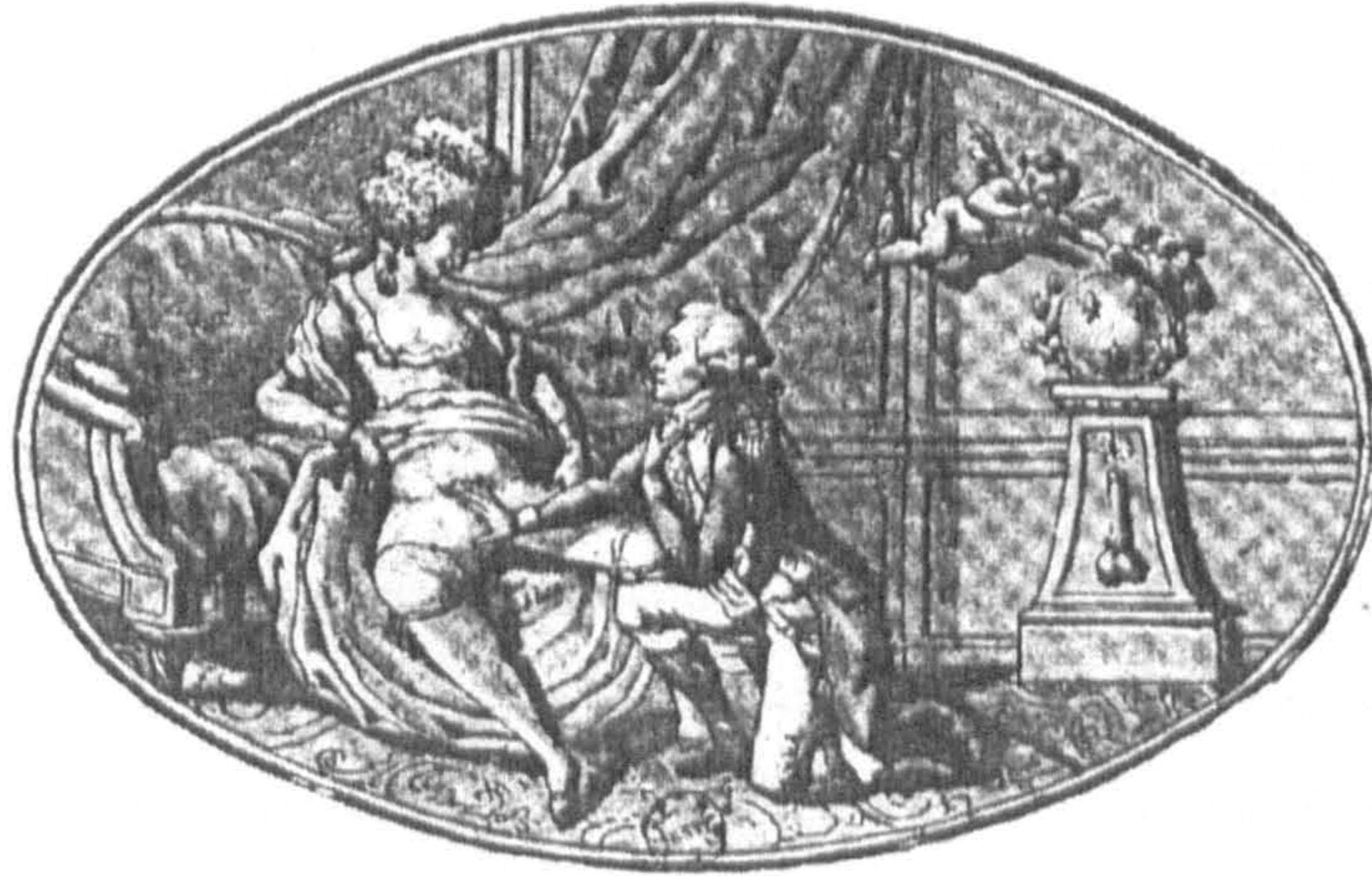


Figure 2: *Ma Constitution*, (ca. 1790) from the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

Confirming the centrality of the body within this tradition, Allison Pease asserts that traditionally, such material served to position ‘the material “truth” of sex against the “hypocritical” conventions of Church and Society’.³ Critique and questioning were intrinsic to this mix of current affairs, flesh, and ‘sin’. It appeared in the form of a condemnation of the court, aristocracy, and the accepted values and beliefs of the ruling institutions: Dukes were portrayed as impotent, priests as perverted, countesses and queens as lesbians, everything supposedly elevated was (often humorously) debased and defiled. Implicitly (if not explicitly) this condemnation demanded social or political reform. Like the forbidden works of the *philosophes* and Jansenist pamphlets, Darnton explains that

all this literature provided a massive indictment of the regime. It was history, biography, journalism, and scandal mongering all at once and all

¹ Goulemot, *Forbidden Texts*, 1-50.

² Schama, *Citizens*, 211.

³ Pease, *Obscenity*, 5. See also 28.

aimed at the same target: the Bourbon monarchy and everything supporting it ... most of them [the forbidden books] were simply a response to the literary marketplace – the demand for information as well as titillation ... hunger for news as well as for the forbidden fruit of abstract thought.¹

Warren Roberts echoes these sentiments: ‘The society described in the erotic work was artificial, degenerate, and morally diseased’,² and Iain McCalman notes that the purpose of the *chroniques scandaleuses* and courtesan ‘confessions’ was to serve ‘as vehicles for exposing upper-class vice and corruption’.³ How much ‘vice and corruption’ *actually* occurred in the lives of the eighteenth-century French aristocracy and how much is attributed to them by what people *thought* they were living and the content of the satirical *chroniques scandaleuses*, is debatable. There is evidence to support both sides of the argument. A cautious critic might choose the latter, while others, such as Warren Roberts, describe how the memoirs of the Duc de Lazun, the Comte de Tilly, and Prince de Lugne tell of incest, adultery, a continual pursuit of women and catalogues of seductions.⁴ Simon Schama similarly notes that ‘the Palais-Royal [was] after all one of the most notorious dens of iniquity where even the police were forbidden’⁵ and, says of eighteenth-century French judges, (a comment with implications for justice and corruption at the time) ‘many of whose [the judges’] legal education left much to be desired since they had bought their offices’.⁶

Among the plethora of forbidden works which satirised (and perhaps exaggerated) aristocratic excess in its process of critiquing current beliefs, one in particular stands out: a classic Enlightenment work of pornography, the anonymous *Thérèse philosophe* (1748, attributed to Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, Marquis d’Argens). By the end of the eighteenth-century this novel was ‘the supreme work in a body of literature ... that took sex beyond the boundaries of decency that had been generally recognised under the Old Regime’.⁷

Reference to *Thérèse philosophe* even appears in Sade’s *Juliette* where it is described as ‘a charming performance ... alone [among eighteenth-century erotic works] to have discerned

¹ Darnton, *Forbidden*, 81-82.

² Warren Roberts, *Morality and Social Class in Eighteenth-Century French Literature and Painting* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 145.

³ Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 222.

⁴ Roberts, *Morality*, 53-54.

⁵ Schama, *Citizens*, 175.

⁶ Schama, *Citizens*, 167.

⁷ Darnton, *Forbidden*, 89.

the possibilities of the genre ... alone to have achieved happy results from the combining of lust and impiety' (*Juliette*, 462). Below I use *Thérèse philosophe* as a representative text in order to consider in more detail the themes of Enlightenment French pornography. Doing so will allow me to return to Sade's novel and compare and locate his concerns with those of this popular (and forbidden) genre.

Thérèse philosophe is a first-person account of a young woman, Thérèse's, experiences. It emphasises the fact that it is a 'written', 'real' account of Thérèse's carnal and philosophical education. Thus, it begins with the line, 'What, sir, you seriously want me to write the story of my life?' and continues to create the illusion that it is a true story by initialising names as if to hide the identity of real people: 'You wish me to describe for you the mystical scenes between Mademoiselle Eradice and the Reverend Father Dirrag and inform you about the adventures of Mme. C. and Abbé T.?' (*Thérèse*, 249).¹ (Sade, of course, uses the same technique when he names one of the libertines 'Bishop of X***').

Thérèse's story emerges as a *Bildungsroman* in which the heroine is educated sexually and philosophically; her growth into a sexually experienced woman runs parallel to that of reaching free-thinking maturity.² Emerging sexually innocent and devoutly Christian from a convent at the age of twenty-three, Thérèse hears of the pious Father Dirrag. Rather than following her mother's wishes to get married (Thérèse is too virtuous and desires only to be married to God), she befriends Mlle Eradice whose confessor is the famous Dirrag. Thérèse's first lesson occurs in Eradice's room when, hidden in a closet, Thérèse watches Eradice's 'confessional' to the Father through a hole 'covered by an old, almost transparent Bergamo embroidery' (*Thérèse*, 255). The confessional involves the Father reciting from the scriptures, flagellating Eradice with birch rods, and finally entering Eradice's vagina from behind (after contemplating which of the possible orifices – vaginal or anal – he should use). 'What a sight, my dear Count,' writes Thérèse to the anonymous addressee of her confessional 'memoirs', 'for a girl of my age who had no knowledge whatsoever of these sorts of mysteries!' (*Thérèse*, 261).

After this initial revelation of 'mysteries', Thérèse's education continues as the Abbé T. instructs her in masturbation, the use of dildos and *coitus interruptus* as means of

¹ Anonymous, *Thérèse philosophe, Or, Memoirs About the Affair Between Father Dirrag and Mademoiselle Eradice*, trans. Robert Darnton, in *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York and London, W.W. Norton, 1996). See also Darnton, *Forbidden*, 91 who discusses how the names of the characters relate to historical figures embroiled in a well-known eighteenth-century scandal involving sex, priests, and the aristocracy.

² Darnton, *Forbidden*, 100.

birth control, rationally arguing that ‘There is no law, either human or divine which urges – much less requires – us to work for the multiplication of the species’ (*Thérèse*, 275). Albeit less aggressive, this of course draws comparisons with the negation of the feminine in Sade’s *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*. Also recalling Sade’s novels, alternating sexual experimentation with metaphysical argument, the Abbé explains that to be a good Christian ‘you must be ignorant [and] have blind faith’ (*Thérèse*, 285). Symbolically opposing this metaphorical blindness is, (recalling Thérèse’s initial voyeuristic revelation), the metaphor of sight, truth and Enlightenment: ‘It is their deeds or, in some cases, their wise counsel which have caused the scales to fall from my eyes’, ‘writes’ Thérèse, describing the lessons she received from Father Dirrag and Abbé T. (*Thérèse*, 249). In the same vein, defending ‘her’ story’s educational purpose from potential censors or prohibition, Thérèse concludes her tale with the words ‘Could I worry about displeasing God and men when I assert truths which can cause no harm, only enlighten?’ (*Thérèse*, 299).

Thérèse philosophe is an exemplary and influential example but as Peter Cryle has shown, since the sixteenth-century works of Pietro Aretino, the techniques used – confession, voyeurism, its movement from innocence, via education, to sexual and philosophical enlightenment, representation of ‘sexuality as intimate truth’¹ – had been established in the Western erotic tradition. ‘Classical erotic texts ...,’ writes Cryle, ‘are characterised by the *mise en abyme* of instruction’.² This instruction operated both within the text and without. Thus, just as Thérèse had her eye to the hole in the closet, so the reader was allowed to ‘see’ in the words or the illustrations on the page into a secret world of sex and perversion and indeed ‘see’ a kind of reflection of ‘him’self within the text by ‘seeing’ others engaged in voyeuristic acts. This motif is frequently present in the illustrations to these texts: consider for example the cupid in figure 2. As Phillips reminds us ‘the act of voyeurism is frequently represented, *mis en scène*, within the narrative itself, as sexual activities are viewed secretly through keyholes, and windows etc., and the reader is able to identify directly with the intradiegetic voyeur’.³ This is not only a kind of identification. It is also an education (of sorts) figured as enlightenment, enlightening or (literally) revealing truths that are normally hidden. Recalling Darnton’s words, these books are all part of ‘the

¹ Cryle, *Geometry*, 39.

² Cryle, *Geometry*, 71.

³ Phillips, *Sade*, 107.

demand for information as well as titillation ... hunger for news as well as for the forbidden fruit of abstract thought'.¹

In eighteenth-century *obscène* books, information and titillation were intertwined. We could summarise the themes of eighteenth-century erotic literature as questioning received beliefs, educating, unmasking, satirising, and penetrating surfaces (literally and figuratively) to reveal hidden truths ('mysteries' and 'truths' in Thérèse's words). In addition to the questioning there was an appeal to more prurient interest – an appeal which propagandists have long realised guarantees rapid dissemination of ideas and which others realised provides a lucrative profit.² In many of these respects therefore (recall the words of Lynn Hunt, Chapter One 'Obscenity and Society'), eighteenth-century pornography was a typically Enlightenment – one could go further and say 'modern' – creation.

Demonstrating the degree to which eighteenth-century obscene books mirror contemporary cultural concerns, during Europe in the late eighteenth century the division between what was seen and what happened beneath the visible surface of things was an area of growing fascination. In his book, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (1992), Thomas Laqueur has shown how, ever since the Renaissance, medicine has passionately dissected humans and animals and the eighteenth century was no exception; understanding of anatomy was becoming increasingly systematised and materialist (i.e. based on biology rather than humours, abstract metaphors or the cosmos). During the eighteenth century, as Laqueur writes, 'the body' came to be all: 'The body is the body is the body, said a new group of self-appointed experts with ever more authority'.³ Gaëtan Brulotte reminds us that artists and technical illustrators were depicting the interior development of buildings and bodies whereas previously only the edifice or the skin had been the focus of attention.⁴ From these examples it can be seen that opening, unmasking, and casting light on the previously hidden were part of the Enlightenment ethos. Just as works which combined sex and metaphysics owed their content and popularity to this contemporary fascination with questioning beliefs and exploring new territories, so Sade's work was no exception. It too moves from the exterior of the body to the viscera beneath.

¹ Darnton, *Forbidden*, 81-82.

² 'Sex Bomb', Channel 4 Television.

³ Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, (Cambridge Mass and London: Harvard University Press: 1999), 151. Also, 154-155: 'By the end of the seventeenth century the various intellectual currents that made up the transformation of human understanding ... had radically undermined the whole Galenic mode of comprehending the body in relation to the cosmos [...]Gender, the social division between men and women, must therefore have its foundation in biology if it is to have any foundation at all.'

⁴ Brulotte, 'Sade and Erotic Discourse', 55.

Indeed, although it may appear that the theatre in Silling ‘is so emphatically cut off from the real world’,¹ just as the novel’s opening paragraph firmly locates events in the society of eighteenth-century France, so critics have discussed the level to which Sade’s novels are indebted to the ‘real world’ of his time. As Klossowski observes, ‘Sade had at his disposal [and used] no other terminology and dialectics than those of the philosophy of the Enlightenment’.² The terminology and the philosophy at Sade’s disposal included France’s forbidden books.

Sade was more than simply aware of popular sexually graphic satires such as *Thérèse philosophe*. He was an avid reader of the satirical works of the radical *philosophes* – like Voltaire’s *Candide* (1759) – and less sexually graphic (but also forbidden) works, including the treaties by Julien La Mettrie, Helvétius and Baron Paul d’Holbach.³ According to Michel Delon, Sade ‘knew well’ a range of licentious works.⁴ With titles such as *Histoire de Mlle Cronel, dite Frétilon, actrice de la Comédie du Man. Écrit par elle-même* (1740) those which Delon mentions fall into the category of *chroniques scandaleuses*. Sade also read (and if the comments in *Juliette* reflect the author’s own attitude, admired) *Thérèse philosophe* and Crébillon fils’s *Le Sopha* (1742).⁵ In his letters, Sade refers to Rétif de la Bretonne, a popular author of pornographic social satire and writer of over two hundred and fifty texts. Bretonne’s works include books with titles such as *Le paysan perversi ou les dangers de ville* (*The Corrupted Peasant: or the Dangers of the City*), which, like other scandalous works, combined pornography and social satire in stories of innocent country-folk perverted by priests and the depraved social elite.⁶

As Delon notes, this is the obscene literary tradition into which Sade is writing: ‘the material of *Cent vingt journées de Sodome*,’ writes Delon, ‘is not without its eighteenth-century equivalents ... *chroniques scandaleuses* regularly divulged anecdotes which we find

¹ Phillips, *Sade*, 43.

² Klossowski, *Sade*, 68.

³ Jean Deprun, ‘Sade Philosophe,’ *Sade: Oeuvres*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1990): lix-lxix.

⁴ Delon, ‘Notice’, 1126.

⁵ Delon, ‘Notice’, 1126. In his essay ‘*Idée sur les romans*’ (translated as ‘Reflections on the Novel’, 1801), Sade refers to several works by Crébillon fils. ‘Reflections on the Novel’, *The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writing*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver (London: Arrow, 1989), 105.

⁶ D-A-F de Sade, *Letters from Prison*, trans. and prefs, Richard Seaver (London: Harvill, 2000), 334. In the letter Sade chastises his wife for sending one of Bretonne’s novels. By all accounts Sade was not enamoured with Bretonne (either his person, or his works). It is interesting to note that Bretonne wrote *L’Anti-Justine* (1797), a supposedly ‘moral’ response to Sade’s notorious novel, *Justine* (1791). Ironically (considering it is supposed to be a morally indignant – ‘anti’-response), Bretonne’s work portrays more graphic and sexually extreme activities than Sade’s.

repeated from the mouths of the [novel's] four story-tellers' [*'anecdotes qu'on retrouve dans la bouche des quatre historiennes'*].¹ Thus, although Delon concedes that Sade's systematising and its 'darkening of the perversions' [*'noircissent des perversions'*] remains 'exceptional in relation to the confessional works of the time' [*'exceptionnels dans les témoignages du temps'*]² we find in *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* the same elements – confession, didacticism and rational arguments countering Christian and socio-moral beliefs – as are present in equally Enlightenment inspired *Thérèse philosophe*. Similarly, we find stories of 'perverse' sex, depraved aristocrats and priests and the revelation of 'secrets' metaphorically figured in frequent acts of voyeurism and the more literal opening of bodies.

Confession is present in Sade's text in the story-teller's autobiographical accounts of their sexual experiences and, in the religious, Catholic sense, within some of the stories they tell (580/316). Analytical argument is used to justify murder and the non-existence of God. If God existed, argue the libertines, then He would surely punish or prevent their sins: 'Would this all-powerful God permit a feeble creature like myself, who would, face to face with him, be as a mite in the eyes of an elephant ... permit this feeble creature to insult him, to flout him, to defy him, to challenge him, to offend him as I do, wantonly, at my own sweet will, at every instant of the day?' [*'Permettrait-il, ce dieu tout-puissant, qu'une faible créature comme moi, qui ne serait vis-à-vis de lui que ce qu'est un ciron aux yeux de l'éléphant, permettrait-il, dis-je, que cette faible créature l'insultât, le bafouât, le défiât, le bravât et l'offensât, comme je fais à plaisir à chaque instant de la journée?'*] (253/68).

Voyeurism is another motif Sade shared with *chroniques scandaleuses*. It plays a significant role in many of the passions told. As early as the second day of stories, Duclos introduces a spy hole in a brothel through which she watches the conduct of various clients ('My sister showed me a hole which looked squarely upon the couch and from which it was easy to see everything that transpired there ... It not infrequently occurred, said she, that this respectable hole had a part in mysteries which would be disclosed to me later on' [*'un trou qui répondait à plomb sur le canapé et duquel on voyait facilement tout ce que s'y passait ... ce respectable trou servait à des mystères dont on m'instruirait en temps et lieux'*] (296/105).

Part of the 'mystery' disclosed is, at heart, educational: Duclos is introduced to the secret hole by her older, wiser sister and from the hole she perceives many strange 'mysteries'. In keeping with the Aretino-tradition of sex education, the whole volume of *Les*

¹ Delon, 'Notice', 1126.

² Delon, 'Notice', 1127.

cent vingt journées de Sodome could be read as a kind of instruction manual. Let's not forget, after all, that Silling is also that Enlightenment institution *par excellence*: a school – *L'école de libertinage* – in which (at the most obvious level), the young girls are taught how to masturbate penises (283–4/94). Hénaff even observes that the narrative itself entails a 'painstaking didacticism' on the part of the narrator who suggests how the novel should be read ('And now friend-reader, you must prepare your heart and mind...')¹ and that not only content but form firmly belongs to the philosophical passions of the age. Referring to the careful organisation, categorisation, and numbered divisions of the novel, Hénaff reminds us that, 'The encyclopaedic endeavour was a passion in the eighteenth century ... [and] Sade adds yet one more dictionary to this list'.²

Social critique is easy to locate in Sade's text. Alongside the various knights, priests, bankers and aristocrats who people the stories, the four libertines represent the four pillars of eighteenth-century French society: the aristocracy, (the Duc, rich, cruel, cowardly); clergy (the Bishop, an atheist and 'idolater of active and passive sodomy, but eminently of the latter') [*Idolâtre de la sodomie active et passive, mais plus encore de cette dernière*] (203/26); justice (the Président, unclean, impotent, and one for whom 'the downtrodden classes were those upon which he enjoyed hurling the effects of his raging perfidy') [*la classe de l'infortune était celle sur laquelle il aimait le plus à lancer les effets de sa perfide rage*] (209/31); and banking, (Durcet, womanly, with a penis 'exceptionally small' and whose 'loftiest pleasures is to have his anus tickled by the Duc's enormous member' [*l'un es grands plaisirs de Durcet est de se faire chatouiller l'anus par le member énorme du duc*] (210/32)). In the later we find, as in the *chroniques scandaleuses*, satirical and humorous reference to events in contemporary French history. Consequently, the banker, Durcet's, special passion could be seen as a cynical reference to France's dire economic straits during the latter half of the eighteenth century; a situation exacerbated by aristocratic refusal to surrender their privilege of tax exemption.³ The Duc de Blangis, one of Sade's most cartoonish characterisations, embodies the novel's satirical aspect. A handsome, powerful man, 'superb buttocks, the handsomest leg in the world, an iron temperament, the strength of a horse, the member of a veritable mule, wondrously hirsute,

¹ Hénaff, 'Encyclopedia', 145.

² Hénaff, 'Encyclopedia', 143.

³ Hufton, *Europe*, 11-14 and 299-356 gives details of the economic and demographic situation of eighteenth-century France. Pages 345-355 detail the increasing political and economic tension between the aristocracy and the *parlements*. See also Delon, 'Notice', 1127-8 for more on Sade's four libertines, explaining that they can be seen as embodying the four seasons, the four medical humours, the four points of the compass, the four months of the retreat and (1129) the 'four social classes'.

blessed with the ability to eject its sperm any number of times within a given day at will, even at the age of fifty' [*les fesses superbes, la plus belle jambe du monde, un tempérament de fer, une force de cheval, et le membre d'un véritable mulet, étonnamment velu, doué de la faculté de perdre son sperme aussi souvent qu'il le voulait dans un jour, même à l'âge de cinquante ans*] (201/24). The Duc seems to be an Über-porn star. But Sade does not stop here. He takes the Duc from superhuman to superhuman *ad absurdum*: 'His prowess at the table outshone, if that is possible, what he demonstrated upon the bed ... it was as nothing to him to toss down his usual ten bottles of Burgundy [*son seul ordinaire était toujours de dix bouteilles de vin de Bourgogne*]; he had drunk up to thirty, and needed but to be challenged and he would set out for the mark of fifty' and 'One day he boasted he could squeeze the life out of a horse with his legs [*Il paria un jour d'étouffer un cheval entre ses jambes*']; he mounted the beast, it collapsed at the instant he had predicted' [*l'animal creva à l'instant qu'il avait prouvé*] (202/25). And then to comic:

the mere thought of even the mildest combat, but fought on equal terms, would have sent him fleeing to the ends of the earth [*l'eût fait fuir à l'extrémité de la terre*]... Justifying his turpitude with equal amounts of cleverness and effrontery, he loudly proclaimed that his poltroonery being nothing other than the desire to preserve himself, it were perfectly impossible for anyone in his right senses to condemn it for a fault [*il était parfaitement impossible à des gens sensés de la reprocher comme un défaut*']. (202-203/24-25)

This Hercules, power-hungry aristocrat, is a coward; his brother the Bishop of X*** a hairless, pallid man, dedicated to passive buggery who passes-out every time he orgasms (203/25-26); ex-judge, Présidente de Curval, is a wizened creature with hygiene problems, drooping buttocks that 'rather resembled a pair of dirty rags flapping upon his upper thighs' [*qui ressemblaient plutôt à deux sales torchons flottant sur le haut de ses cuisses*] and a gaping, filthy anus (205-206/27-28); Durcet is fat, has woman-like breasts, a penis so small and flaccid it rarely gets erect and an anus 'excessively agape, owing to the habit of sodomy' (210/32). Certainly, as Frappier-Mazur points out, 'Parody is at the heart of the orgy scene'.¹ These orgy-going, power-wielding, pleasure-seeking members of the Regency's elite for whom excess is a way of life are not the conventional handsome studs of pornographic fiction; they are not even especially masculine. They *are* cartoon freaks. Although one of the libertines' statutes bans laughter from Silling, the text itself indicates that Sade was daring his readers to break the libertines' own rule. Parody, farce, absurdity,

¹ Frappier-Mazur, *Writing the Orgy*, 75.

caricature, comic asides, comic alliteration, juxtaposition, 'toilet humour', and timing are significant aspects of Sade's oeuvre.¹ Following the popular *chroniques scandaleuses*, *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* is no exception in this, and, as we have seen, multiple other ways, not least in its indictment of the key institutions of the *ancien régime*.

Sade's descriptive obscenity plays a central role in painting the depravity and inhumanity of the social elite of his time. It renders them, the beliefs they represent, and the beliefs they espouse, repulsive, hypocritical and mendacious. On this level, Sade's voyeuristic display of secret 'mysteries' and his raising of the metaphorical curtain joins a plethora of other forbidden texts in revealing social hypocrisy, avarice and perversion. Seen in this way, although more extreme and violent, Sade's obscenity (as Hénaff confirms) is not unique. What it teaches the reader is nothing new. Yet to me, like the mirrors around the auditorium reflecting so much obscenity, the reader's mind is led to reflect on more than the hypocrisy of the social elite of eighteenth-century France. If, as the narrator of *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* notes, Sade's book were intended to solely 'reveal secrets which ought to be sunk in obscurity', then by the end of the eighteenth-century social hypocrisy was popular (if not required) material and a 'secret' which was anything but 'sunk in obscurity'.

So what other 'truth', 'mystery, or 'secret' could it be that is unveiled – unveiled even when, as we have seen, it is ostensibly 'veiled' – on the stage of Silling? In a sense, as I see it, just as obscenity takes centre stage at Silling, so this 'truth' is obscenity. More accurately, what we find on the stage at Silling is that which lies at the core of the obscene and which causes the obscene to evoke responses of horror and repugnance. This centre, as we saw in Chapter One, is death. On one level, in *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*, the reader is forced to see the allure which death and defilement exerts played out by Sade's libertines. As Delon notes, *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* has the ability to force us to 'to recognise an obscure complicity between desire and death' [*'reconnaître une obscure connivence du désir et de la mort'*].² We can add, between desire and the obscene.

Two aspects of the novel illustrate this point further: the female body and the society of Silling. First, the recurrent violation of the female body. As I mentioned earlier, in relation to *Juliette*, Warman has pointed out Sade's metaphorical use of a process of 'unveiling' (*'devoiler'*) to reveal truth (*'La vérité'*). 'A forbidden unveiling pushes it [the locus and nature of truth] strongly in the sexual direction,' writes Warman, noting that

¹ John Phillips, "'Laugh? I Nearly Died!': Humour in Sade's Fiction,' *The Eighteenth Century Theory and Interpretations* 40:1 (1999), 49.

² Delon, 'Notice', 1130.

'Truth' in *Juliette* (as it is in the French language) is gendered as female. Consequently, for Warman, the opening of the female body equates to 'unveiling' truth, penetrating it represents penetrating the body of truth.¹ We can view the female body in *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* in the same way as Warman interprets it in *Juliette*. However, further details can be added. Firstly, as we have seen, even when (or indeed because of being) veiled or violated, Sade's novel perpetually draws attention to the female's 'uncanny' sexual organs. The 'uncanny' of course, carries connotations of death and dismemberment: it is a 'harbinger of death' (see Chapter One, 'Psychology of Obscenity'). Secondly, Sade's bodies are relentlessly materialist. Like Thérèse's, there is little metaphysical about them. Part of the process of education which the pupils at Silling undergo is the realisation that they are nothing more than mortal objects; Christian metaphysics is brutally punished. As the repeated and detailed expositions of farting, excretion, vomiting and disembowelling show, Sade makes it clear that, when opened, what dwells within this body is no metaphysical spirit, soul, or other less materialist revelation. It doesn't reveal anything as abstract as progress, civilisation, liberty, equality, freedom – those abstract Enlightenment beliefs – which were to be the watchwords of the Revolution.² For Barthes, this materiality means that 'there is no bodily secret to seek' there is no 'unveiling of the truth' only 'ejaculation'.³ Yet could not this – this lack of 'secret' – be *the* 'secret', something perhaps disavowed by cultural ideology and the secret 'which ought to be sunk in obscurity for the good of humanity'? Could it be that the 'truth' within Sade's female bodies is obscene, obscene in the sense that the body is dehumanised, a cadaver, an uncanny reminder of our fragility and death – as well as the fascination that these forces hold?

Of course, Mary Douglas influentially observed that the body does not just stand as representative of, in Warman's terms, 'truth'; it is also a symbol of society.⁴ Confirming this link between the *female* body and society we have seen Schama note that in the licentious satires on Marie-Antoinette the queen's body stood as a metaphor for the political and physical constitution of France. Elsewhere in his study of the French Revolution Schama observes that, after 1789, France adopted Marianne as its symbol. According to Schama this national symbol represents 'a secular reworking of traditional images of the

¹ Warman, 'Jewels', 94-95. 'Truth' figured as female is a recurrent motif in Western culture. I discuss this in greater depth in Chapter Five.

² Brun, 'Sade', 48 contrasts the materiality of the bodies on Sade's stage with the 'dematerialisation' which it was undergoing on the stage at the end of the eighteenth century.

³ Barthes, *Sade*, 158.

⁴ See Chapter One, 'Obscenity and Society'.

Virgin Mary in which the exposed breast signified her intercession before Christ on behalf of the sinful'.¹ In images of both Mother Country and Mother Church, the female breasts and body are fecund, innocent, and generous. The same functions are violently attacked by Sade's libertines; acts which, in this way, can be seen as symbolic attacks on the body of Mother Country and Mother Church. Additionally, opening the female body (but of course, also the male), exploring and dissecting it, stands as a symbolic dissection of society. If these bodies are the social body, then beneath its surface Sade reveals impurity, rottenness, excrement, fragility, and ultimately death. Death gives obscenity its power and the obscene is also death's 'harbinger'.

To see *Silling* as a comment on eighteenth-century French society is to see *Silling* as containing and/or shaped by the beliefs of society at that time. Ostensibly, *Silling* is a place where the libertines can say, 'I am alone here, I am at the end of the world, withheld from every gaze, here no one can reach me, there is no creature that can come nigh where I am; no limits, hence no barriers; I am free' (412/193). It is a society they create with its own boundaries and laws and which seems to provide an almost perfect inversion of the avowed values of French society. Christians are persecuted, obscene behaviour and excess are the law. Purity, decency and moderation are criminal acts met with the harshest punishment. It portrays a potent mix of 'perverse' sex, violence, crime and horror and it confuses accepted boundaries, dichotomies and the limits of social behaviour. I say 'almost' perfect inversion because not everything is 'inverted'. Much is, like the *Duc*, distorted or exaggerated, not reversed. Like the *Duc*, *Silling* can be seen as a grotesque (obscene) replica, a satirical microcosm of the society the libertines claim to have escaped. Structurally, the similarities are obvious: the four leaders of this society are the same; its citizens are from all social backgrounds, ages and sexes; it has its own budget, hierarchy, regulations, laws, punishments, costumes – even regular festivals and marriages. We can also find within *Silling* the Enlightenment drive towards progress through empirical data and scientific exploration. The latest scientific tools (including pneumatic machines) (611/337) and the mathematical language of classification, time-tabling, and education all occur. The most fashionable 'civilised' decor (*Silling* is stuffed with elegant ottomans, tapestries, an advanced heating system, armchairs, and dinner services) and rational philosophical discourse all play a part in the acts and desires of the libertines.

Numbering, measuring, organising, classifying, regulating, punishing, and control: these are the tools which provide the required devices of Sade's villains. Yet, in *Silling*,

¹ Schama, *Citizens*, 768.

these rational and cerebral Enlightenment values are married to the corporeal and excretory. Recall the aforementioned passion, 'He has girls A and B shit. Then he forces B to eat A's shit, and A to eat B's. Then both A and B shit a second time; he eats both their turds'. This is more like a mathematical equation than a sexual act. Combined with the precise measurements and numbers which scatter the text (dates, times, details, and measured penises and clitorises) as well as the 'encyclopaedic' form of the novel, it is as if thrill lies in algebra and the application of mathematical rules to sex and murder as well as in the obscene. Consider as another example the 'elderly Knight of Malta who opened a kind of wardrobe filled with cubby-holes, each of which housed a porcelain chamber pot containing a turd; the old rake ... [had] filed away each performance according to a classifying system' (414/195). In Silling, just as Sade too 'had at his disposal no other terminology and dialectics than those of the philosophy of the Enlightenment'¹ so the logic of Enlightenment reason animates all that the libertines commit and regulates the precise nature of the novel's obscenity.

In this way Sade creates an obscene satire of the 'real' world (in terms of eighteenth-century pre-Revolutionary France). His satire has many similarities to the *chroniques scandaleuses*. It portrays the aristocracy revelling in excessive cruelty, the clergy not believing in God, justice not being just, and banking as concerned with greed. Yet we need to consider two sides to Silling. On one side are the obscene acts and stories. On the other, although monstrous, obscene, Sade's libertines are Enlightened humans, educated, wealthy members of the most privileged, most 'civilised' class. They take pride in founding their absolutist society and pride in educating, controlling, organising and punishing its citizens. The suggestion is that their desires exist *because* they are civilised. Everything points to the fact that this society of extreme human defilement – this theatre of obscenity – is the result of *following* the ideological trajectory of 'civilisation'. Echoing these sentiments we find Deleuze's assertion that the primary wish of the sadist, is 'to demonstrate that reasoning itself is a form of violence, and that he is on the side of violence'.² Here, 'reasoning' implicates the logical 'reason' of Enlightenment ideology. But there is more than simply (obscene) sexual violence in this novel.

Self-destruction is a recurrent motif in Sade's work. Cryle, for instance (quoting Maurice Blanchot), notes that *Juliette* is a *Bildungsroman* which involves Juliette's gradual

¹ Klossowski, *Sade*, 68.

² Deleuze, *Coldness*, 18.

self-destruction (self-destruction as loss of identity).¹ Klossowski notes that *La philosophie dans le boudoir*'s revolutionary 'tract', '*Français, encore un effort si vous voulez être républicains*' (296-339/137-89) begins by affirming that 'with atheism one would inculcate in children excellent social principles' but ends by promoting 'a state of permanent immorality – that is, [one which] throw[s] society ineluctably into its own destruction'.² Anticipating this aspect of Sade's later novels, self-destruction is also present in *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*. Proclaiming their hatred of God and religion, creating a commune away from society's repressive laws, the four pillars of eighteenth-century society *could* have created a kind of Enlightenment 'utopia'. Following its own Enlightenment-influenced rules however, the society spirals into self-destruction – which includes the tearing out and killing of Curval's unborn son and heir. By the final days of the retreat less than half its citizens remain alive. Here, as Delon noted, is 'an obscure complicity between desire and death'. Desire, we could add, for death, regression within progress, barbarism within 'civilisation', fascination within revulsion, death within life, obscenity on the centre of the stage, darkness within the Enlightenment.

To confirm this assertion we find Klossowski saying that Silling is

'The vision of a society in the state of permanent immorality presents itself as a *utopia of evil*. And this paradoxical utopia corresponds to the virtual state of our modern society. But while the utopian sense of human possibilities elaborates the anticipations of a virtual progress, the sadist mind elaborates the anticipations of a virtual regression'.³

Klossowski goes on, 'This disestablished great lord [Sade] did not espouse the philosophy of the Enlightenment solely in order to reveal the darkness of its foundations ... [we can see Sade's work as representing] one of the most searching and most revealing epiphenomena of a vast process of social decomposition and recomposition'.⁴ Similarly, Blanchot calls Sade 'both execrable and enlightening'.⁵ These sentiments are echoed by Bataille, who wrote,

¹ Cryle, *Geometry*, 85.

² Klossowski, *Sade*, 62.

³ Klossowski, *Sade*, 62.

⁴ Klossowski, *Sade*, 63-4.

⁵ Blanchot, 'Sade', 48.

It is only today we realise that without de Sade's cruelty we should never have penetrated with such ease the inaccessible domain where the most painful truths lay hidden ... Now the average man knows he must become aware of the things which repel him most violently – those things which repel us most violently are part of our own nature.¹

'Vision', 'penetrating', revealing, 'painful truth', 'enlightening', 'darkness': these critics use the terms and motifs of the eighteenth-century erotic text to describe Sade's novels. As questionable as any notion of intrinsic or monolithic authenticity – 'truth' – may be in relation to these texts (see Introduction), one thing is undeniably true. As my findings in Chapter One show, what repels mankind violently (and attracts so inexorably) is the obscene and it repels us *so* violently because of the morbid reminder which lies at its heart: that disavowed desire for a regression which Freud named the death-instinct. Death – not only literal (and remember Freud's death drive was not simply literal death), but through the destruction of categories, ambiguity, loss of identity and civilised values – is centre stage in Sade's obscene novel. This explains and exposes our reaction to Sade's obscenity and it is what Sade's obscenity 'reveals'.

To read Silling's obscenity as part of Enlightenment society distorted to reveal a disavowed undercurrent of obscenity and destruction (Bataille's comment that it reveals 'those things which repel *us* most violently are part of *our* own nature' (my emphasis) implies this social relevance) is to see it as anticipating the work of several twentieth-century cultural critics. Freud's of course, is one influential example. His cultural theory depicts man and civilisation as hanging between an urge towards destruction (mankind has 'a lust for aggression and destruction'²) and preservation and progress (see also Chapter One, 'Psychology of Obscenity' and 'Obscenity and Society'). Around this destructive instinct, civilisation and religion attempt to erect 'benevolent illusions' to hide man from his darker nature and assist in the necessary repression – disavowal – of certain instincts. As Freud wrote in 1920,

It may be difficult, too, for many of us, to abandon the belief that there is an instinct towards perfection at work in human beings, which has brought them to their present high level of intellectual achievement and ethical sublimation ... I have no faith, however, in the existence of any

¹ Bataille, *Eroticism*, 196.

² Sigmund Freud, 'Why War?', trans. James Strachey, *Civilization, Society and Religion*, Penguin Freud Library, Vol. 12. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 357.

such internal instinct and I cannot see how this benevolent illusion is to be preserved.¹

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (first published in 1944) proposes a similar model. 'The curse of irresistible progress,' they write, 'is irresistible regression'.² This, they argue, is the dialectic at the heart of Enlightenment 'civilisation': 'The strain of holding the [Enlightenment] I together adheres to the I in all stages and the temptation to lose it has always been there with the blind determination to maintain it'.³ That both Freud and Adorno were writing in the shadow of two of the most wilfully destructive acts of history (the First and Second World Wars) cannot be discounted. Yet, from my investigation into the obscene, it seems that progress and regression have a complex, interrelated attraction which is not limited to twentieth-century theories.

Like Delon and Foucault we could draw comparisons between Sade and the work of his contemporary, the Spanish artist, Francisco Goya.⁴ 'Visually' (here of course I refer back to Sade's evocation of what the reader will 'see'), both depict bleak, sometimes fantastic scenes and monstrous acts of violence. Of course, such comparisons must be qualified. Many of Goya's most famous and violent works – *Los desastres de la guerra* (*The Disasters of War*) – are a response to the atrocities committed when Napoleon invaded Spain and began the Peninsula War (1808-1813). For this reason these works cannot be seen as Goya's response to the Enlightenment *per se*. In his earlier *Caprichos* (*Caprices*, etched between 1794 and 1799) however, we find closer parallels between Goya and Sade. Among the *Caprices* is, to me, the appropriately titled *Il sueño de la razon produce monstros* (*The Dream of Reason Produces Monsters*). It is the image of a gentleman scholar asleep at his desk, a horde of winged monsters emerging from the gloom behind him. Using the motif of sight, art historian, Fred Licht, explains that images such as this explore 'the inadequacy of our normal perceptions'⁵ and,

¹ Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', 314. See also the first two chapters of Freud's 'The Future of an Illusion', *Civilization, Society and Religion*, Penguin Freud Library, Vol. 12 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991) for further expansion of this theme.

² Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1979), 36.

³ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic*, 33.

⁴ Delon, 'Notice', 1130; Foucault, *Madness*, 208.

⁵ Fred Licht, *Goya: The Origins of the Modern Temper in Art* (London: John Murray, 1980), 103.

form an intellectual and visual hinge between the age of the Enlightenment and our own modern epoch ... the artist sets himself the task of illuminating certain incongruencies, injustices, stupidities, and cruelties of his age in order to open our eyes and arouse our indignation. The purpose of the plates [Goya's *Caprices*] is therefore in perfect harmony with the aims of the Enlightenment.¹

In this respect, Sade and Goya are allies. While there may be little new in terms of themes – social injustice, aristocratic and ecclesiastical hypocrisy, greed, abuses of power, and perversion – in comparison to earlier, forbidden, comic eighteenth-century satires, Sade and Goya are blunt and obscene – obscene because they portray inhumanity and morbidity (and as we have seen in relation to Sade, ambiguity, obscene language and linguistic and descriptive excess). Like Goya, Sade removes us from the world of bawdiness and although caricatural in their portrayal of their cultures, the art of these artists is more explicit in its bitterness and ugliness than the work of, for example, their English contemporary William Hogarth. Like Goya, Sade articulates darker, forgotten undercurrents, the 'bad conscience'² to an Enlightenment belief in progress. Like Goya's, Sade's work is produced within and determined by Enlightenment ideology. It digs beneath the respectable facade of this ideology to root out its less savoury aspect. Just as Goya's etchings 'open our eyes', so Sade's work raises that metaphorical curtain to unveil the unsaid and unseen to a vision of the 'incongruencies, injustices, stupidities, and cruelties of his age'. One could of course say more and suggest that this injustice (etc.) continues to underpin 'civilised' norms. This dark underpinning is that which 'civilised' ideology resolutely disavows: that inherent within 'civilisation's' progress may in fact be its opposite, regression. As a gory illustration of this point and of Sade's first novel, written four and a half years earlier, we could point to the Revolution which Sade lived through. During the Revolution, Enlightenment learning, knowledge and progress appeared alongside – and to justify – despotism, massacres, defilement, and Terror.

On the last day of *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*, the libertines and the surviving twelve of their retinue of forty-two, return to Paris where (it seems) they melt with impunity into the 'civilisation' from which they emerged. It is even suggested that they will return to

¹ Licht, *Goya*, 92.

² Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975), 168.

a similar stage to perform similar scenes of obscenity.¹ They leave behind them a tale which is indeed so 'impure' that it haunts the mind of the reader. Theirs' is tacitly not, as Denis de Rougement claimed it to be, a 'glorification of sex'.² To see the libertines as satisfying their sexual whims, abandoning themselves to the sex instinct and swooning with satisfied lust time and again, is misleading. What they perform on their stage surrounded by mirrors is a profoundly unsettling vision. The fact that it is so unsettling relies on Sade's use of obscenity: obscenity to shock and appal; obscenity which has a revelatory function, which lies behind the façade of bodies and of society; obscenity as excess, ambiguity, void, impurity, silence which challenges the fundamental rules (linguistic, moral, sexual, legal) of society. Ultimately, Sade's obscenity is, like the content of so much eighteenth-century pornography, educational in the sense that it forces us to reflect on what constitutes the civilised and what constitutes humanity. After all, even when veiling, he unveils 'secrets' which should be hidden 'for the good of humanity'. 'What makes Sade unreadable for some [is] not the obscenity or even the sadism,' writes Phillips, 'but the sheer hopelessness of his vision of the world and of human nature'.³ Undoubtedly this is true, but central to the vision of human nature which Sade puts on the stage of Silling is obscenity: an obscene material reality. Obscenity and its complex dynamics are fundamental to Sade's work and his portrayal of humanity. The obscene is what he puts centre stage and beneath that, threatening and dark, lies the morbidity which haunts the obscene.

¹ One of the statutes states that punishment for the libertines will be fines and the money from these fines 'shall be especially employed, upon the return to France, for the initial expenses incidental to a new party, either in this same kind, or in another' [*elles seront toutes spécialement employées, au retour en France, à commencer les frais d'une nouvelle partie, ou dans le genre de celle-ci, ou dans un autre*] (249/65).

² Rougement, *Love in the Western World*, 212.

³ Phillips, *Sade*, 61.

CHAPTER THREE

THE 'UNCANNY AURA' OF
VENUS IM PELZ

A RECURRENT FEATURE of obscene literature and much of the obscenity so far considered has been vulgar words and graphic depictions of taboo acts involving the human body and its violation. This is the conventional sphere of obscenity, but, as I hope to have made clear this is only one aspect of the obscene. Obscenity is conveyed by, and operates in, multiple ways: excess and absence are but two and violation of the body represents only the surface of an underlying root of the obscene: its evocation of and/or proximity to death. This chapter departs from the 'conventionally' obscene and considers how it is not just graphic depictions of violated bodies that can evoke the fear filled yet fascinating domain associated with obscenity. It does so by applying our knowledge of obscenity to *Venus im Pelz* (*Venus in Furs*, 1870), a novella by the once-popular nineteenth-century Austrian writer, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. We will see how *Venus im Pelz* is underpinned by uncanny and obscene themes and how this novella is 'dirty', obscene and unsettling even without recourse to 'conventional' obscenity.

When reading *Venus im Pelz* for the first time, even though the novella's events are often light-hearted, it conveys a slightly disturbing or threatening atmosphere. Furthermore, *Venus im Pelz* maintains a 'dirty' and notorious reputation almost comparable to that of Sade's work. All this despite the fact that, in stark contrast to *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*, *Venus im Pelz* contains no explicit sexual content, little description of violence or violated bodies, no scatology, no nudity (beyond a few passing references to surging bosoms) and no obscene language. In fact, as Deleuze writes in *Le froid et le cruel*, his canonical study of Sacher-Masoch's work, 'The work of Masoch, is on the whole commendable for its unusual decency. The most vigilant censor could hardly take exception to *Venus*, unless he were to question a certain atmosphere of suffocation and suspense'.¹ This absence of 'conventional' obscenity is one reason why I have chosen to explore

¹ Deleuze, *Coldness*, 25.

Sacher-Masoch's text: it provides relief from graphic portrayals of sexual organs and excreta and it gives an opportunity to explore how the obscene operates throughout a book in non-'conventional' ways. It should be noted however – and *Venus im Pelz* is a case in point – an absence of explicit (read 'conventional') obscenity does not equate to an absence of culturally threatening themes. Indeed, Harrison quotes a nineteenth-century commentator who objected to Sade's novel *Aline et Valcour* on the grounds that 'this novel, which is less immoral than *Justine*, is perhaps more dangerous since the scenes it portrays are less revolting'.¹ For this commentator Sade's novel was only superficially 'decent'. Similarly, as we will see, despite its superficial decency, *Venus im Pelz* is not dissimilar to *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* in the themes it contains and the cultural critique it presents.

In terms of this thesis's historical trajectory, *Venus im Pelz* stands as a representative of a notorious nineteenth-century text which combines themes of sex and violence. I hasten to add that, in its own time, *Venus im Pelz* was never *legally* forbidden – on the contrary, it was a bestseller. The fact that the work was a bestseller of course does not preclude it from being obscene. As we have seen, the obscene exerts a powerful form of fascination and other obscene novels – Réage's *Histoire d'O* is one (see Chapter Five) – have been bestsellers. It might be more accurate therefore to say that *Venus im Pelz* gathered an explicitly dangerous reputation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century when the acts it describes became regarded as 'perverse' and/or degenerative (discussed more in due course).² As a representative of nineteenth-century literature which combines sex and violence, *Venus im Pelz* represents a type of writing which, according to Steven Marcus, exploded across Europe and America at that time. This was the 'genre' of flagellation literature. 'The vast literature of flagellation produced during the Victorian period ... the immense number of works published and titles listed,'³ writes Marcus, included novels, stories, formal dialogues, lectures, plays, skits, farces, verses and

¹ Paul Jacob, *Zoloé et ses deux acolytes*, quoted in Harrison, *Censorship*, 132. (My emphasis).

² Another reason can be found in the 1930s, when, with the rise of German National-Socialism (a political ideology only nominally socialist, and fascist rather than nationalist), Sacher-Masoch's work was seen as a challenge to the dominant cultural ideology. As such, it was burned with other 'degenerate' books (including the work of Freud). The German National-Socialist's objections however would have been fuelled just as much by Sacher-Masoch's unapologetic philo-Semitism and staunch opposition to the German empire as by his choice of provocative themes. See Michael T. O'Pecko, 'Afterword', *A Light for Others and Other Jewish Tales from Galicia* by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, trans. Michael T. O'Pecko (Riverside CA: Ariadne Press, 1994), 333-36.

³ Marcus, *Victorians*, 252. Carol Siegel, *Male Masochism: Modern Revisions of The Story of Love* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 188-89 supports this assertion when she writes 'It does seem obvious from Sacher-Masoch's work alone that many more books centring on eroticized beating were published in the nineteenth century than had been previously.'

any number of works of historical or documentary presumption – histories of flagellation, punishment, torture, discipline, “The use of the rod” etc.; authentic exposures of the goings on at schools in the form of memoirs, confessions ... medical tracts describing the salubrious effects of beating on the human frame and constitution; lists of compendia of both the great and the obscure who have been addicted to such practices.¹

In Chapters One and Two a link was forged between Freud’s ‘uncanny’ and the responses which obscenity evokes. The uncanny (like Kristeva’s abject) and the obscene, I have suggested, operate in very similar ways. For this reason I seek out the uncanny aspects of *Venus im Pelz*. This allows me to read this novella through and alongside Freud’s theory of the uncanny. Although this technique leads us to the novella’s obscene themes, it is not a conventional way of approaching Sacher-Masoch’s text and it certainly does not use the Freudian approach that often accompanies discussions of *Venus im Pelz*. This approach involves exploring the story through theories of masochism.

‘Masochism’ was a nineteenth-century invention and when considering the work of Sacher-Masoch and its context within the great age of defining sexual deviance and obscenity laws it is difficult not to mention ‘masochism’ and one of the most influential sexological tracts of the late nineteenth century, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886). *Psychopathia Sexualis* was the work of German sexologist, Richard von Krafft-Ebing. An encyclopaedic work of sexual behaviour and ‘perversion’ ostensibly for the use of judges to combat the perceived decay of social morality, *Psychopathia Sexualis* included case studies and commentary on a vast range of sexual ‘perversions’. It even discovered/invented new ones including the psycho-sexual anomalies sadism and masochism. As critics have often noted, the names and definitions of both conditions were coined from the names of Sade and Sacher-Masoch respectively.² Merging author, text, and personal reputation, a decade or so after Sacher-Masoch wrote *Venus im Pelz*, Krafft-Ebing described several cases of (overwhelmingly) men who gained sexual pleasure from, or fantasised about, being dominated or having pain inflicted on them (usually by a woman). Krafft-Ebing went on, ‘I feel justified in calling this sexual anomaly “Masochism” because the author *Sacher-Masoch* frequently made this perversion, which up to this time was quite unknown to the scientific world as such, the substratum of his writings’.³ Krafft-Ebing asserted that

¹ Marcus, *Victorians*, 252-53.

² For example Deleuze, *Coldness*, 15-16.

³ Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: With Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct*, (English Translation of the Twelfth German Edition) trans. F. J. Rebman (Brooklyn, New York: Physicians and Surgeons Book Company, 1934), 132. (Krafft-Ebing’s emphasis).

‘Masochism is the opposite of sadism. While the latter is the desire to cause pain and use force, the former is the wish to suffer pain and be subjected to force’.¹ Ever since their twin-like appearance in Krafft-Ebing’s influential text, these two notorious psychosexual ‘perversions’ – sadism and masochism – have repeatedly appeared in each other’s company, either as opposites or as equivalents. In terms of this thesis, herein lies another reason for my inclusion of Sacher-Masoch’s text in the sense that this chapter joins a well-established critical tradition of comparing and contrasting the work of Sacher-Masoch and Sade. Thus, it is in comparison with the obscenity of Sade’s novel that much of this chapter considers Sacher-Masoch’s.

As mentioned above, Krafft-Ebing’s term ‘masochism’ has come to dominate discussions of Sacher-Masoch’s novel. To be more accurate, it is not so much what Krafft-Ebing wrote about masochism, than Freud’s early twentieth-century adoption of Krafft-Ebing’s definitions of masochism and sadism which have come to dominate writing on Sacher-Masoch’s books. This dominance extends to more than readings of Sacher-Masoch’s novels; over the years masochism (far more than sadism) became a recurring and increasingly central topic in Freud’s theories and eventually one of the essential, universal elements of Freudian psychoanalysis. The exact nature of masochism’s role in Freud’s theory is changeable and complex. It has been discussed by many critics, and although this chapter closes with a brief consideration of how Freud’s masochism relates to certain themes within *Venus im Pelz*, my reading does not revolve around Freud’s theories of masochism. That said, in relation to masochism and psychoanalysis it is worth noting that, after Freud a large amount of literature has appeared which discusses, questions and offers alternative explanations for why masochism exists. Theodor Reik, Gilles Deleuze, Jean Laplanche, Gaylyn Studlar, Kaja Silverman and Leo Bersani are just a few of the critics and analysts who have offered their own interpretations of what masochism is, where it originates, and how it operates. Despite the attention it has received, masochism remains a debated, ambiguous and complex concept. Is it, as Freud originally posited, indistinct from sadism as the sadistic instinct turned back against the self (‘Three Essays on Sexuality’)?² Or does it, as he later asserted, involve complex shifts in identification, gender, voyeurism, and comprise a universal drive within all living things (as Freud argues in his later essays ‘A Child Is Being Beaten’ and ‘The Economic Problem of Masochism’)? Is it, as Deleuze

¹ Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 131.

² Sigmund Freud, ‘Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality’, trans. James Strachey, *On Sexuality*, Penguin Freud Library, Vol. 7 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 73. Freud writes, ‘A sadist is always at the same time a masochist’.

asserts in *Le froid et le cruel*, a turning away from the patriarchal superego to the cold, pre-Oedipal, ideal maternal?¹ Is the male masochist, as Kaja Silverman says, ‘a rebel, or even revolutionary [who seeks] to remake the world in another image altogether, to forge a different cultural order’?² Or does masochism involve conformity to and exaggeration of the power dynamics upon which the established order depends: as Leo Bersani writes, sadomasochism ‘exposes the mechanisms of power in society’ and ‘shares the dominant culture’s obsession with power’?³

Perhaps because Sacher-Masoch’s texts remains *the* works from which the concept originated – and, as his best-known and most available work is *Venus im Pelz*, this is *the* text usually evoked – for all their contradictions, psychoanalytic theories of masochism remain the backbone of criticism on Sacher-Masoch’s writing. In other words, the theory of masochism often appears as the tool for interpreting Sacher-Masoch’s text (work by Gilles Deleuze, Gertrud Lenzer, and Kaja Silverman are representative). Indeed masochistic theory has become such a part of interpreting Sacher-Masoch’s work that, over the past century, the two – masochism and Sacher-Masoch’s writing – have become inextricably intertwined.

That said, there was no masochism when Sacher-Masoch wrote *Venus im Pelz*. This is one reason why, as much as possible, this chapter veers away from the well-worn path of the psychoanalytic approach – the psychoanalytic approach, I hasten to add which focuses solely on psycho-sexual development. Although I briefly consider how the themes of the novel relate to their psychoanalytic interpretations (‘A Truly Modern Attitude’) this chapter uses as its exploratory tools recent criticism on Sacher-Masoch’s work (by Carol Siegel, Anita Phillips and Suzanne Stewart) to locate obscene themes within the text and to explore how and why these themes are present and how they compare to Sade’s theatre of obscenity. Ultimately I return to psychoanalytic theory myself – but not that of masochism. Rather, as previously mentioned, I forge links between Freud’s theory of the uncanny and Sacher-Masoch’s novella – links which help unlock the novella’s obscene themes.

In terms of the obscene, it is perhaps of interest to note a certain convergence of masochism and obscenity, or rather, the first evidence of the presence of obscenity in this apparently ‘decent’ book. Masochism originates in Sacher-Masoch’s writings and

¹ Deleuze, *Coldness*, 47-55.

² Kaja Silverman, ‘Masochism and Male Subjectivity,’ *Camera Obscura* 17 (1988), 33.

³ Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 83, 91. The conflation of sadism and masochism, the term ‘sadomasochism’ or ‘S/M’ is never used by Freud. From my own reading, in my opinion, ‘sadomasochism’ is no different from, and simply refers to ‘masochism’. Deleuze influentially attacked the term and concept of ‘sadomasochism’ in *Coldness*, 129. ‘Sadomasochism,’ Deleuze concludes, ‘is one of those misbegotten names, a semiological howler’.

masochism is an ambiguous, enigmatic force (Carol Siegel talks of '*masochism's* elusiveness').¹ Masochism slips through the boundaries of definition set up to enclose it; it is ambiguous and contradictory and resists simple definitions. So too is (and does) the obscene. It is this ambiguity – not masochism *per se* but the ambiguity which blurs the boundaries of Sacher-Masoch's novel – which I will explore as a way towards the novel's obscenity. It is this ambiguity, I suggest, that lends the novel its unsettling atmosphere and dirty reputation. For this novel and, (if one falls back to the commonplace conflation between Sacher-Masoch's work and masochism for a moment), masochism, has a reputation for disgust. As Anita Phillips has noted, masochism is 'dirty', 'loathing', 'sordid' and understanding it involves understanding 'the disgusting and disgraceful side of yourself'.² While Deleuze may assert that *Venus im Pelz* is 'decent', the mechanics of masochism it seems, are already pulling us back towards the realm of obscenity: a place of dirt, impurity, 'the in-between, the ambiguous'. This is not to mention something else which masochism shares with the obscene: fascination for, like the obscene, masochism is a continuing source of morbid fascination (morbid for reasons which will become more apparent).

The following section, 'An Uncanny Aura' takes us further into the realm of *Venus im Pelz's* obscenity by comparing Sacher-Masoch's text to that of Sade's and drawing links with Freud's uncanny. Doing so explores how the novel creates its threatening atmosphere and evokes responses of disgust. The second section ('A Truly Modern Attitude') continues following the uncanny connotations introduced in the first section and concentrates on the novella's depiction of the central female figure – Wanda von Dunajew – and the role she plays within the novella's themes and its obscenity. Through Wanda it is possible to locate Sacher-Masoch's text within a cultural and artistic context fascinated and formed by threat, contamination and death. To conclude, I return to what *makes* this novel 'dirty' and obscene and relate this to Freud's theory of the death-instinct.

¹ Siegel, *Masochism*, 19. (Siegel's emphasis).

² Anita Phillips, *A Defence of Masochism* (London and Boston: Faber, 1998), 9, 75, 15.

1. 'An Uncanny Aura'¹

Although published as a stand-alone book – and usually critiqued as such – Sacher-Masoch intended *Venus im Pelz* to be one of the opening works in a larger series of writings called *Das Vermächtnis Kains (The Legacy of Cain)*. *Das Vermächtnis Kains* was an ambitious six-volume project which Sacher-Masoch meant to 'represent *the whole existence of man* – as much as a writer can do it – by a *great cycle of short stories* ... As prologue, a short story called *Das Vermächtnis Kains* will lay out the themes of the whole work'.² In this vista of man's existence each volume was to focus on a particular 'sin': 'The Love of the Sexes [which included *Venus im Pelz*], Property, The State, War, Work, Death'.³ Although this was the plan Sacher-Masoch sent to his brother in January 1869, he completed only the first two volumes of *Das Vermächtnis Kains*.

In fact, the prologue to the volume was eventually entitled *Der Wanderer (The Wanderer)*. As prologue to the stories which followed and written the same year as *Venus im Pelz* (1869), this short tale deserves a moment's consideration. It describes an anonymous narrator's meeting with an old man on the desolate eastern steppes. The old man – the eponymous Wanderer – is a member of an extreme Christian sect. Upon meeting the younger narrator, the Wanderer gives an impromptu sermon that claims to tell the truth of the world. "'The first important revelation",' he begins,

"... is that you poor and foolish human beings live with the illusion that God, in his wisdom, kindness and omnipotence, has created the world as good as possible, has established a moral order and that those who are evil and act in an evil way destroy this order and this good world and are subjected to eternal justice. This is a sad and fatal mistake! The truth is that this world is bad and deficient and that being [*Dasein*] is a form of penance, a painful trial, a sad pilgrimage, and *everything that is alive, lives on death* [*'und alles, was da lebt, lebt vom Tode*] and plundering of the other."⁴

¹ 74/124.

² Wanda von Sacher-Masoch, *The Confessions of Wanda von Sacher-Masoch*, trans. Marian Phillips et al (San Francisco: Re/Search, 1990), 104. (Sacher-Masoch's emphasis).

³ Wanda von Sacher-Masoch, *Confessions*, 104.

⁴ Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, 'Der Wanderer,' *Venus im Pelz und andere Erzählungen* (Köln: Könnemann, 1996), 348. Passage trans. Vike Plock and Ben Jacob. (My emphasis).

Initially, these bleak sentiments appear to stand at odds with the apparent frivolity of *Venus im Pelz*. Yet, when considering *Venus im Pelz* we should remember that the bleakness of *Der Wanderer* was intended to lay out the themes of all the works that followed and the sentiments of this prologue deserve to be kept in mind as this chapter unfolds.

One of the first stories in *Das Vermächtnis Kains*, *Venus im Pelz* opens like a series of Chinese boxes. Each 'box' or scene contains recurring motifs: paintings, furs, mirrors, statues, fires, and whips. The narrator of the framing narrative is an anonymous male friend of the main story's male protagonist. The opening pages describe a conversation held in a cosy study with a marble statue of Venus wrapped in furs. 'You northerners take love too earnestly, too seriously. You talk about duties, when all that should count is pleasure,' chides the stone Venus (4/9-10). 'But you cannot deny that in your serene and sunny world man and woman are natural-born enemies as much as in our foggy world ... [and that] the person who doesn't know how to subjugate will all too quickly feel the other's foot on the nape of his neck,' answers the narrator (5/11). The narrator continues, admitting that, 'nothing excites a man more than the sight of a beautiful, voluptuous, and cruel female despot who capriciously changes her favourites, reckless and rollicking' [*es gibt für den Mann nichts, das ihn mehr reizen könnte, als das Bild einer schönen, wollüstigen und grausamen Despotin, welche ihre Günstlinge übermütig und rücksichtslos nach Laune wechselt*] (6/12).

This encounter reveals itself to be a dream. The narrator has fallen asleep over a book by the German philosopher Georg Hegel.¹ As the narrative continues, the opening scene reveals itself as a strange after-effect of the main story, prefiguring *and* echoing what follows. This becomes clear when the narrator goes to visit his friend – the principle 'masochist', Severin von Kusiemski – and there recounts his dream. A portrait of Severin with a whip-wielding woman hangs in Severin's room. When the narrator notices this picture, he cries "Venus in Furs! ... That was how I saw her in my dreams". Severin answers, "So did I ... except I dreamed my dream with open eyes" [*habe ich meinen Traum mit offenen Augen geträumt*] (8/16). This is Severin's cue to present the narrator with a manuscript. The manuscript, the first person account of Severin's *Confessions of a Suprasensual Man* [*Bekenntnisse eines Übersinnlichen*] (10/19) then takes over the narrative.

¹ The significance of Hegel's book – *Phänomenologie des Geistes (Phenomenology of Spirit, 1807)* should not be underestimated when approaching *Venus im Pelz*. It assumes a privileged position at the beginning of the text and serves to position the novel and its fascination with slavery and mastery within a philosophical framework which viewed society and history in a significantly different way from that of eighteenth-century optimism.

These *Confessions* relate the unusual relationship that develops between Severin and a young, rich, widow, Wanda von Dunajew. Their story begins in the Eastern margins of the Austrian Empire at an anonymous spa town in the Carpathian mountains. Severin admits to being ‘nothing more than a dilettante’ [‘*als ein Dilettant*’] in all the arts, and indeed, life (11/21), and gives no reasons for being at the spa town, only that he lodges in a secluded house, seeing nobody and being seen by nobody (11/21). Unlike Sade’s ageing libertines, this character is young. There is no suggestion of either criminal past or criminal predilections and, in contrast to the libertines’ assured mastery over all they do, Severin appears to be cast adrift in a world of uncertainty.

This is not to say that Severin and Sade’s libertines do not share common traits. Although not a judge, banker, or clergyman, Severin is a wealthy aristocrat of his time. In Severin’s case this means he is educated in ancient and modern sciences, ‘chemistry, alchemy, literature, astronomy, philosophy, law, anatomy, and history’ (7/15), a voracious reader of a wide range of texts (‘Homer, Virgil, Ossian, Schiller, Goethe, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Voltaire, Molière, the Koran, the Cosmos, Casanova’s memoirs’) (33/55) and follower of the ‘thermometer, barometer, aerometer, hydrometer’ as much as the philosophies of ‘Hippocrates, Hufeland, Plato, Kant’ (7/15). Like Sade’s libertines, time, career, and money are no object for Severin, and, like the libertines, this privileged nineteenth-century man harbours unusual desires. Yet, Severin’s desire differs from the Duc’s. Where the Duc declares that ‘the idea of evil’ is the source of the libertines’ sexual arousal and satisfaction (*120 Days*, 363-64), Severin desires the ‘tortured bliss of worshipping ... of being the slave of a beautiful female tyrant’ (14/26), ‘*To be the slave of a woman, a beautiful woman, whom I love, whom I worship*’ [‘*Der Sklave eines Weibes, eines schönen Weibes zu sein, das ich liebe, das ich anbete!*’] (37/62), especially a woman clad in furs ‘like Catherine the Great’ [‘*wie ... die Große Katharina*’] (60/99).

At this point, Severin encounters Wanda von Dunajew. A young widow, Wanda is frequently described in terms of predatory animals: ‘a wild beast, a female bear’ (67/112), ‘lioness’ (96/163). Her hair falls unrestrained, red like the flames of consuming passion and like the decaying beauty of the leaves that form the novella’s autumnal setting. With her eyes, ‘diabolical’ or ‘consuming’ (27/47), her luxuriant fur coats, high leather boots and mocking laughter, Severin sees her as his ideal female tyrant and he tries to convince her to accept the role. After much persuasion, Wanda agrees to transform Severin’s fantasies into reality. She assumes the role of the ‘cruel, Nordic, Venus in Furs’ (54/89). Only too pleased to comply, Severin fulfils his desire to be her slave. At Wanda’s command the couple leave the Carpathian resort and travel by train across Austro-Hungary, via the capital, Vienna, to

Florence. At his mistress's request, Severin changes his name to 'Gregor' (59/98), dons Polish servant's livery (63/105), gives Wanda his fine clothes and money and waits on her hand and foot. Again, to satisfy Severin's desire ('I want your power over me to be sanctified by law, I want my life to be in your hands, I want nothing in this world to be able to protect me or save me from you') [*Ich will, daß deine Gewalt über mich durch das Gesetz geheiligt, daß mein Leben in deiner Hand ist, nichts auf dieser Welt mich vor dir schützen oder retten kann*] (50/83), Wanda employs a contract to make her the governess of Severin's destiny. The contract specifies that Severin,

commits himself, on his word of honour as a man and nobleman, to being henceforth the slave of Frau von Dunajew ... As the slave of Frau von Dunajew he is to ... unconditionally fulfil each of her wishes, obey each of her orders, show submissiveness to his Mistress ... Frau von Dunajew may punish her slave as she sees fit for the slightest oversight or offence, she also has the right to mistreat him at whim or merely as a pastime, however it happens to please her, and she even has the right to kill him if she so wishes. In short: He is her absolute property [*er ist ihr unbeschränktes Eigentum*]. (73/121-22)

The contract signed by both parties, Severin legally becomes 'her absolute property'. In return, Wanda whips, beats, kicks, ties up, verbally abuses and humiliates him. Frequently another male admirer of Wanda circles at the margins of their relationship. At one point, this figure – a German artist – exhibits masochistic tendencies. More often the admirer is a 'true man' competing for Wanda's affections. In Florence, an androgynous Greek officer, a cruel 'man like a woman' [*Es ist ein Mann wie ein Weib*] (100/170) called Alexis Papadopolis assumes the third party role.

Alexis is the most sexually ambiguous figure in this novel full of ambiguity. In the sentence quoted above, Sacher-Masoch makes this ambiguity explicit by referring to Alex as 'it' (*es*): '*Es ist ein Mann wie ein Weib*'. Moreover, Alexis has unusual cross-dressing predilections: 'He would change his coquettish attire four or five times a day, like a vain courtesan. In Paris he had appeared first in women's garb [*Frauenkleidern*], and the men had showered him with love letters' [*bestürmten ihn mit Liebesbriefen*] (100/170).

From the very beginning of their relationship, as much as Severin expresses his wish for a dominating woman, Wanda desires 'a total man' [*ein voller Mann*] a man who commands my respect, who subjugates me with the power of who and what he is' [*der mich durch die Gewalt seines Wesens unterwirft*] (26/45). In the dominating Greek, Wanda finds *her* master (although, considering his ambiguous sexuality, he is an unconventional 'total man'). She becomes indifferent to Severin's slavish fawning. Severin attempts suicide

by drowning. He fails and confronts Wanda. Wanda confesses that, all along, she has been playing the role he desired; in reality she loves him and wants to be his wife. 'Gregor' becomes Severin again and consents to one last session of cruelty. Bound hand and foot, Severin is (not unpleasantly) surprised to find himself at the mercy of, not Wanda, but Alexis Papadopolis. Alexis whips Severin who suddenly undergoes a reversal in his desires. 'Apollo [the Greek] lashed the poetry out of me' proclaims Severin, '... it was like awakening from a dream' [*Mir war es, wie das Erwachen aus einem Traum*] (117/200). After months of convincing Wanda to satisfy his suprasensual desires and a lifetime desiring to be 'a slave to a beautiful female tyrant', the novella concludes with Severin's declaration that he has been 'cured' of his suprasensual predilections. This gives an almost explicit invitation to apply a psychoanalytic reading to his story: 'The therapy was cruel but radical. The main thing is: I am healed' [*ich bin gesund geworden*] (119/203). Wanda and Alexis leave Florence. Alone, Severin considers adventure in the army or the imperial colonies of Asia or Algiers (117/201). Instead, he returns to his ancestral home to care for his ailing father. His father dies; Severin replaces him as the wealthy landowner and, whipping his female servants accordingly, he proclaims that 'you have to train women' (9/18). Meanwhile, we learn from a letter which Wanda sends Severin some time after their adventure that she has ceded her role as the cruel Venus to Alexis. She is subservient towards her new master and assumes, for a while at least, the more acceptable nineteenth-century role of passive femininity – until the reader learns that a few years later Alexis dies and Wanda becomes a prostitute in Paris.

'As soon as we read Masoch,' writes Deleuze, 'we become aware that his universe has nothing to do with that of Sade'¹ and Carol Siegel observes that 'The usefulness of distinguishing between the two [masochism and sadism] has increasingly been recognised by literary critics in the last few years'.²

In terms of plot it may indeed appear that the two writers have little in common (and in terms of psychoanalysis it may be important to distinguish between sadistic and masochistic drives). In terms of certain levels of obscenity too, their books are vastly different.³ After all, Severin willingly assumes the position of the powerless. In contrast, the

¹ Deleuze, *Coldness*, 13.

² Siegel, *Masochism*, 30. Gaylyn Studlar, *In The Realm of Pleasure* (Urbana and Chicago: Illinois University Press, 1988) provides another example of a study which strictly differentiates between sadistic drives and the motifs and themes of Sade's writing and masochism and the themes of Sacher-Masoch's.

³ Deleuze, *Coldness*, 17: 'The nature of their obscenity [is] strikingly different'.

victims in Sade's narratives are not complicit in their ordeals and desire neither pain nor subjugation. Furthermore, just as Severin's quest to become the ultimate slave is a long way from the libertines' obsessive desire for sin, the events of Severin's *Confession* are a far cry from the debauchery of *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*. Although, as in Sade's theatre of obscenity, her natural reproductive function has no place in Severin's story, Wanda cannot accurately be conflated with the powerful women in Sade. Juliette and the libertine storytellers are corrupt and debauched women. Unlike Wanda, they do not need convincing to be cruel; they embrace crime, 'perversion', and violence as a means to climb social hierarchy and further their own means through privilege, injustice, and hypocrisy. Further differences between Sade's work and Sacher-Masoch's are not difficult to find. One could point to the fact that, in Sade's novels, there are no 'relationships' between the sadistic libertine and his/her victims. In Sade's work daughters feel no remorse for killing their parents, wives their husbands, husbands their wives, and parents their children. There exists an alliance of domination that the libertine brotherhood shares over weaker masses. The roles of the protagonists are static: the victims *always* remain subservient to the libertines' will. In contrast, intimacy and emotions – love, envy, happiness, depression – in both victim and 'Master' or 'Mistress' are significant aspects of Sacher-Masoch's 'masochistic' narrative. It is also important to note that this central relationship is often triadic: Wanda, Severin and the Greek; Wanda, Severin and (at one point) a Russian Prince; Wanda, Severin and the German artist. Wanda, the dominant woman, becomes dominated; Severin, a privileged man becomes a 'slave' then a 'Master'; the Greek sometimes dresses like a man, sometimes like a woman. Finally, of course, *Venus im Pelz* lacks the vulgar language and obscene descriptions which have made Sade's work notorious.

Yet, *Venus im Pelz*, like Sade's novels, mixes sex with violence; at its core *are* many of the same motifs as *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*: bodies, violence and personal behaviour anathema to accepted, 'normal', 'healthy' and 'pure' standards of conduct. Focusing on the differences between the work of these two writers risks overlooking important similarities. It is, I suggest, the similarities that open the way to locating and reading *Venus im Pelz*'s obscenity.

As a story of seduction and sexual satisfaction *Venus im Pelz* shows the influence of the European erotic tradition. Like *Thérèse philosophe* and others (including, as we have seen, aspects of Sade's first novel), Severin's story presents itself as a written 'Confession' which assumes an air of 'real' authority: 'The following text is compiled from my journal of that period' ['*Das Folgende habe ich aus meinem damaligen Tagebuche zusammengestellt*'] (11/19) reads the *Confessions*' title page. Like *Thérèse philosophe* and *Les cent vingt*

journées de Sodome, *Venus im Pelz* also tells a story of initiation and education. In the opening dream-sequence, the narrator is referred to as a ‘good pupil’ [‘*wie gelehrig Sie waren*’] who ‘was taught’ [‘*haben mich gelehrt*’] about love by the cruel, cold, Venus (4/9). Later Severin approvingly observes that one learns so much faster ‘when it is a woman’s small, full hand [‘*eine kleine volle Frauenhand*’] that teaches the lesson’ (79/132). Perhaps following these textual markers, Deleuze too talks of the ‘masochistic “educator”’ and goes on to describe the role ‘persuasion and education’ play in the scenarios Sacher-Masoch describes.¹ Suzanne Stewart points out that (in a transformation we can see as echoing Thérèse’s or many of Sade’s female libertines, including *Juliette*) the story tells Severin’s maturation from naive dilettante to successful gentleman landowner.² In this way, *Venus im Pelz* reveals that it too belongs to the Aretino-esque tradition of teaching and learning which Peter Cryle has so carefully observed in Europe’s ‘forbidden’ books. Where *Venus im Pelz*’s originality (and notoriety) lies is in the fact that it is a man, not a woman, who is being educated. In relation to Cryle’s findings, it is of interest to note that Cryle recognises erotic literature of the eighteenth-century as showing the gradual ‘loss of feminine erotic authority’.³ Women, notes Cryle, ‘first had the power to know and teach the art of pleasure’ which they then ‘gradually lost’ to men, who, in works like *Thérèse philosophe* are depicted as the primary educators of women.⁴ *Venus im Pelz* (and, by extension, the nineteenth-century tradition of flagellation literature which usually depicts men being punished and/or ‘educated’ by women) shows a reversal of this trend. For most of the novella, it is Wanda who trains, educates and punishes Severin. At least, that is how it appears, but the roles of male or female educator and pupil have a significance – especially in relation to Wanda and the book’s depiction of women – which I will return to below (see ‘A Truly Modern Attitude’).

As we saw in Chapter Two, themes of confession and education are significant aspects of the European erotic tradition and we have briefly established that *Venus im Pelz* displays these same themes. In Chapter Two we also saw that traditionally within the genre these themes are related to ‘forbidden’ literature’s central concerns: revelation and ‘truth’. If *Venus im Pelz* displays some of these themes – confession and education – then it is possible they contribute to the same underlying concerns. It is certainly true that, just as

¹ Deleuze, *Coldness*, 19-20.

² Stewart, *Masochism*, 74.

³ Cryle, *Geometry*, 25.

⁴ Cryle, *Geometry*, 31.

voyeurism – figured within the obscene text as revealing/seeing hidden ‘secrets’ or ‘mysteries’ – assumes a central role within Sade’s first novel and the themes of other works of forbidden literature, voyeurism appears at the core of Sacher-Masoch’s novella.

Voyeurism or, more accurately, the gaze, appears in a number of ways. On one level, just as it stood at the centre of Sade’s novel as a means of combining voyeurism and revelation with one of the etymological roots of the obscene (that which is ‘off the stage for the purpose of public decency’) we find within *Venus im Pelz* the repeated motif of the theatre.

Venus im Pelz is full of references to sight and to theatres (the two are linked: the theatre involves audience, spectators, and display), role-playing and theatricality. On one level there are the literal theatres which Wanda attends in Florence – Teatro della Pergola (79/133) and the Teatro Nicolini (98/167) and the ‘actress’ Severin has previously had a relationship with (34/56). There are also multiple references to the German novelist and dramatist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (and frequent reference to his play, *Faust*) the Russian dramatist and novelist Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol (1809-52), and the seventeenth-century French comic dramatist Molière (1622-73) (10/26). On another level there are the novel’s multiple references to theatricality and theatrical gesturing: Severin mentions his ‘theatrical posture’ [‘*meiner theatralischen Attitude*’] (104/178) and other characters use ‘theatrical gesture[s]’ (65 and 69/108 and 116). Severin’s *Confessions* also appear framed by theatrical reference: at the beginning with an epigraph from Goethe’s *Faust* and, in its opening lines reference to Gogol and Molière (‘Gogol, the Russian Molière says – indeed where?’) (10/20) to its climax with the entrance of the ‘villain’, Alex Papadopolis, making his theatrical entrance through the net curtains of Wanda’s canopy bed (114/195). Furthermore, within the story, Alex’s rather comical climactic entrance is not the only moment when a character assumes the role of an actor. Severin refers to his entire tale as ‘the most interesting drama [‘*das interessanteste Drama*’] of my life’. At one point Wanda congratulates Severin by saying, as if to an actor that, ‘You’ve played your part splendidly [‘*du hast deine Rolle herrlich gespielt*’]. I was delighted’ (66/111).

To a large extent, role-playing is part of the world of desire and violence which Sacher-Masoch portrays. Costumes and other props contribute to the story’s theatrical atmosphere: regal Russian furs and a whip aid in a process of identity-transformation by endowing their bearer with despotic status and power (35/59). Consequently, for most of the narrative, Wanda wears these symbols. During the climactic beating of Severin by Alexis, the furs and whip are passed to Alexis (116/197-98). At this moment, with the ‘props’ of power passed to Alexis he becomes the master of both Severin and Wanda. On another

occasion Severin tries on Wanda's furs. An immediate crisis occurs. "I think you enjoy wearing this fur", says Wanda to Severin, "Hand it over quick, quick! Otherwise I'll lose all sense of my rank" ['gib ihn mir, rasch, rasch, sonst verliere ich ganz das Gefühl meiner Würde'] (66/110). The androgynous Alexis Papadopolis first dresses as a woman – he had appeared in Paris 'in women's garb, and the men had stormed him with love letters' (100/170); Wanda assumes the dominant, economically and socially independent role usually reserved for nineteenth-century men then adopts the dependent, passive role conventionally held by women. Meanwhile, changing his name to 'Gregor' and donning Polish servant's livery, Severin transforms his aristocratic Austrian identity along lines of social status and nationality. At times this switching of roles threatens to abandon any sense of seriousness and erupt into a Molièrian comedy: 'I can't help smiling, indeed laughing raucously as I record my adventures' (11/20) says Severin and elsewhere, walking through Vienna wearing his Polish servant's garb, Severin admits that he feared, 'I would burst into raucous laughter at any moment' ['ich jede Sekunde in lautes Lachen auszubrechen fürchtete'] (68/114).

Such theatricality has drawn comments from various critics. Anne McClintock talks of sadomasochism as 'a theatre of transformation'.¹ Gaylyn Studlar mentions the masochist's 'theatrical ritualization of fantasy' as a way for the masochist to 'control desire' and derive further satisfaction from desire's perpetual deferment.² For Gertrud Lenzer's argument 'role-playing' indicates that masochism is formed by latent/disavowed homoerotic desire.³ Anita Phillips comments on the necessity of costume for the masochistic scenario (especially boots and corsets⁴ – we can add that in *Venus im Pelz* the costumes are not limited to the 'dominatrix' figure and they include furs rather than corsets). For Suzanne Stewart masochism's theatricality and the shifting of power along lines of gender has had a significant influence on its enduring fascination: the 'theatrical aspect of masochism,' writes Stewart, 'as well as its reversal of gender roles ... has contributed to the renewed interest in masochism today'.⁵ As previously noted, we can add that this motif of theatricality provides a link to the theatre of obscenity in *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*: recall the frequent

¹ McClintock, *Imperial*, 143.

² Studlar, *Pleasure*, 70.

³ Gertrud Lenzer, 'On Masochism: A Contribution to the History of a Phantasy and Its Theory,' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1:2 (1975): 310. 'The relation of one man to another man seems to be the dominant wish, the fulfilment of which is pursued in most of Sacher-Masoch's work,' she writes (312).

⁴ Phillips, *Masochism*, 100-101.

⁵ Stewart, *Masochism*, 2.

role-playing in the storyteller's stories (prostitutes who pretend to be virgins; libertines who fake executions of thieves played by actors), not to mention the stage/theatre at the centre of Silling and the costumes the captive audience wear. In Sade's first novel the stage became a place of obscenity, a literalisation of obscene as that which is kept 'off the stage' or 'off the scene' firmly placed *on* the stage.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the obscenity Sade arrayed on and around the theatre of Silling was multilayered and multiform. A significant aspect of that obscenity was its excess: an over spilling of boundaries including nearly every socially acceptable duality: food and excreta, vagina and anus, man and woman. This recalls Kristeva's writing on the abject as that which (like the uncanny) over spills and 'disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite'.¹ In this way we begin to see where some of *Venus im Pelz's* 'loathsome' reputation lies. It appears 'on stage' as ambiguity and lack of respect for socially acceptable 'identity, system, order'.

To illustrate more of *Venus im Pelz's* 'loathsome' ambiguity it is necessary to recall that the novella's central motif is less the gaze and the proscenium arch than the gaze and the gilded frame of paintings and mirrors. Indeed, the novel could be said to be set within its own frame: that of the frame narrative which, like the voyeurs traditionally present within erotic narratives, allows the reader to see 'himself' mirrored within the text as the anonymous narrator picks up the story-within-a-story and, in the voyeuristic mode, reads Severin's private sexual adventures and fantasies.² In a more important sense – in terms of reading the text's obscenity. A prevalence of scopic imagery, including mirrors, portraits, photographs and a network of reading, windows, eyes, glances, stares, and other ways of looking (Stewart calls it 'a veritable orgy of gazes'),³ indicates the novella's preoccupation with vision. Even the book's title refers to a painting. This painting, which hangs in Severin's study, provides an example of the book's complex references to the voyeuristic and the visual arts.⁴ After relating his dream to Severin, the narrator notices the painting *Venus im Pelz* on Severin's wall. This painting inspired the narrator's dream. The dream, in other words, is a distorted copy, reflection, or reproduction of the painting. Severin directs

¹ Kristeva, *Powers*, 4.

² Cf. Siegel, *Masochism*, 57 who talks of the 'internal reader' in *Venus im Pelz*.

³ Stewart, *Masochism*, 84.

⁴ Stewart, *Masochism*, 62-3. Stewart notes that 'Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* is a story about the *Augenblick*.' *Augenblick* is a word with a dual meaning in German and it recurs with great frequency throughout the novella. It means, as Stewart points out, 'both the gaze and ... the moment'. Stewart sees this 'moment' presented in the novel as time captured in pictures.

the narrator's attention to the painting hanging opposite *Venus im Pelz*. This painting is 'an excellent copy of Titian's renowned *Venus with Mirror* in the Dresden gallery' (8/16). It was this, says Severin, which provided the inspiration for the *Venus im Pelz* portrait. Appropriately the two pictures (the copy of a Titian and the painting inspired by the Titian) mirror each other by hanging on opposite walls. In turn, the reproduction of Titian's picture is an imaginary representation (a reproduction) of the Goddess of Love wrapped in furs, looking at her reflection in a mirror. This is only the beginning of a sequence of reflections, reproductions, and shifting associations which occur around the motif of 'Venus in Furs'. It emerges, for example, that the marble statue which infatuates Severin at the beginning of his story is also a reproduction ('the original, I believe, is in Florence') (8/16). Later, Severin is thrilled when a Jewish dealer acquires for him a photograph of Titian's *Venus with a Mirror* (13/25) – the same Titian a reproduction of which later hangs on Severin's wall. In due course, Severin writes a poem entitled 'Venus in Furs' and Wanda, modelling herself on Severin's photograph of *Venus with a Mirror*, calls herself 'Venus in Furs' (21/36).

The above example illustrates that in the novella 'mirroring' includes reproducing the 'real' and rendering it into an aesthetic copy. Indeed, recalling the walls of Silling's storytelling chamber, mirrors of all sorts abound in *Venus im Pelz*. These mirrors include a plethora of 'real' mirrors but at one point even a meadow is said to shine 'smooth as a mirror' [*'wie ein Spiegel'*] (15/28). Mirrors hang on the walls of rooms where Severin and Wanda meet (41/68, 65/109, 91/154) and, fusing the novella's motifs of mirroring and *Augenblick* – seeing and capturing the moment or image – at one stage a mirror captures an image of Severin and his mistress, 'as if in a painting' (91/154). An infatuated German artist commits this image to canvas and in doing so turns the elusive reflection into a 'real' painting. Having the same suprasensual desires as Severin, in exchange for a taste of Wanda's whip, the artist paints Wanda and Severin in the style of the Venetian school (i.e. Titian). The artist names his picture '*Venus im Pelz*' (93/158). In this way, through a series of echoes and reflections we return, full-circle, to the painting hanging in Severin's study and the narrator's dream told in a book that is in turn called *Venus im Pelz*.

From this account of the visual in Sacher-Masoch's novella, it becomes evident that the voyeurism – the gaze – which it depicts, is not clear-sighted. Sight is central but it is not in the unhindered form of, for example, Madame Duclos's spyhole at the brothel or Thérèse's hidden vantage point from which she learns the secret goings-on between Father Dirrag and Eradice (see Chapter Two, 'To Reveal Secrets Which Ought To Be Sunk In Obscurity').

Throughout *Venus im Pelz*, the gaze is attacked: blurred, distorted, and blinded. The aforementioned mirroring provides one example: reflections, of course, produce an inverted rather than 'true' image; sight is deceived. Additionally, from the opening dream narrative to Wanda's description of Severin as 'dreaming with open eyes' (10/16) to the various dreams and daydreams experienced by Severin (67-68/112-113, 80/134, 106/181) until, at one point, he asks 'what had I experienced and what had I merely dreamed?' (43/72), what Severin actually 'sees' is repeatedly questioned. On the one hand this questioning occurs through the over spilling of dream and fantasy into reality. Throughout *Venus im Pelz* dreams overwhelm a bourgeois nineteenth-century reality of spa towns, villas, operas, and train stations to the extent that even these surroundings assume a dream-like ambivalence. Severin's description of the Carpathian resort is typical: 'The house I was staying in was located in a kind of park or forest or wilderness – whatever one wishes to call it' (12/21). As Michael Finke asks, *is it a park? A forest? Or a wilderness? Wild nature or its aesthetic reproduction?*¹ On the other hand the veracity of what is seen is questioned through the aforementioned role-playing: Alex deceived his admirers into thinking he is a woman; Severin deceives others into thinking he is a Polish slave. *Venus im Pelz* suggests that sight is easily deceived and little is as it seems. Finally, and most explicitly however, amidst the novella's questioning of the gaze is the trope of blindness.

Unlike the explicit violation of flesh found on the stage of Silling, violence in *Venus im Pelz* is muted – it is *not* the case, as Siegel strangely asserts that Severin is 'beaten unconscious repeatedly throughout *Venus in Furs*'.² (In fact, Severin faints only once and this is not due to being beaten but the effect of an over-emotional encounter with Wanda) (45/75-76). Indeed, despite its reputation, Severin's flagellation is related only six times (thrice by Wanda, once by Wanda's African slaves, once by Alex and once Severin recollects the experience at the hands of his Aunt Sobol) and even on these occasions this violence carries a certain dreaminess (Deleuze notes that 'The body of the victim remains in a strange state of indeterminacy').³ This is unlike the raw immediacy of Sade's descriptions (recall 'the Duc thrust his hand into her cunt and cuts through the membrane dividing the anus from the vagina'). Yet for all this *Venus im Pelz* maintains a sense of violence and impending death far in excess of its apparently small amount of explicitly violent content.

¹ Michael C. Finke, 'Sacher-Masoch, Turgenev and Other Russians,' *One Hundred Years of Masochism: Literary Texts, Social and Cultural Context*, eds. Michael C. Finke and Carl Neikerk (Amsterdam and Atlanta: GA, 2000), 127.

² Siegel, *Masochism*, 57.

³ Deleuze, *Coldness*, 26.

This is because the novella's violence is present(ed) in a more pervasive and less immediate fashion.

On the one hand, the violation of flesh is presented in more culturally 'respectable' forms. We find *Venus im Pelz* presenting flesh and its violation through cultured, that is to say mythological, aesthetic, and biblical reference. Apollo's flaying of Marsyas (96, 116/164, 198), Brunhilde's hunting of King Gunther (36/60), Dionysus 'who broiled the inventor of the iron bull in his own invention in order to see whether his wailing, his death rattle actually sounded like the bellowing of a bull' (40/67), all feature as do stories of the Christian martyrs who 'were roasted on grills, were shot through by arrows, boiled in pitch, thrown to wild beasts, nailed to crosses' [*auf den Rost gelegt, mit Pfeilen durchschossen, in Pech gesotten, wilden Tieren vorgeworfen, an das Kreuz geschlagen wurden*] (36/60) and the biblical tale of Judith who seduces and then beheads the enemy general, Holofernes (14, 117/26, 200). Among these examples, another gains a place of particular importance. Mentioned in the story three times, it also appears as a painting on the ceiling of Wanda's bedroom from where it oversees the signing of Severin's contract and his final whipping by Alex: this is the legend of Samson and Delilah (Judges 16). Not only does its appearance at axiomatic points in the plot emphasise its significance and not only is it an instance of a kind of displaced violence within the novel; this story also fuses the novella's central themes of art and the gaze/sight, or more importantly, destroyed sight. In this picture (as in the legend) Samson is about to be blinded by the Philistines ('her eyes [Delilah's], half closed, encountered Samson's eyes, which, in their final seeing, still clung to hers ... one of the foes was already kneeling on Samson's chest, about to blind him with the red-hot poker' [*ihm das glühende Eisen hineinzustoßen*] (74/124). That the violent events of this scene present another form of mirroring – a mirroring of Severin's relationship to Wanda – is evinced on the most obvious level by the fact that Delilah, like Wanda, appears with red hair. Yet, this particular scene is more than a mirroring of the protagonists or a form of displaced violence. Working from this image of the blinded Samson leads us to a far wider number of themes which in turn enables us to approach the 'dirt' – and some of the obscenity – of the novel. The clue lies in Sacher-Masoch's choice of words.

The word Sacher-Masoch uses to describe the Samson and Delilah picture is significant – or at least, it gains a great deal of significance fifty years later and this significance is crucial in pinning down the story's obscenity. In the most recent English translation, Severin describes the painting as having 'a strange, for me downright sinister, complexion' (74). The word Sacher-Masoch uses contains the connotation of 'sinister' but more precisely the word is *unheimlich*: *für mich geradezu unheimliches Gepräge gab*

(123). The sentence could be more accurately rendered as a strange ‘for me downright uncanny aura’ (*Gepräge* meaning ‘character’ in the sense of ‘atmosphere’ or ‘aura’). In other words, the picture is not just ‘downright sinister’, in the German it is literally ‘unhomely’ or ‘uncanny’. This is the significant point: Sacher-Masoch’s word ‘*unheimlich*’ is precisely that used by Freud in his essay, ‘The “Uncanny”’: ‘*Das Unheimliche*’. Sacher-Masoch’s ‘uncanny’ provides a direct link forwards to Freud’s ‘Uncanny’ essay and not simply on the level of word alone. Indeed, it seems to me that not just the fresco but the novella in its entirety is imbued with an ‘uncanny aura’.

Venus im Pelz is uncanny on multiple levels. As it did in relation to Sade’s work (Chapter Two, ‘Horrors Of Such Absolute Filthiness’), the uncanny leads us into the realm of the obscene. There is, as established earlier (Chapter One, ‘The Psychology of Obscenity’) a great deal of similarity between the operation of obscenity and the uncanny. The responses they evoke are similar and their threatening nature derives from an identical source: death. As we have seen, much of what attracts accusations of obscenity also features in Freud’s essay as a source of the uncanny and in future chapters we will find that the uncanny is a ubiquitous component of obscene narratives. In keeping with these findings, while it is commonly regarded as the original ‘masochistic masterpiece’¹ (pace Krafft-Ebing), the novella appears to me just as much if not more, a masterpiece of the uncanny. The Samson and Delilah image depicts these themes on a miniature canvas; the events and themes of the novella as a whole copy and recopy them. Both the obscene and the uncanny (and although I am leaving it out of the discussion to avoid repetition, Kristeva’s abject) exhibit a curious twin dynamic of fear and fascination and denial. What Freud ascribes to the uncanny recalls two of the suggested etymological roots of the obscene. Firstly there is the correlation between Freud’s reference to the uncanny as ‘the uncanny harbinger of death’² and one of the Latinate origins of the obscene as something ‘ill-omened’. Secondly, the uncanny has similarities to the etymological definition of the obscene as something placed on the stage – as Freud asserts, the uncanny involves revealing what is usually ‘Concealed, kept from sight, so that others do not get to know of or about it’.³ In short, Severin’s story disturbs, unsettles, threatens, and attracts comments such as Anita Phillips’s ‘loathsome’ because it is uncanny, because it ‘shows’ what it should not, and is, at heart ill-omened (discussed more in ‘A Truly Modern Attitude’).

¹ Larry Wolff, ‘Introduction,’ *Venus in Furs* by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), viii.

² Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’, 357.

³ Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’, 344.

Another specific link to Freud's uncanny is the act of blinding depicted in the painting. In Freud's Oedipal drama blinding is symbolic of castration and the fear induced by castration anxiety (as Freud writes, 'anxiety about one's eyes, the fear of going blind, is often enough a substitute for the dread of being castrated').¹ As a symbol of castration the threat of blinding features prominently in Freud's essay. There it stands alongside other forms of physical violation as a source of the uncanny's threatening nature. Recall Freud's words: 'dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist ... all these have something peculiarly uncanny about them'.² Regarding the castration complex, Freud adds, 'the castration complex ... [is one of] the factors which turn something frightening into something uncanny'.³ As we have seen, however, within *Venus im Pelz* blindness in various forms is not limited to the act depicted in the Samson and Delilah picture. Forging a link between Samson and Severin we find that Severin too is described as blind. At one point Wanda talks of Severin's 'insane blindness' [*wahnsinniger Verblendung*] (75/127). Again, Sacher-Masoch's choice of word is significant: *blendung* means blinding as in being dazzled by something bright and the line could be more accurately translated as 'blinding/dazzling madness' – these connotations reflect the red-hot poker of the Philistines.⁴ Furthermore, in German *blendung* carries connotations of 'blinding' when blinding occurs as a form of punishment; once again this returns us to the Samson picture (if not, of course, to Freud's castration complex). Severin's blindness, however, is more usually figurative. Thus, although Stewart points out that, compared to Samson, Severin's eyes remain 'open' ('while Severin sees, Samson is blinded'),⁵ as we saw earlier, Severin's sight is not clear. He is, in this sense, (at least partially) blind. On one level this distortion of vision occurs amid the novella's paintings and mirrors but paintings and mirrors introduce another of Freud's uncanny motifs: the 'double'.

For Freud, 'the phenomenon of the "double"' is another source of the uncanny. Freud mentions the "double" in terms of dolls, 'reflections in mirrors, with shadows, with

¹ Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', 352.

² Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', 366.

³ Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', 365.

⁴ *Blendung* is also the adjective used in German to talk of a 'blinding revelation'. This meaning has resonance in the next chapter on Bataille's *Histoire de l'oeil*.

⁵ Stewart, *Masochism*, 87. See also 78-81 on the gaze and masochism which provides some discussion of the visual, blindness and the uncanny in *Venus im Pelz*. It could be said that, in the novella, Samson is not actually blinded. Such an argument ignores the well-known 'facts' of the myth.

guardian spirits'¹ so, in the mirrors which fill the novella, Severin is confronted with his double – and not just Severin but, as we have seen, at one time or another, most characters catch their double framed in a mirror: even the Venus in Severin's copy of Titian's *Venus with Mirror* peers at her reflection. Thus, within these mirrors, portraits, and reflections, we find more than a representation of the distortion of vision; we find another uncanny motif. The same is true when we return to one of the other, figurative, ways in which Severin's blindness is portrayed.

Severin's sight, blurred by dreams, cannot be trusted. 'I dreamed my dream,' asserts Severin, 'with open eyes' (8/16), Wanda talks of him as 'dreaming with open eyes' (10/16), he can't distinguish between a park and a forest, he has visions of Wanda floating, like Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, above the waters of the Arno (106/181). For him statues too seemingly come alive (13/24-25). Like the novella's mirrors these dreamy visions introduce yet another uncanny motif. 'An uncanny effect,' writes Freud, 'is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolises'.² Thus, every time Severin's dreams overwhelm reality they induce an uncanny effect: when the statue of Venus appears to come alive and when Wanda assumes the role of Severin's dream ideal, the uncanny confronts Severin (and the reader). Consider the moment when he believes the statue of Venus has come alive:

I was walking along a garden path leading to the house when I abruptly saw – separated from me only by the green gallery of trees [*'die grüne Galerie'*] – a female figure, white as stone, shining in the moonlight. I felt as if the beautiful marble woman had taken pity on me and had come alive and followed me. But then I was seized with a nameless dread [*'eine namenlose Angst'*]. (13/24-5)

Not only is this moment aestheticised – 'a green gallery' is hardly a conventional metaphor for trees – but as the boundaries between fantasy and reality are blurred, the uncanny comes into play. Confronted with his fantasy, with the uncanny animation of the inanimate, Severin is overcome by the uncanny's 'nameless dread'. What does he find so fearful, so threatening? On one level dissolution – dissolution of the boundaries and order dividing the

¹ Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', 356.

² Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', 367.

inanimate and the animate, life from death – and, on another, the dissolution of life. This latter point may require some explanation.

Ultimately, as has been discussed, man's ambivalent fear of death underpins the uncanny, the abject and the profoundly disturbing effect of the obscene. It is in relation to the 'double' that Freud talks of the uncanny as 'a harbinger of death'.¹ In the mirrors and the paintings which fill Severin's world, we find an effacement of the boundaries between reality and fantasy. This ambiguity extends to 'fixed' social determiners such as power, class status, gender, nationality, the aesthetic and the real, the wild and the tame. Ambiguity is part of the domain of the obscene and it confronts Severin with the fragility of his bourgeois world. Each time he gazes into a mirror, confronting his 'double', distorting his perception, blurring reality and illusion, Severin is confronted with an uncanny source of 'unnameable fear' and the awareness of his mortal fragility. At the moment when he sees his and Wanda's reflection in a mirror, this connection between confronting the 'double' and death becomes explicit: "“This splendour of the body,”” says Severin, gazing at the reflection, ““is appalling and afflicts me with all the horrors of death, of annihilation”” (91/154).

As expected from the ambivalent fear evoked by the uncanny and the obscene Severin's 'unnameable fear' of death is not pure horror. Embodying the tension within the subject which Freud depicts as repulsion of the morbid matched by the attraction wrought by the death-instinct and the subject's inner compulsion to '*restore an earlier state of things*,'² Severin's 'unnameable fear' contains attraction. Although he experiences 'profound horror' at the sight of the 'suicide note' Wanda has written for him (73/122), whenever Severin is confronted by the uncanny his horror is tempered by fascination. 'I was both delighted and horrified' he admits, remembering the appearance of the animated statue (14/22). He reads *The Legends of the Martyrs* 'with a horror that was actually delight' [*'einem Grauen das eigentlich Entzücken war'*] (36/60), Wanda's 'cruelty filled me with delight' [*'Ihre Grausamkeit erfüllt mich mit Entzücken'*] (43/73) and he describes his 'sweet horror' [*'süßem Grauen'*] (53/88) after Wanda says 'If you were whipped to death, your gaze would have to be wonderful as you breathed your last' (53/88).

Just as Sade's libertines enact the disavowed attraction of the obscene, so Severin challenges conventional behaviour by acting on the death-driven attraction of the uncanny. He makes conscious and explicit an inner urge towards death. His desires dangerously admit

¹ Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', 357.

² Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', 308-309. (Freud's emphasis). See also Chapter One, 'The Psychology of Obscenity'.

a fascination for the repulsive, the urge to regress and the pleasure it brings. Often the uncanny and the obscene are fused: ““You are attracted by what other people are repulsed by?”” wonders Wanda (30/50). She could be referring quite explicitly to the operation of the obscene: a force which repulses and horrifies yet also attracts. On other occasions it is fear of punishment (but, at its core, fear of death) which gives Severin his *unheimlich* feeling. At one point, for example, the sight of Wanda’s whip leaves Severin feeling (according to the translator) ‘somewhat queasy’ (39), while in German the feeling is the more complex ‘uncanny’: ‘*es mich etwas unheimlich beschlich*’ (66). The same occurs later in the novel when Severin says that ‘There was something eerie about her [Wanda’s violent] treatment of me’ (57). In the German, ‘eerie’ is, once again, ‘*Unheimlich*’: ‘*Diese Liebenswürdigkeit, mit der sie mich behandelt, hat etwas Unheimliches für mich*’ (94). That Severin desires punishment illustrates once more his conscious movement towards the domain of uncanny horror, towards, in other words, the obscene.

Further in keeping with its uncanny themes, the female is at the centre of the novel’s ‘uncanny aura’. Within *Venus im Pelz* the female body repulses most. Moreover, just as occurs in Sade’s theatre of obscenity, the female body usually appears veiled. If revealed it is a source of morbid horror: ‘During a swift movement on her [Wanda’s] part, I saw that she was wearing only the fur [coat], and I was terrified – I don’t know why – as terrified as a condemned man who knows he is heading towards the scaffold, yet starts to tremble the moment he sees it’ (89/150). As with Sade’s libertines, Severin’s is not only terror at Freud’s other central source of the uncanny – the female, or, more specifically for Freud, the female genitals – but a reaction tinged with (uncanny) fascination. As Severin admits, ‘When I was a little boy I had an enigmatic fear [mysterious shyness] of women, but that was actually an intense interest in them’ (31). Once again, the translator shifts Sacher-Masoch’s ‘uncanny’ to ‘intense interest’, losing the word’s more significant connotations. The German reads: ‘*Als kleiner Knabe zeigte ich eine rätselhafte Scheu vor Frauen, in welcher sich eigentlich nur ein unheimliches Interesse für dieselben ausdrückte*’ (52). Severin’s interest is ‘uncanny’; his shyness mysterious.

The uncanny, fear and desire, repulsion and attraction, dissolving boundaries and inauspicious reminders of death prevail throughout *Venus im Pelz*. Furthermore, a source of fear and desire, of truth (in Sade’s novel) and knowledge (Wanda appears as Severin’s educator), the female figure appears integral to uncanny reactions and, by extension and association, the obscenity of work by Sade and Sacher-Masoch. In *Venus im Pelz*, Wanda makes Severin tremble like a man sentenced to death. The following section explores this aspect of the novella and concentrates on Wanda’s ‘uncanny aura’. As we did with Sade’s

depiction of women and voyeurism, considering Wanda in this way allows us to locate her and the themes of *Venus im Pelz* within the aesthetic and cultural concerns of the period from which this novella emerged. It also allows further exploration of the novella's uncanny and obscene themes.

2. 'A Truly Modern Attitude'¹

'The furred figure of Wanda ...,' asserts Larry Wolff, 'the personification of voluptuous cruelty, was a specifically Slavic fantasy'.² In confirmation, Severin often compares Wanda to the Russian tsarina, Catherine the Great ('she reminded me intensely of Catherine the Great') (82/138). Certainly, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Catherine and the Eastern empires held a particular fascination for more 'developed', Western Europe. Indeed, as Wolff notes, Western Europe had long 'invented' its Eastern half (just as it had Africa and Asia) as 'the Orient of Europe': a place of shifting regimes and national borders which evaded the fixed certainties and categories preferred by Western Enlightenment encyclopaedists and geographers.³ Even gender-certainties were perceived as more easily effaced in the East. After all, during the reign of Catherine the Great (1729-1796), Russia had extended her empire (at the expense of Turkey, Sweden, and Poland) and established Catherine as a figure of formidable might that the West usually associated with masculine, rather than feminine, power. Furthermore, analogous to the dark continents of Africa and Asia, in the eyes of the West, Russia and the Eastern empires were places of barbaric primitivism. There the whip held particular social significance. Eighteenth-century travellers perpetuated this attitude by returning from Poland, Russia and the Eastern margins of the Habsburg Monarchy (later the Austrian and then the Austro-Hungarian Empire) with tales of despotic barons and graphically illustrated accounts (figure 3) of serfs stripped half-naked and whipped.⁴ Even Sade's work fed off and into the reputation of Catherine the

¹ 18/31. I have altered the original translation's word order from 'Truly a modern attitude', the syntax of which is odd or outdated. The German supports my preferred syntax: '*eine echt moderne Anschauung*'.

² Wolff, 'Introduction', x.

³ Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 185. Also 107-143.

⁴ Wolff, *Eastern Europe*, 50-88.

Great and barbaric Russians by having Catherine step into the story of *Juliette* (there she appears as a powerful libertine despot who enjoys keeping her subjects in slavery by liberal use of the whip, or ‘knout’) (*Juliette*, 882). Sade also specifies that Minski the giant – one of Sade’s most brutal creations – is ‘a Muscovite’ (*Juliette*, 579).

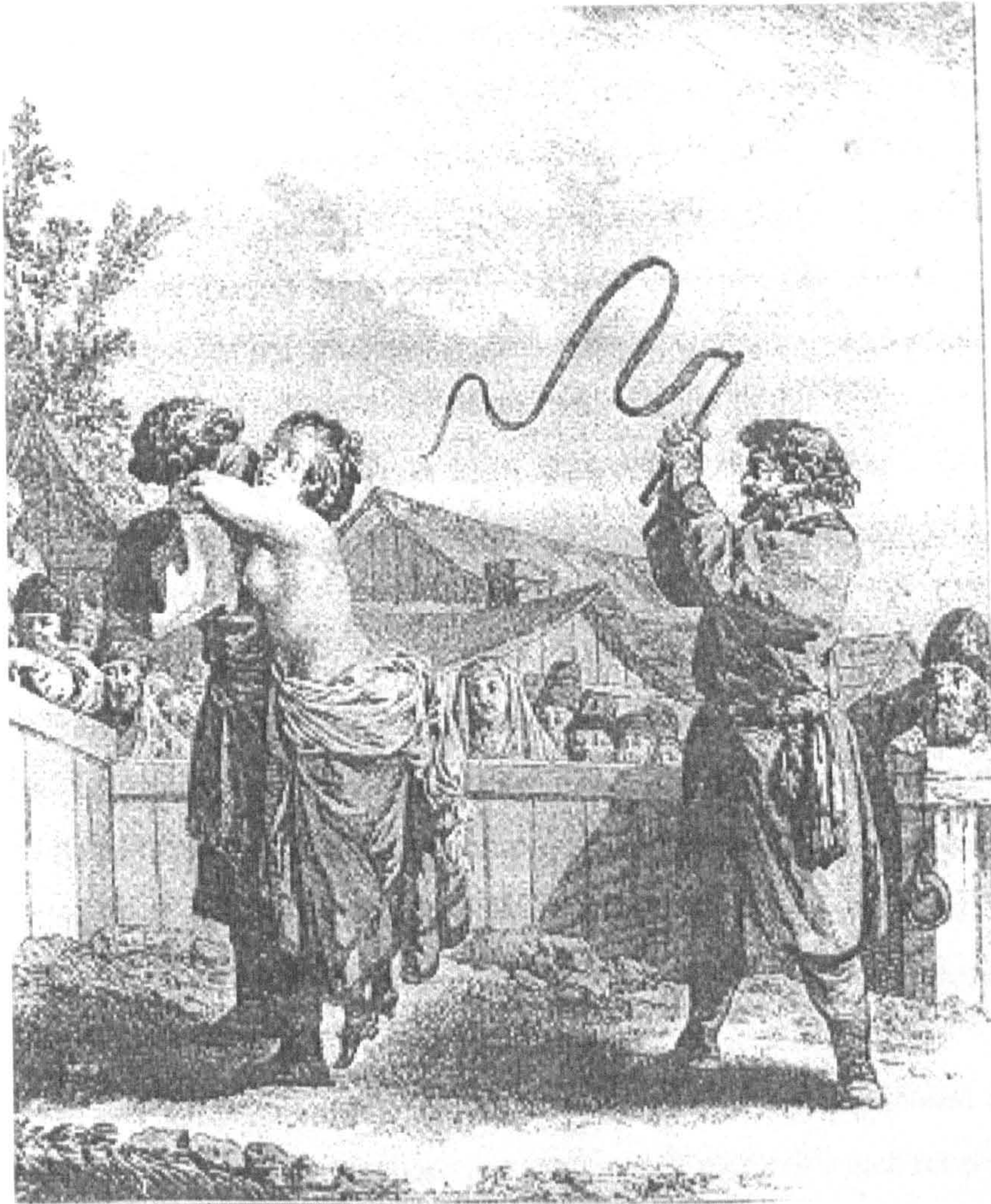


Figure 3: ‘Supplice du Knout Ordinaire’ from Chappe d’Auteroche, *Voyage en Sibirie*, Vol. 1 (Paris, 1768). Reproduced by permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Obviously such stories and images fed a certain cultural fascination, a fascination which Severin shares. Indeed, Severin’s willingness to become a woman’s property and his proclamation that he wishes ‘*to be the slave of a woman, a beautiful woman, whom I love, whom I worship ... who ties me up and whips me*’ (37/62, translator’s emphasis) – especially when the whip Wanda uses is specifically ‘the sort of whip that was used on rebellious slaves in Russia’ [‘*in der Art wie man sie in Rußland hatte für widerspenstige Sklaven*’] (39/66) must have had particular resonance in a Europe where serfdom and

slavery were very recent memories: the abolishment of serfdom in Russia officially occurred in 1861. Meanwhile, in the United States, Negro slaves were emancipated only in 1865.

Yet, as much as fantasies of Eastern Europe and powerful Slavic women inform Wanda, this is far from the only influence. As the novella's central figure – she not Severin is its eponymous protagonist – Wanda is a complex creation. Initially she might appear almost as unique in nineteenth-century literature as she would have been sweeping through the cobbled streets of Vienna. Young and financially independent, she claims that “‘I live cheerfully for pleasure and enjoyment’” (20/35). This is certainly not the role of the majority of nineteenth-century heroines who seek eligible bachelors, marry into wealth, die of heartache or disease or fade from grace to live in poverty. Even her ultimate role as ‘courtesan’ seems to be less out of necessity than a chosen career-move and one in keeping with her personal ethos of ‘pleasure’ but this, perhaps, is speculation. What can be said with certainty is that, in the ‘drama’ of Severin’s life, Wanda’s role is to reduce a white, aristocratic man to slavery. Severin seems more like a passive spectator and without her his dreams of subordination would never become ‘real’.

In fact, scholars have recently pointed out that Wanda is far from unique. I noted earlier how *Venus im Pelz* displays the influence of the erotic tradition and Wolff sees fantasies of the Eastern Empires as influencing Wanda. In addition, Suzanne Stewart observes that the novella’s frequent evocation of sculpture and painting places it squarely in the West’s artistic tradition – especially the West’s tradition of depicting Venus.¹ This is certainly the case when viewed in relation to popular paintings from the nineteenth-century ‘salons’ of France.

Walking past many of the great works of nineteenth-century art housed in the Musée d’Orsay in Paris involves encountering a number of pictures which recall aspects of Sacher-Masoch’s novella. Wanda’s paganism for example echoes in classical scenes of Roman feasts and decadence (such as Thomas Couture’s *Romans of the Decadence*, 1847). The struggle between the sexes – a theme which underpins much of *Venus im Pelz* – corresponds to Edgar Degas’s early *War Scene in the Middle Ages* (1865) where mounted noblemen shoot arrows at naked women. Of course, there is nothing unusual about naked or semi-naked women appearing in art (Chapter Five considers further the Western depiction of the female nude), so, in the same tradition we find at the Musée d’Orsay, paintings contemporary with Sacher-Masoch which depict voluptuous Roman beauties enjoying the tepidarium (Théodore Chassériau’s *The Tepidarium*, 1853), dissected women in medical

¹ Stewart, *Masochism*, 69.

demonstrations; full-frontal images of the female genitals (Gustave Corbet's *Origin of the World*, 1866); Édouard Manet's captivating *Olympia* (1863) and various portraits of alluring yet powerful-looking society women. There are also a number of 'Venuses': Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's *Venus in Paphos* (1852-53) and two called *The Birth of Venus*: Alexander Cabanel's (1863) and William Bouguereau's (1879). Each draws, as does Sacher-Masoch, on the legacy of Titian. Venus, it seems, was a popular subject at that time and, from this perspective, Severin's obsession with Titian's *Venus with a Mirror* and his pilgrimage to view the Medici *Venus* at the Tribuna (88/149) appear to be in keeping with the fashionable artistic tastes of nineteenth-century Europe.

In contrast to these beauties, although she assumes the title 'Venus' and is painted by the German artist in the style of Titian, Wanda/Venus in Furs is cruel, as well as seductive. Unlike those in the Musée d'Orsay, Sacher-Masoch rarely paints his Venus in amorous flesh tones. She is seldom naked (although Deleuze says 'We never see the naked body of the woman torturer', and it is true that Sacher-Masoch does not describe her nudity in any detail, at times Severin does see her naked (90/151-2); when he does he is either overwhelmed by her 'purity' or filled with 'uncanny' terror and fascination).¹ Instead of being vulnerable, Wanda is cloaked in furs, sports a whip and wears high boots. She assumes the role of 'the cruel Nordic Venus in furs' (54/89) and, echoing the novella's references to Goethe's *Faust*, Severin describes Wanda as a devil ('I felt as if I had been sold or had pledged my soul to the devil ... My beautiful devil' [*Mein schöner Teufel*] (63/104). She has 'murderous lips' [*ihren mörderischen Lippen*] (45/75) on multiple occasions is compared to predatory animals: 'a wild beast, a female bear' [*ein wildes Tier, eine Bäarin*] (67/112) and lionesses (96, 97/163, 164) – even her hair is described as 'tangled like a lion's red mane' (97/166). At other times, Wanda fixes Severin with a 'consuming look'² [*verzehrenden Blicke*] (27/47) with eyes which pierce him with 'diabolical green rays' [*zwei diabolische, grüne Strahlen*] (15/28).³

Yet, even in her predatory cruelty Wanda is not without precedent. Indeed, she is self-consciously aware of her place within a tradition of representation which was popular at the time. Severin's attitude towards Wanda – his mixture of fear and fascination; his regard for her as "something hostile ... something whose power over you, however, you feel as a

¹ Deleuze, *Coldness*, 26.

² Original translation reads 'consuming eyes' however the German uses *Blicke* not *Augen*.

³ Original translation reads 'green shafts' however *Strahlen* means 'rays or beams' not 'shafts'. Lenzer, 'Masochism', 296-97 notes that all Sacher-Masoch's female characters are portrayed with similar, bestial, associations.

sweet torment, a prickling cruelty,” is in Wanda’s own words “truly a modern attitude” [*‘eine echt moderne Anschauung’*] (18/32).

A number of critics have explored this ‘modern attitude’ of which Wanda speaks in terms of nineteenth-century portrayals of women as powerful and hostile. To begin with, however, it is worth noting that only certain aspects of this ‘attitude’ can be called ‘modern’. Mario Praz, for example, opens his chapter on the cruel woman in nineteenth-century literature with the words: ‘There have always existed Fatal Women both in mythology and literature’¹ and Theodor Reik, a theorist of masochism, echoes this observation by citing the Hindu Kali, the Babylonians’ Ishtar, the Syrians’ Astarte, Brunhilde, and Turandot as examples of the avatars of the masochist’s dominatrix.²

Venus im Pelz is certainly aware of its debt to earlier femmes fatale. ‘I had breakfast in my honeysuckle gazebo and read the Book of Judith,’ writes Severin, ‘and envied the grim hero Holofernes for the queenly woman who chopped his head off’ (14/26). Severin also reads Homer’s *Odyssey* and dwells on Circe, the ‘attractive sorceress who turned her worshippers into beasts’ (16/30). In addition of course, there is the painted ceiling of Wanda’s boudoir, ‘where Samson, at Delilah’s feet, was being blinded by the Philistines’ (116/198). Other women from myths and history – Catherine the Great (60/99), Brunhilde (36/60) and ‘all those women whom the pages of history have depicted as lascivious, beautiful, and violent, such as Libussa, Lucretia Borgia, Agnes of Hungary, Queen Margot, Isabeau, Sultana Roxolane, [and] the Russian tsarinas of the eighteenth century’ (37/61) – colour Severin’s obsession and Wanda’s character. Although all these women belong to distant or imaginary times, they are integral to the ‘modern attitude’ of which Wanda speaks. But how and why?

Carol Siegel points out that in art and literature the nineteenth century witnessed a shift away from the sentiments of the traditional courtly romance. In the courtly romance men (Siegel’s discussion focuses on representations of masochistic males) idealised women and this worship brought transcendence. In contrast, ‘the discourse of male masochism shifts its focus from emotions about idealised women to sexualised activities with debased, prostituted women’.³ Siegel continues, ‘Values that the courtly tradition attached to male

¹ Praz, *Romantic*, 215.

² Theodor Reik, ‘Masochism in Modern Man,’ *Of Lust and Love: On the Psychoanalysis of Romantic and Sexual Emotions* (London: Souvenir Press Ltd, 1957), 338-9.

³ Siegel, *Masochism*, 145.

masochistic acts and longings are reversed ... in these writings, male masochism promised degradation rather than [the traditional, courtly] transcendence'.¹

Chiming with Siegel's assertion of a move away from transcendence to degradation, Bram Dijkstra too shows how the nineteenth century's perception of woman underwent a significant change. In *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*, Bram Dijkstra reveals that a popular subject in European art from around the 1860s to the first decades of the twentieth century was sensuality, femininity, and power combined in depictions of semi-clad female figures. At the beginning of the century woman had primarily been represented as a household nun – pure, virtuous and chaste, bearer of empire and home (whether that empire was British, French, or Austrian). As the century progressed, images of powerful, deceitful, primitive, and sensual women – such as the mythical Amazons, Turandot, Bathsheba, Judith, and Delilah – became increasingly common. By the closing decades of the century, European artists, including Felicien Rops and Aubrey Beardsley, were turning away from portraying idealised Venuses to painting prostitutes and satisfying a particular market in portraying woman as associated with sensuality, and sensuality with death. Praz shows that a deadly fascination with (the deadly) woman was not confined to art. The Fatal Woman appeared as a central theme in the work of numerous popular writers of the time from Swinburne to Baudelaire, D'Annunzio to Mirbeau.² The one-time virtuous household nun had transformed into a Circe or Judith, powerful and/or cruel; a threat to 'civilised' man.³ Feminine sensuality and 'primitiveness' were arrayed against masculine cerebrality, progress and 'civilisation'.

Another picture from one of the salons of the day, Edouard Toudouze's *Salomé Triumphant* (ca. 1886, figure 4), illustrates this shift in the portrayal of women. Just as Sacher-Masoch was not a minor writer of his time, Edouard Toudouze was not a marginal painter; he was the winner of several gold medals, and, like Sacher-Masoch, honoured by France, the home of 'civilisation', with the French Légion d'Honneur for his services to the arts.⁴

¹ Siegel, *Masochism*, 145

² Praz, *Romantic*, 215-299.

³ Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), esp. 352-401.

⁴ James Cleugh, *The First Masochist: A Biography of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (1836-1895)* (London: Anthony Blond, 1967), 181.



Figure 4: Edouard Toudouze, *Salomé Triumphant* (black and white detail), ca. 1886.

Toudouze's painting shows a nubile Salomé reclining coquettishly on a throne. Her head is garlanded with flowers. Recalling pagan rites and primitivism, Salomé's throne is covered in Celtic patterns and the pelts of animals. She too wears – as Wanda does when being

Severin's mistress – the skin of an animal. In this painting, Salomé rests her head against that of a carved predatory cat. Again, this detail recalls descriptions of Wanda as a 'lioness'. In both cases the woman's proximity to the feline comments on their lithe, bestial power. Just as imperialism underlies Wanda and her paraphernalia of discipline and punishment, whips boots and ropes (a point to which I return) so, behind Salomé lean the furled banners of (Roman) imperial power. Before her, represented by John the Baptist, lies the severed head of reason and civilisation.¹ Against or rather within this strain of contemporary art, what does Wanda – the female figure who exerts so much power, so much fear and 'uncanny interest' in *Venus im Pelz* – represent?

According to Dijkstra, the emphasis on these figures of feminine cruelty in nineteenth-century Europe told a story which tapped into a particular strain of contemporary social ideology. At several points Wanda declares that 'despite all progress of civilisation, women have remained exactly as they emerged from the hand of nature. A woman has the character of a *savage*, [*Das Weib ist eben, trotz allen Fortschritten der Zivilisation, so geblieben, wie es aus der Hand der Natur hervorgegangen ist, es hat den Charakter des Wilden*]' who acts loyal or disloyal, generous or gruesome, depending on whatever impulse happens to rule him at the moment' (47/79). Severin too says, 'I saw woman as the personification of nature' [*ich sah im Weibe die Personifikation der Natur*] (36/60). Satisfying the same theme, throughout his *Confessions*, Wanda is conflated with wild nature – she wears furs and, as we have seen equated with predatory beasts – at one point she even takes a bite out of Severin's flesh (45/76). As if this cannibalistic tendency was not enough, at other times, Wanda displays almost vampiric characteristics: 'She clung to my lips, sucking my soul from my body' [*und sie hing an meinen Lippen und sog mir die Seele aus dem Leibe*] (53/88).

In all these respects, Severin is guided by, and Wanda embodies the influence of, the 'modern attitude'. This 'attitude' stemmed from an age in which the white heterosexual male embodied the pinnacle of evolutionary advancement. Against this pinnacle, women (and not only women, but most other races) were inferior beings. The evolutionary theory gathered and explained in Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) provided probably the most influential tracts of the century from which complex webs of social evolutionary theory – often imperialist and racist – spread into Western culture. *The Descent of Man* provides some examples of this attitude towards

¹ For fuller explanation of these issues, see Chapter XI, 'Gold and the Virgin Whores of Babylon; Judith and Salomé: The Priestesses of Man's Severed Head', Dijkstra, *Idols*, 352-401.

women. 'Woman,' asserts Darwin, '[has] the powers of intuition, or rapid perception, and perhaps of imitation ... but some at least, of these faculties are characteristic of the lower races, and therefore of a past and lower state of civilisation [...] Man has ultimately become superior to woman'.¹

Womankind, as contemporary artistic representations such as that by Toudouze (figure 4) illustrate, was not only 'inferior' in the social and evolutionary hierarchy. The beliefs underpinning a Darwinist model of society categorised various groups as 'inferior' to the moral, spiritual, and 'civilised' ideal of the Caucasian male. Thus, influential nineteenth-century discourses gradually came to conflate all 'inferior' groups into one. Each group acquired the associations of others; all represented danger. Womankind became conflated with Negroes, Jews, criminal types, lower classes, and the insane.² 'In the eyes of many fin-de-siècle males,' observes Dijkstra,

woman had become a raving, predatory beast, a creature who preyed on man out of sheer sadistic self-indulgence ... the struggle between man and woman, the battle of the sexes, was a war between the forces of evolution and emissaries of degeneration. Woman, the intellectuals wanted the world to know, was the Beast of the Scriptures, evil incarnate, an animal.³

Rita Felski concurs: 'Women is identified with the primitive uncontrollable forces of nature,'⁴ and elsewhere she notes that

The demonic femme fatale of the late-nineteenth-century cultural imagination is revealed as a projection of male fantasy. The representations of despotic, phallic women that permeate the literature and art of the period (Salomé, Judith, Delilah) can be seen in this context as yet another facet of the anxiety with which the male European intelligentsia responded to contemporary debates about the "woman question" and the increasing urgency of feminist demands.⁵

¹ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: John Murray, 1901), 847, 858-860.

² McClintock, *Imperial*, 5: 'Imperialism and the invention of race were fundamental aspects of Western, industrial modernity. The invention of race in the urban metropolises ... became central not only to the self-definition of the middle class but also to the policing of the "dangerous classes": the working class, the Irish, Jews, prostitutes, feminists, gays and lesbians, criminals, the militant crowd and so on.'

³ Dijkstra, *Idols*, 234.

⁴ Rita Felski, 'The Counter-Discourse of the Feminine in Three Texts by Wilde, Huysmans, and Sacher-Masoch,' *PMLA* 106:5 (1991), 1102.

⁵ Felski, 'Counter-Discourse', 1104.

This is Severin's 'modern attitude': the battle of the sexes figured as the struggle for 'civilisation' against regression. Yet within this struggle different interpretations existed and they displayed a curious twin dynamic. Man represented 'civilisation', the cerebral, and 'civilised' (I constantly use inverted commas because, as these obscene books show, 'civilisation' does not really mean what the word conveys) progress; woman stood for nature, regression and the sensual and emotional. However, for all her Otherness (Stewart describes the recurring nineteenth-century image of woman as 'a cold, indeed terrifying and inhuman partner, occupying that place of radical Otherness')¹ and regressive and inferior tendencies, this curious dynamic positioned the feminine Other, the inferior and the threatening, at the heart of culture's self-definition.² The threatening (recall also the nineteenth-century attitude towards 'obscene literature') became an object of not only threat and fear but also fascination. Imperialist discourse created and demonised groups as atavistic 'Others', sensual, seductive, fascinating, powerful, and threatening. Woman was an object of 'sweet torment' (my emphasis) – not just 'torment'. In this light, the appeal of images such as *Salomé Triumphant* – the coquettish girl, clad in animal skins, with the slain head of morality and 'civilisation' at her feet – becomes evident. Salomé (like obscene literature) was a figure who titillated, fascinated, and, perhaps because of these reasons, also threatened; or, *because* she threatened also attracted fantasies of desire. Amazons, Turandot, Circe, Judith, and of course Sacher-Masoch's Wanda, represented the feared yet seductive return of – the uncanny, the obscene – primitive sensuality into modern society. As Wanda declares, 'I'm far worse than a heretic, I'm a pagan!' ['*ich bin eine Heidin* '] (18/32). In some ways therefore Wanda represents the 'earlier state of things' which, according to Freud's theory of the death-instinct is what all life wants to 'restore'.³ At this stage it is worth recalling the words of *Der Wanderer, Venus im Pelz*'s prologue. These words closely anticipate the obscene ('material reality') sentiments of Freud's '*everything that is alive, lives on death*'. Here too we find the twin dynamic of the uncanny: attraction and repulsion framed by fear and desire for death. The same dynamic and the same source of fear and fascination operates at the heart of the obscene. Indeed, without recourse to graphic sexual

¹ Stewart, *Masochism*, 5.

² One could point to J.J. Bachofen theory of 'Mother Right' which proved particularly influential in the nineteenth-century. In his theory of the development of culture, Bachofen suggested that, in its primitive stages, culture developed through various matriarchal forms. See J.J. Bachofen, *Myth, Religion and Mother Right: Selected Writings of J.J. Bachofen*, trans. and ed. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, USA: Princeton University Press, 1967). See also Stewart, *Masochism*, 165.

³ Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', 308-309. (Freud's emphasis). See also Chapter One, 'The Psychology of Obscenity'.

imagery, obscene language or excretory functions, *Venus im Pelz* has led us via a different route into the realm of obscenity: ambiguity, regression, the primitive, threat, and, as we will see, death.

Exemplifying this dual dynamic, at the heart of these sometimes obscene (obscene because primitive, atavistic, sexual, threatening 'others' figured as 'low' and uncivilised) representations of women, Felski notes that in the pessimistic Decadent vision, 'women stand for ... the crass vulgarity and emptiness of modern bourgeois society'.¹ Women exemplify modern culture and consumerism. As Stewart observes, for 'Many critics ...the prostitute was the late nineteenth century's object par excellence... she became a metacharacter of modernity ... the very mark of the commodification of the human body'.² For others, as McClintock has shown, within the duality of inferiority and evolutionary superiority, woman was not simply inferior and weaker; she was evolutionary inferior yet intrinsically superior.³ In the same vein, Adrian del Caro notes that, culturally, women from Eve to Delilah, to Judith and Bathsheba have demonstrated their power by repeatedly subduing male strength and wisdom.⁴ The source of this power lies in a diametrically opposite view to that which links women to modern artifice. From this perspective woman represents the primitive and natural. In this light she gains the power and wisdom of the ancients. Woman was natural and her naturalness opposed the artificiality of 'civilisation'; she represented profound, natural 'truth'.⁵ In fact, Wanda voices this twin dynamic when she asserts that,

'Women are neither as good as their admirers and defenders would have it nor as bad as their enemies make them out to be ... The best woman sinks momentarily into filth, the worst woman rises unexpectedly to great good deeds ... No woman is so good or so evil as not to be capable at any moment of both the most diabolical and most divine, both the foulest and the purest thoughts, feelings, actions' (47/71).

Whether an embodiment of crass modernity or primitive nature we find that, in this particular aspect of nineteenth-century ideology, the female figure continues the role

¹ Felski, 'Counter-Discourse', 1100.

² Stewart, *Masochism*, 54-5.

³ McClintock, *Imperial*, 194.

⁴ Adrian del Caro, 'Nietzsche, Sacher-Masoch, and the Whip,' *German Studies Review* 21:2 (1998), 253.

⁵ McClintock, *Imperial*, 24 and 194. McClintock's excellent study provides much more information on the portrayal of women and the 'role' of these portrayals in the imperial/colonial context.

established for her in earlier erotic books. There she was an educator, a revealer of 'truths' and secrets. Whether the embodiment of the degenerative truth of modernity or the atavistic power of nature, in those nineteenth-century depictions which I have concentrated on, the woman's role as educator – in the sense of being a location of knowledge and 'truth' – is injected with a morbid and atavistic element.

This is the point I wish to make regarding Wanda. It is a point which brings us once again to the uncanny and the frightening yet alluring realm of the obscene and Freud's death-instinct. In questioning the association Deleuze makes between Wanda and death, Carol Siegel asserts that, 'Cruel yet maternally solicitous Wanda is, but deathly she is not, unless one brings to bear on the novel Freud's ... interpretation of masochism as a manifestation of the death drive'.¹ As I hope to have shown, however, Wanda is surrounded by an aura of death. This 'death' does not depend on the application of Freud's theory of masochism. We have seen that, within popular artistic depictions of the femme fatale in Europe at the time, woman represented a regressive force and a threat to mankind and 'civilisation'. Wanda too is demonic, predatory, compared to carnivorous animals and associated with men-killers such as Delilah and Judith. She provides Severin with 'sweet torment'. She asserts that 'Despite all progress of civilisation, women have remained exactly as they emerged from the hand of Nature' (47/73). She combines coldness and cruelty, and appears first as a marble sculpture with 'dead stone eyes' [*der toten Steinaugen*] (3/8) which brings to mind tombstones not feminine fecundity.² Finally, as Anita Phillips observes, Wanda 'trails death behind her in the form of numerous rodents skinned for their fur, and of one swiftly mourned husband'.³ From these traits – especially her association with death and primitive nature – it can be said that Wanda, like other nineteenth-century depictions of women, embodies elements of the uncanny and obscene. In Chapter One I showed how the obscene (like the uncanny and Kristeva's abject) has connotations of the primitive and the uncivilised; how it is a threatening and horrifying force; how it carries associations with violence, the fragility of bodies and defilement; and finally of course, how the obscene contains desire – as Stoller says, 'a form of unaccepted desire ... a form of excitement, an anticipation of danger'.⁴ Wanda is violent, atavistic, threatening, ambiguously powerful, and terrifying. She is all these things because as a

¹ Siegel, *Masochism*, 64.

² Cf. Siegel, *Masochism*, 66.

³ A. Phillips, *Masochism*, 20.

⁴ Stoller, *Erotic Imagination*, 88-89.

woman she is 'vulgar' and she is 'vulgar' because she is all these things (violent, atavistic, threatening). For Severin women are part of a chain linking threat, vulgarity, fear and the female sex: "I displayed an insuperable abhorrence for all that was vile, common, and unsightly," says Severin, "And the thing that struck the maturing adolescent as particularly unsightly [*'Unschönes'*] was the love for women as it was shown to him in its full vulgarity" [*'vollen Gewöhnlichkeit'*] [(31/53).¹ Wanda defies and defiles the order of society. She violates the sanctity of the male body with a whip which cuts into Severin's flesh (43/71). She admits to harbouring 'dangerous forces' [*'Gefährliche Elemente'*] (43/72) and is described as 'demonic'. She is a source of Severin's terror, his profound fear, 'nameless dread' and also 'uncanny interest' and fascination. Indeed, it is because she is cruel and horrifying, primitive, obscene and vulgar that, ultimately, Severin is drawn to her. From this attraction he derives pleasure: 'her cruelty filled me with delight' [*'ihre Grausemkeit erfüllt mich mit Entzücken'*] (43/73).

Naturally, as the focus of much critical attention, Wanda has been interpreted in many different ways. Wanda, some observe, is in fact created, Pygmalion-like, by Severin. For Deleuze, 'It is essential to the masochist that he should fashion the woman into a despot, that he should persuade her to co-operate. He is essentially an educator'.² From this perspective it is not the woman but the man who is the educator and not the man but the woman who is the pupil. Seen in this way, however, she is a pupil who destroys her tutor, or, like the metaphor of the iron bull and Dionysus (which occurs twice in the novella), the inventor is destroyed by his creation. "It was you who inoculated me with selfishness, arrogance, and cruelty, and you are to be their first victim", says Wanda to Severin during the story's climax (114/194). Yet, however she is created, Wanda personifies a powerful uncanny force to which Severin succumbs.

Michael Finke has noted that Wanda's function is less as a wielder of whips than 'with her ability to become an aesthetic object, or, more accurately, to efface in her self-for-him the boundary between the aesthetic and the real'.³ Felski too describes how 'the overt fetishism evident in *Venus in Furs* erases the materiality of the naked female body to relocate erotic excitement in an exotic apparatus of whips, furs, and elaborate costumes'.⁴

¹ Felski, 'Counter-Discourse', 1101: 'Severin's memories of his youth reveal a clearly established chain of associations linking vulgarity, women, and the fear of sexual and emotional intimacy.'

² Deleuze, *Coldness*, 21.

³ Finke, 'Sacher-Masoch', 128.

⁴ Felski, 'Counter-Discourse', 1102.

For Felski, this aesthetic process controls the threat which Wanda represents. Her danger is negated by being turned into art. As we have seen however, in terms of the uncanny, this aestheticising and the effacement between the aesthetic and the real which this process involves neither *negates* Wanda's power nor her uncanniness. The core uncanny threat remains ('An uncanny effect,' Freud reminds us, 'is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced').¹ Similarly, critics have interpreted the relationship between Wanda and Severin in terms of attempting to control threat – whether the threat of dissolution, instability, womankind or regression. Lenzer, for example, sees *Venus im Pelz* as a story which attempts to provide stability to a world that was fearfully shifting – a stability which, by the end of the novella is gained by reinstating the European male to a position of patriarchal dominance.² Bram Dijkstra's study also presents Severin's tale as a process of learning that secures mastery and 'Aryan' masculine unification in a nineteenth-century world where man feared the threat to his masculine domination.³ As Siegel has observed, however, the tale's final conclusion and Severin's 'cure' are undercut by Severin's seemingly ironic humour (he winks 'humorously' as he expounds the virtues of beating women) (9/18). Despite some assertions that order is reinstated at the end of the book, Siegel writes that 'We are shown not a return to gender norms and the family ... but instead a sour, sterile isolation'.⁴

That the novel presents a continuing (and relatively bleak) instability is the interpretation that I share. It seems to me that the novella's uncanny themes emphasise dissolution and ambiguity which, although not portrayed in the violent physical and detailed manner of Sade's *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*, remain potent driving forces. An atmosphere of inexorable disintegration – of place, culture and the individual – permeates Severin's story. Even setting aside Wanda's embodiment of the regressive, the natural, the obscene (or, as others see her, the degradation and death inherent in modernity) death transfixes and terrifies Severin. He reads with avid interest stories of men's suffering and death at the hands of women as well as accounts of the Christian martyrs and the thought of his own death gives him a 'profound horror' [*ein tiefes Grauen*] (73/122). Like a moth to a flame, he is attracted to Wanda's deathly/uncanny aura. He says, at the sight of her naked body that the thought of its mortality 'afflicts me with all the horrors of death, of

¹ Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', 367.

² Lenzer, 'On Masochism', 320. See also, Caro, 'Nietzsche', 245.

³ Dijkstra, *Idols*, 374.

⁴ Siegel, *Masochism*, 66.

annihilation' [*'faßt mich mit allen Schauern des Todes, der Vernichtung an'*] (91/154). He recalls the deaths of his mother, brother, wet nurse, and childhood playmates all 'covered by the cold, dead, indifferent earth ... all dust to dust returned' [*'alles Staub zum Staube zurückgekehrt'*] (106/180). Severin's father dies (118/201) and Severin attempts suicide (106/181). Severin's account is written 'with the red blood that drips from my heart' (11/20); bathed in autumn sunsets, rooms are described as 'swimming in blood' [*'das ganze Zimmer schwimmt im Blut'*] (112/192) and although not 'literally' spilled (as far as one can say that in terms of fiction), this blood as much as if it was described as pouring out of Severin's flesh, serves just as effectively as a reminder of man's fragility. The frequent evocation of death – whether of the martyrs and Christ, or the deaths of Holofernes and Samson – describes a seductive fascination with death. The same seduction lies at the core of the uncanny. And the obscene.

Venus im Pelz's is not a Romanticisation of death. The tone is one of inevitability, of gradual decay and disintegration rather than welcome release. In Severin's world, cultural boundaries are fragile, permeable, and superficial. It presents the effacement of those stable hierarchies, categories and binary oppositions upon which the advance of nineteenth-century European 'civilisation' believed itself to depend. Paganism, the irrational powers of dream, of characters drifting through national boundaries (consider the Greek, the German, the Russian, the negro slaves all in lands which aren't their own), powerful women, foreigners of ambiguous gender – all these 'dangers' overwhelm the rigid borders of a Europe in which laws against immorality, impurity, contagion and, as we have seen, literature with the power to 'deprave and corrupt', were designed to enforce and perpetuate order.

McClintock dubs the 'sodomasochistic scenario' 'a theatre of transformation'.¹ Now, whether or not one regards this (common) conflation of sadism and masochism as misleading has no bearing on the fact that this is an accurate description of the events in Sacher-Masoch's novella. Within *Venus im Pelz* all is ambiguous, changeable, mutable and most of all, as we have seen, this applies to the socially ordained categories by which the 'civilised' West is given order. The relationships in *Venus im Pelz* are triadic – an excessive number which spills over the acceptable sexual duo. Pagan values re-emerge in this modern world. Likewise, as we have seen, dreams, fantasy, and art overwhelm and destabilise nineteenth-century reality. With its perpetual confusion of the aesthetic and the real, *Venus im Pelz* suggests that reality itself – all the cultural order to which 'civilised' society clung at

¹ McClintock, *Imperial*, 143.

that time – is an illusion. Reality/fantasy, man/woman, race and class, names and other cultural symbols change. Consider for example the role of clothing in the novel. In McClintock's words clothing is 'central to the policing of social boundaries ... class and rank'.¹ Yet, throughout Severin's 'drama' clothes change like costumes – consider Alex's cross dressing, Wanda's wearing of the despot's furs and Severin's adoption of Polish servant's garb. The social boundaries these clothes exist to indicate become transformed. As another example, consider the whip. Conventionally the whip is a symbol of phallic potency and, as McClintock notes, 'violent mastery of the work both of servants and beasts ... the whip marks the boundary between women and men and between men and animals'.² In *Venus im Pelz* these associations fall apart. For all but one page of the novella, the whip is wielded by a woman and an androgynous man; it does not oversee and control the world of work but, instead, pleasure; it is not (at least, wholly) an object of fear and it does not give punishment, but, instead, is a source of pleasure and fascination. The whip does not delineate the boundary between man and animal but aids in transgressing that boundary by dehumanising Severin, reducing him to the state of an animal drawing a plough (84/141), a 'lifeless object', a 'dog' (51/85).

McClintock reads the transformations at the heart of 'sadomasochism' as having a socio-political significance. They reveal 'that social order is unnatural, scripted and invented'.³ For McClintock here lies the shock value of the masochistic scenario: 'It's greatest outrage,' she says, is that it 'refuses to read power as fate or nature ... [it] presents social power as sanctioned, neither by nature, fate nor God, but by artifice and convention and this as radically open to historical change'.⁴ Anita Phillips echoes these sentiments with her observation that masochism disrupts, 'bringing the whole order of things crashing down to the ground'.⁵

Disorder is anathema to 'civilised' society because society depends on borders, boundaries and demarcations ('*the ideal order of society* is guarded by dangers which threaten transgressors' writes Mary Douglas).⁶ Disorder and the blurring or rupturing of conventional, 'civilised' boundaries – man/animal, man/woman, reality/dream – is

¹ McClintock, *Imperial*, 174.

² McClintock, *Imperial*, 80.

³ McClintock, *Imperial*, 144.

⁴ McClintock, *Imperial*, 144.

⁵ A. Phillips, *Masochism*, 77.

⁶ Douglas, *Purity*, 3. (My emphasis).

unsettling, fearful, threatening. This is another way in which *Venus im Pelz* is 'dirty' for, as Douglas reminds us, dirt 'is essentially disorder ... Dirt offends against order'.¹ In this way, with its offences against 'order' Severin's story can be seen as 'dirty'. And, as dirty and low, obscene.

Anita Phillips offers another perspective from which to see the dynamics of masochism as 'loathsome'. Phillips focuses on the fact that the masochistic scenario (and whether 'masochistic' or not this is also true of Severin's experiences) is about abasement. For Phillips masochism 'contributes to a general lowering'.² It reminds us of the Low. It fetishizes, for example, the shoe or the boot. Role-play centres on the lowly and servile. In this sense too, therefore, Severin's acts belong 'to the level of filth'³ and the fearful powers of dirt and, relatedly, decay. Decay leads Phillips to another form of 'dirt', one which chimes with the uncanny themes already shown as underpinning Sacher-Masoch's novella. 'The self-abasement involved in masochism,' says Phillips confirming what has already been considered, 'is a *momento mori*'⁴ and elsewhere, 'A vision of death is acted out ... a foretaste of mortality'.⁵ It is not just the falling apart of that which is deemed 'proper' through a process which reveals the fragility of the social system. Severin's tale also provides an uncanny/obscene reminder of our fragility and mortality – recall its preoccupation with images and memories of death (the obscene as 'ill-omened'). *Venus im Pelz* reveals an attraction to this fragility, a veering towards death and the repulsive which Severin embodies. From this perspective, when Wanda rhetorically asks, "'Can you deny that our Christian world is rotting?'" ['Können Sie leugnen, daß unsere christliche Welt in Fäulnis übergegangen ist? '] (19/34), it can be seen not only as a literal reference to the relative decline in Christian power, but, perhaps more tellingly, it indicates a fascination with disintegration, death and degeneracy⁶ as not alien to 'civilised' Europe, but entrenched within it. This is certainly the domain of the obscene – ambiguity, threat, impurity, dehumanisation, death, and an attraction to them. *Venus im Pelz* has taken us here, unlike Sade, without recourse to obscene language or graphic depictions of sexual and excretory acts. Yet, as in *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*, we find a very similar core at the heart of

¹ Douglas, *Purity*, 2.

² A. Phillips, *Masochism*, 78-79.

³ A. Phillips, *Masochism*, 78.

⁴ A. Phillips, *Masochism*, 81.

⁵ A. Phillips, *Masochism*, 154.

⁶ *Fäulnis* means 'rottenness', 'decadence' or 'degeneracy'; in *Fäulnis übergehen* translates as 'rotting/decaying'.

Venus im Pelz. Here there is an urge towards not just individual but also social regression. This parallels the urge articulated in Sade's theatre of obscenity. It is, perhaps, this urge and the novella's obscene themes which perpetuate this work's notoriety and give it a disturbing atmosphere at odds with the novella's apparent harmlessness.

Sade portrayed his libertines as the products of Enlightenment France; Sacher-Masoch emphasises that Severin and his 'modern attitude' are products of nineteenth-century ideology. Severin is wealthy, educated, and culturally privileged; a physically healthy, spa-going art lover and reader of fashionable philosophical texts, plays and novels, as well as a follower of the latest scientific and technological advances (7/15, 33/51). And yet despite – or indeed, because of these things – Severin desires to be the slave of a woman. He is enthralled by his own mortality, the loss of his identity and status. Here, we find a form of dehumanisation and self-destruction – recall for instance, the frequent description of Severin as 'a dog, a 'lifeless object' [*ein Hund, ein lebloses Ding*] (51/85) and the scene in which he is harnessed to a plough and becomes a beast, beaten by Negro slaves (83-4/140-1). If Wanda embodies the uncanny and the power associated with the obscene, Severin embodies the *attraction* of the uncanny, of death, of the obscene, of dissolution, of, as Siegel says, 'the allure of the primitive' and man's 'need to escape the demands of civilisation'.¹

Severin also admits the tradition of fascination with suffering that is long-established in the West. As an example, we could recall the luridly illustrated accounts of travels to the 'primitive' Eastern empires (figure 3, above). We could also point to the fascination that masochism has exerted among psychoanalysts and critics. More pervasively there is the Christ figure who stands as an exemplary symbol of the central position of death and suffering within Western culture. Yet, this morbid core remains usually disavowed. Anita Phillips writes, 'what is less admissible is how much pleasure and meaning is gained from identification with a body in pain. Christ is always worshipped as a figure nailed to a cross, bleeding and mutilated, scorned and betrayed. This is also a cherished, though generally secret, vision of ourselves'.²

Christ and the death-instinct are not the only influences on Severin's actions and his morbid desires. It is possible to speculate about the ways in which the values of his time and culture could lie at the heart of Severin's story. As we saw in Chapter One, 'The Legal Obscene', nineteenth-century attitudes towards obscene literature provide one example of how contagion is evident in Western culture's paranoid reaction to obscene publications:

¹ Siegel, *Masochism*, 38.

² A. Phillips, *Masochism*, 144 and 143. Also Studlar, *Pleasure*, 152.

they were presented, after all, as books with the power to 'deprave and corrupt'. Bearing in mind Jameson's warning that to talk of any one particular aspect of culture involves 'the isolation and privileging of one of the elements *within* that totality'¹ and invariably also of reductionism, as the previous chapter did with the Enlightenment, it is possible to characterise certain influential traits of nineteenth-century Europe and view them as a formative backdrop to Sacher-Masoch's obscene novella. Thus, we could describe imperial and Western Europe during the nineteenth-century (and increasingly towards its close) as focusing on the values of restraint and control as paramount in a struggle for continuing 'civilised' progress. Due to historical events – especially the shockwaves sent through Europe by the French Revolution and its aftermath and the various revolutions which swept Europe during the first decades of the century (especially the revolutionary tide of 1848) by the time of *Venus im Pelz*'s publication the optimism of the eighteenth-century was tempered by awareness of 'civilisation's' fragility.² In response, struggle and the value of self-restraint, self-discipline and control were repeatedly expounded as vital to the furtherance of 'civilisation' in various works from the late nineteenth century. We have considered the aesthetic representation of a struggle between the sexes and similarly this struggle was figured in terms of an inner one which espoused the need for struggle and restraint against the temptations of deviant, impure and threatening (but yet, recalling Freud's 'a thing that is forbidden with the greatest emphasis must be a thing that is desired')³ instincts and desires. Throughout *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Krafft-Ebing voices sentiments such as, 'life is a never-ceasing duel between the animal instinct and morality. Only will-power and a strong character can emancipate man from the meanness of his

¹ Jameson, 'Interpretation', 28.

² Nineteenth-century historical events provide a fascinating backdrop to the emergence of a literary genre dedicated to flagellation. The complexity and the vast scale of these events means that such a discussion falls beyond the scope of this chapter. In terms of history, the following works paint a good historical backdrop, especially to formative events within Sacher-Masoch's and Freud's native Austria: Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso, 1979); Michael Biddiss, *The Age of the Masses: Ideas and Society in Europe Since 1870* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977); T.C.W. Blanning, ed. *The Nineteenth Century: Europe 1789–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Asa Briggs and Patricia Clavin, *Modern Europe 1789–1989: A History of Europe* (London and New York: Longman, 1997); Robert Gildea, *Barricades and Borders: Europe 1800–1945*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Harry Hearder, *Europe in the Nineteenth Century 1830–1880*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Longman, 1988); E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire 1875 - 1914* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987); Martin Pugh, ed. *A Companion to Modern European History: 1871–1945* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998); Alan Sked, *The Decline and Fall of the Habsburg Empire 1815–1918* (London and New York: Longman, 1989); Jonathan Sperber, *Revolutionary Europe: 1780–1850* (Edinburgh, Longman, 2000); Peter Stearns, *1848: The Revolutionary Tide in Europe*. (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1974).

³ Freud, 'Totem and Taboo', 126.

corrupt nature'.¹ Likewise, Max Nordau's *Entartung (Degeneration)*, one of the most influential exponents of degeneration theory at the close of the century, concludes with these words: 'progress is the effect of an ever more rigorous subjugation of the beast in man, of an ever tenser self-restraint, an ever keener sense of duty and responsibility'.² Thus, it is possible to suggest, punishment, hierarchy, domination (and their impermanence) echo in the events of *Venus im Pelz*. Reminding us of the 'rot' or 'degeneracy' which Wanda observes in her 'modern world', the discourse of degeneration is of relevance to the 'modern attitude' underlying Sacher-Masoch's text.

'The poetics of degeneration,' writes McClintock, 'was a poetics of social crisis'.³ She continues: 'central to the idea of degeneration was the idea of *contagion* (the communication of disease by touching, from body to body), and central to the idea of contagion was the peculiarly Victorian paranoia about boundary order'.⁴ This precipitated the atmosphere of 'social crisis' of which McClintock speaks and the atmosphere in which *Venus im Pelz* was composed.

Part of this 'social crisis' can be described as, in a sense, a crisis of self-belief. Degeneration was not like an external foe; it could be seen as a product of civilisation itself. As Jonathan Dollimore has noted, underpinning degeneration theory and nineteenth-century concerns about boundaries and purity is a realisation that the newly discovered science of evolution, 'itself cannot guarantee progress'⁵ and that 'progress is itself responsible, in that degeneracy is produced not only by a falling away from the higher *but by the very effect of reaching towards it*'.⁶ 'We discern a fear,' continues Dollimore,

that degeneration is not just a hiccup in evolution but somehow its logic and destiny. It is as if there is a teleological 'unconscious' desire in evolution which leads to decline, exhaustion, disintegration, and even self-destruction: social death.⁷

¹ Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 5.

² Nordau, *Degeneration*, 560.

³ McClintock, *Imperial*, 46.

⁴ McClintock, *Imperial*, 47.

⁵ Jonathan Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1998), 145.

⁶ Dollimore, *Death*, 141. (Dollimore's emphasis).

⁷ Dollimore, *Death*, 132.

Venus im Pelz can be seen to illustrate precisely this degenerative urge, this desire ‘which leads to decline, exhaustion, disintegration ... self-destruction: social death’. McClintock has noted, for example, that the *tools* of masochism – chains, ropes, harnesses, straps, high leather boots, and above all, whips – are also the tools of imperial discipline, punishment and control.¹ In this way, in Severin’s story, whips, ropes and chains do not perform their ordained role of suppressing instinctual urges and stopping cultural (or individual) degeneration. Nor, for that matter, does Severin’s wealth, social status, his education, interest in the most recent sciences, classics of literature and religion. Instead, this paraphernalia and artistic legacy – indeed, Severin’s ultra-civilisation – contributes less to ‘civilised’ progress than the disintegration of social values via dissolution of its accepted borders and hierarchies. In *Venus im Pelz*, the ideology and paraphernalia of imperialism, restraint and discipline do not bring control; they contribute to instability and disorder. *Venus im Pelz* suggests that the ideology of ‘civilisation’ itself contains not only a fascination with, but also the seeds of, its own decay. It is after all fragile, ‘rotting’ and, as Wanda astutely observed, addressing Severin’s desires, ‘Our unnaturalness must create such diseases. If you were less virtuous, you’d be completely normal’ [‘*Unsere Unnatur muß solche Krankheiten erzeugen. Wärest du weniger tugendhaft, so wärest du vollkommen vernünftig*’] (44/74). In other words, the unnatural pressure of striving towards progress and civilised virtue can be read, precisely as Dollimore suggests, as the cause of Severin’s descent towards a more fundamental realm of death, disorder, and dirt, the uncanny and the obscene.

Ultimately, another writer brought up in the twilight of the Austrian empire and the atmosphere of degeneration theory forged a theoretical link between the sentiments of Severin’s story and an individual and cultural death drive. In 1924, Freud published ‘The Economic Problem of Masochism’, his fourth essay on the subject of masochism. His essays had been presenting masochism in increasingly complex terms since its first appearance in the 1905 ‘Three Essays On Sexuality’. There it had stood as a puzzling manifestation of inverse sadism (‘Masochism’, wrote Freud, ‘is nothing more than an extension of sadism

¹ McClintock, *Imperial*, 143. Severin’s story is universally accepted as depicting masochistic desires. Such a view, of course, has the problems of anachronism (within the text he is not a ‘masochist’ but ‘suprasensual’) and often ignores how theoretical views of ‘masochism’ change through history, sometimes diverting considerably from the events and atmosphere of *Venus im Pelz*. In this sense, just as there is no single obscenity, there is no one masochism but many masochisms. As interesting as such observations are, they are irrelevant to the accuracy of McClintock’s arguments regarding the ‘tools’ of Severin’s story.

turned round upon the subject's own self').¹ Among the significant changes which occurred in Freud's complex 1924 model, was the following conclusion:

If one is prepared to overlook a little inexactitude, it may be said that the death instinct which is operative in the organism – primal sadism – is identical with masochism. After the main portion of it has been transposed outwards on to objects, there remains inside, as a residuum of it, the erotogenic masochism proper ... in certain circumstances the sadism, or instinct of destruction, which has been directed outwards, projected, can be once more introjected, turned inwards ... If this happens, a secondary masochism is produced, which is added to the original masochism. Erotogenic masochism accompanies the libido through all its developmental phases.²

Despite a 'little inexactitude,' masochism was no longer 'sadism turned round upon the subject's own self'; it was linked to the death instinct, one of the most powerful drives of all living things. Of course, as I hope to have shown, a different route could be taken from Severin's 'masochistic' acts to Freud's death instinct and that is the route which focuses on the strong uncanny elements within Severin's story. What I hope to have gone some way towards demonstrating is that the route of the uncanny leads us to the domain of the obscene.

Reading the novel in this way is unconventional. Reading the obscene in this way is, of course, to follow a different route from that offered by the (sometimes) 'conventional' obscene of Sade, but, crucially, many of the elements are the same. There is an axiomatic female figure, although where Sade's women correspond to those of eighteenth-century *livres philosophiques* in Sacher-Masoch's novella, this figure is more shaped by contemporary art, classical literature and nineteenth-century ideologies; consequently she and her 'truth' appear as threatening and regressive. There is dehumanisation – people become objects, toys, commodities, akin to animals. The novella is permeated with violence and the violation of bodies even though not in the graphic manner of *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* but in a muted presence and through reference to seemingly 'respectable' sources which *Venus im Pelz* casts in a light which questions their respectability. Finally, there is disorder, the 'the in-between, the ambiguous'. Furthermore, onto the stage of Sacher-Masoch's 'play' (the metaphor of the theatre is the same), creeps abasement, dirt and decay. We are presented with the obscene: that which should be 'off the stage' is made central. Obscenity's 'ill-omened' aspect recurs in the novella's sense of impending dissolution. At

¹ Freud, 'Three Essays', 72.

² Freud, 'Economic Problem', 419.

the core of *Venus im Pelz*, as in Sade's theatre of obscenity, there is death: that force which, underneath it all, attracts Severin to Wanda and lends obscene literature its fearful power and its attraction.

CHAPTER FOUR

**OBSCENITY UNVEILED:
*HISTOIRE DE L'OEIL.***

PUBLISHED IN A LIMITED EDITION under the pseudonym “Lord Auch”, *Histoire de l’œil* appeared in France in 1928.¹ It was the work of Georges Bataille, a man in whose writings – which included fiction, articles and influential theoretical/philosophical studies – obscenity was always afforded a central position. The obscene, as we have seen, is multi-faceted. When considering Bataille’s oeuvre, we find the obscene in all its guises: obscene language, saying all, speaking the ‘unspeakable’ and revealing the concealed; descriptions of excreta, the low, dehumanisation and the impure; ambiguity; the primitive; graphic descriptions of sexual acts and organs; images of decay, defilement, violated bodies, death. Finally, although these many aspects of the obscene do not operate independently in Bataille’s work, we find the obscene and its motifs recalling Havelock Ellis’s suggestion that the etymological roots of ‘obscene’ link it to today’s ‘obscure’ (i.e. ‘dark, dim’).² Thus, in Bataille’s writing, obscenity is often linked to darkness and night. In this way and others – let alone the novella’s and Bataille’s influence on twentieth-century French cultural criticism and obscene literature – Bataille’s novella is a necessary inclusion in a study on obscene literature.

Histoire de l’œil, Bataille’s first novella, introduces themes that come to dominate his later works. Literally as much as figuratively (the final word of the novella is *obscène*) it leads the reader into Bataille’s depiction of what he presents as a usually disavowed obscenity. This chapter focuses on the many forms of obscenity in *Histoire de l’œil*. *Histoire de l’œil* has two parts and this chapter begins by considering what is obscene on the most conventional or obvious levels – descriptions, acts portrayed, language used – of the first

¹ Later editions of the novel appeared in 1944 and 1952-3 but their content is different from that of the 1928 edition. Only the posthumous 1967 edition appeared carrying Bataille’s name. Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 106.

² Ellis, ‘Obscenity’, 103 fn.1.

part, in other words, the story. It goes on, in the second section ('Obscene Composition') to explore obscenity in the novel's second part. It looks at how the novel comments on its own obscenity, and at the role obscenity plays in terms of the book's principal themes. Although the focus is *Histoire de l'oeil* – this chapter does not have the capacity to unravel obscenity in its entirety within Bataille's extensive oeuvre – to consider the role of obscenity in Bataille's novella requires reference to texts from Bataille's later theoretical work. These texts include three articles from the journal *Documents* ('Oeil', 'Informe' and 'Le gros orteil') and the longer works *L'érotisme* (*Eroticism*, 1957) and the post-humously published *L'histoire de l'érotisme* (*The History of Eroticism*, printed in volume two of *The Accursed Share*, 1976). I explore the role of obscenity in Bataille's wider oeuvre in the third section, 'Death Is The Sole Outcome Of My Erection'. *Histoire de l'oeil*'s relation to these themes and the interlinked motifs of sight and the unveiling of obscenity are considered in 'Decent People Have Gelded Eyes'. Throughout, this chapter does not so much offer a startling 'new' reading of Bataille's work, but draws together issues concerning Bataille's obscenity which have appeared in, above all, the recent reading of Bataille's first novel presented by Patrick Ffrench who draws on the work of Roland Barthes, Rosalind Krauss, Georges Didi-Huberman and Denis Hollier to (among other things) read the obscenity of *Histoire de l'oeil*.

1. 'Pink And Black'¹

Histoire de l'oeil has two parts: the *récit* ('story') and, following the *récit*, a brief essay entitled *Coïncidences* in the first edition (*Reminiscences* in subsequent editions). Ostensibly, this essay explains the autobiographical sources of the story. In both, the narrators are anonymous and (as will be discussed in 'Obscene Composition') the narrator of the autobiographical comment appears to also be the writer of the preceding tale. The events of the *récit* and its obscenity are considered below.

Histoire de l'oeil opens by following the conventions of the erotic tradition: it situates itself in anonymous environs at a 'beach in X' [*la plage de X*] (9/13).² Recalling

¹ 10/14. Although I give page references to the current English translation (by Joachim Neugroschal, Penguin) in my opinion this translation is often inaccurate so all translations from the novella are my own.

² Marcus, *Victorians*, 268-70.

Severin's admission that 'When I was a little boy, I had an enigmatic fear of women ... at a time when other boys act crude and obscene, I displayed an insuperable abhorrence for all that was vile, common, and unsightly [i.e. sexual]' (*Venus*, 31), *Histoire de l'oeil*'s narrator is also attuned to the enigmatic – uncanny – fear of the sexual. He admits 'as far back as I recall I was frightened of anything sexual' [*'aussi loin que je me rappelled, j'étais angoissé par tout ce qui est sexuel'*] (9/13).

This narrator is anonymous in the fullest sense: throughout the novel, he is a watchful eye/'I' and all the reader learns during the opening scene is that he is 'nearly sixteen'. Although not in itself obscene, through the transgression of social taboos and beliefs, outrage and shock are reactions which frequently accompany the obscene. In this respect the protagonist's youthfulness contributes to the shock-element of the novel. As Harrison notes, despite Freud's findings, for most of the twentieth-century Western world, youth and children (up to around the arbitrary age of eighteen) have conventionally been associated with innocence and purity (hence the laws designed to protect people under eighteen encountering images of violence or sexual intercourse).¹ As an example consider this quote from a recent magazine article: 'We [in today's West] still cling to the romantic view of a child whose delicious body is innocent of adult sexuality and whose mind is blank ... At a deep level, we like to think of childhood as a kind of Eden'.² In themselves the graphic sexual acts these characters perform are outrageous enough but against the West's cutely sentimental view of non-adults the age of Bataille's protagonists could be said to increase reactions of outrage by shattering cultural expectations and beliefs. In *Histoire de l'oeil* the innocent and pure are impure.

While the narrator remains anonymous we learn much more about Simone, the young girl who the narrator encounters in the first lines of the novella. She is about the same age as the narrator and their families are distantly related. At the time of their first amorous encounter Simone is dressed in black and white – a black pinafore, starched white collar and black silk stockings. In the villa's hallway there is a saucer of milk left for a cat to drink. On Simone's initiative, the narrator dares Simone to sit in the milk. She sits. The 'I' watches: 'I stood before her for some time, immobile, the blood rushing to my head, and trembling while she watched my stiff penis stretch my trousers. Then I lay down at her feet without her moving and, for the first time, I saw her "pink and dark" flesh cooling in the white milk' [*Je*

¹ Harrison, *Censorship*, 133. Over the last decade in Britain, these laws have changed slightly: films which would once have had an adult's only certificate are now passed with 15 rating.

² Nicci Gerard, 'For Whom The Bells Don't Toll,' *Guardian Weekend* [London], 31 July 2004: 25.

restai quelque temps devant elle, immobile, le sang à la tête et tremblant pendant qu'elle regardait ma verge raide tendre ma culotte. Alors, je me couchai à ses pieds sans qu'elle bougeât et, pour la première fois, je vis sa chair "rose et noire" qui se rafraîchissait dans le lait blanc] (10/13-14). This opening scene is multi-layered: it introduces the novella's themes and motifs and many aspects of the obscenity which recurs in later episodes.

In terms of obscenity, it could also be said that by sitting in milk meant for a cat, Simone is approaching a bestial rather than 'civilised' human condition (dehumanisation being one important aspect of obscenity).¹ Awareness of naming, words and their associations also plays a significant role in this scene's (and the novella's) obscenity. The narrator tells how he and Simone chose the word *cul* – more conventionally 'arse' – to 'name' Simone's genitals [*'cul (ce nom que j'employerais avec Simone me paraissait le plus joli des noms du sexe)*'] (10/13). On one obscene level 'cul' and 'verge' introduce obscene language and obscene language's associations with the primitive and pre-social.² On another level of obscenity they emphasise the narrative's focus on the low, bestial – obscene – sexual organs (of which more will be said in due course). In terms of obscene themes, the choice of 'cul' is given additional significance. 'What does not respect boundaries, position, rules,' writes Kristeva, 'The in-between, the ambiguous'³ are all part of Kristeva's abject, and sources of horror which, as I have discussed, closely resemble the obscene. Likewise, the narrator's choice of 'cul' injects a slippage – obscene ambiguity – between two categories (if they can be called that) for the distinction (boundary) between arse and vagina is shattered.⁴

'Cul' and 'sexe' are not the only conventionally opposed values present in the novella's opening but then, in a sense, combined. (Although both 'obscene' organs – the vagina itself, as we will see, is a specific obscene motif in Bataille's novella – by 'opposed' I mean the anus is associated with waste and illicit, 'perverse' sex; the vagina with life and acceptable, procreative intercourse). In fact, the reader is confronted by a number of binary oppositions, especially (in this episode) colours – black and white, pink and black (of which

¹ Cf. Ffrench, *The Cut*, 21: 'The dislocation of the human [in Bataille's work] more often than not takes the form of foregrounding the animalistic, not in order to propose an animal nature, a ground for the human in animality, but simply in order to depose the human from its sublime position.'

² The connotations and associations of obscene language are not repeated in detail in this chapter as they were considered in Chapter One ('Obscene Language') and in relation to *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* (Chapter Two, 'The Most Impure Tale Ever Told').

³ Kristeva, *Powers*, 4.

⁴ Cf. Ffrench, *The Cut*, 110-11.

more will be said in due course). Finally, just as visual themes have emerged as fundamental to the obscene (and erotic) traditions (recall how obscenity commonly involves a setting onto the stage of what is normally ‘off the stage’) so the same themes of unveiling, revealing and sight are also afforded a prominent role in the first pages of Bataille’s novella. The encounter between the protagonists, for example, is primarily (and certainly initially) voyeuristic. Moreover, despite the anxiety he feels, the narrator notes that although he hoped she was entirely naked under her pinafore, he ‘could not yet see’ Simone’s ‘cul’ [*‘j’espérais que, sous ce tablier, elle était entièrement nue ... mais je n’avais pas encore pu la voir jusqu’au cul’*]. It occurs to him that ‘by ‘moving aside the back of her pinafore’ he ‘could see her obscene parts unveiled’ [*‘je verrais ses parties impudiques sans aucun voile’*] (9-10/13). Moments later Simone’s ‘obscene parts’ are ‘unveiled’ and he sees her ‘pink and black’ ‘cul’ cooling in the saucer of milk.

Before returning to these themes it is worth sketching other significant moments in the novella. The opening chapter contains two other important incidents. The first is a car crash after which Simone and the narrator stare, transfixed, at a corpse. The narrator describes his feelings at the sight of the half-decapitated girl-victim as ‘horror and despair induced by so much bloody flesh, nauseating in part, and in part very beautiful’ [*‘L’impression d’horreur et de désespoir provoquée par tant de chairs sanglantes, écoeurantes en partie, en partie très belles’*] (11/14). He likens this response to that which he and Simone experience upon seeing each other. After this scene, the narrator and Simone engage in frenzied mutual masturbation on a cliff top during which Simone introduces the act/motif of urination. Another girl, Marcelle, interrupts the event. Marcelle is beautiful and, the narrator says, ‘the purest and most affecting of our friends’ [*‘la plus pure et la plus touchante de nos amies’*] (12/16). As a thunderstorm breaks, Marcelle’s modesty and the shame she feels at her sexual desires compel Simone and the narrator to sexually assault her. Marcelle abandons herself to the ensuing frenzy of colliding bodies, mud and rain.

The events which follow – Simone’s development of a predilection for throwing eggs into the lavatory bowl and urinating on them and breaking raw eggs with her ‘cul’, a drunken orgy undertaken with a handful of teenage friends, the narrator’s decision to leave his parents and live with Simone, Marcelle’s incarceration by her parents and Simone and the narrator’s successful rescue of her – progress towards three pivotal incidents. The first is the discovery of Marcelle’s suicide by hanging in a wardrobe. This discovery prompts the narrator and Simone to have vaginal intercourse for the first time and for Simone to urinate over Marcelle’s dead eyes. ‘To avoid the bother of a police investigation’, the pair flee to Spain

where Marcelle's role as the third party is taken by Sir Edmund, an older, 'fabulously rich Englishman' ['*un richissime Anglais* '] (45/48). Attending a bullfight in Madrid, Simone requests the raw testicles of a slaughtered bull. The testicles are 'of a pearly whiteness, faintly bloodshot, like the globe of an eye' ['*d'une blancheur nacrée, à piene rose de sang, identique à celle du globe oculaire* '] (51/54). Simone devours one testicle and inserts the other into her vagina. Her resulting orgasm coincides with the death of a toreador, impaled through one eye by a bull's horn. Rapidly, the novella moves on to Seville and its climax: a parodic/blasphemous confessional and mass, and the rape and murder of a priest in the Church of Don Juan. Surrounded by 'religious gewgaws' and pictures of 'decomposing corpses' (56-57/59), Simone, Sir Edmund and the narrator hustle a young priest into the tabernacle where Sir Edmund presents him with the chalice and ciborium. The Host, explains, Sir Edmund 'is Christ's sperm', the wine is His 'urine' ['*le sperme du Christ ... et urine* ']. The priest is forced to urinate into the chalice and drink Christ's urine, which he does in 'filthy ecstasy' ['*d'extase immonde* '] (62/63-64). Simone then strangles the priest while raping him. At the moment of his death, she reaches orgasm. The final moment occurs when Simone asks Sir Edmund to remove one of the priest's eyes. As she did with the bull's testicle, she inserts it into her vagina. The narrator, gazing into Simone's vagina sees an eye. He imagines the eye to be Marcelle's, peering back at him. This final image is obscene on multiple levels. In one moment we are presented with the 'obscene parts' confronting the reader/viewer. 'Streams of spunk' ['*traînées de foutre* '] smearing Simone's 'steaming pubic hair' ['*le poil fumant* '] surrounding the eye and its tears of urine ['*des larmes d'urine* '], presents the narrator and the reader with a climactic 'lunar vision of disastrous sadness' ['*vision lunaire [avec] un caractère de tristesse désastreuse* '] (67/69). In terms of obscenity, we are confronted with excreta, orifices and a portrayal of the body's fragility. It is also a moment which is obscene in bringing the 'high' (the civilised and the human represented by the eye) to the 'low' animal, sexual organs. Recalling one of the suggested etymological roots of the word 'obscene' – as shared with that of 'obscure' – we also find an association between this 'low' obscene image and darkness and night. It is, after all, a vision '*lunaire*', not one accompanied by the day and the sun. The rest of this chapter will consider how and why these levels of obscenity operate.

It could be said that, in the time-honoured Aretino tradition, *Histoire de l'oeil* is a tale of sexual education or initiation. Yet if this is a story of sexual awakening, it is simultaneously an initiation into violence and death for violence and death accompany all the pivotal sexual

acts of the novella. Consider the following passage in which, in a ‘stinking shithouse’ [‘*chiottes puantes*’] the narrator ‘exposed the young girl’s [Simone’s] cunt to force into her blood-red, dribbling flesh, first my fingers, then my penis, which entered that cavern of blood while I tossed off her arse, thrusting my bony middle finger deep inside’ [‘*je pus mettre à nu le cul de la jeune fille, enforcer dans sa chair couleur de sang et baveuse, d’abord mes doigts, puis le membre viril lui-même, qui entra dans cette caverne de sang pendant que je branlais son cul en y pénétrant profondément avec le médius osseux*’] (51/54). As in the *récit*’s opening and its concluding *vision lunaire* we find in a single moment, the intertwined themes which dominate much of the story’s obscenity: excreta and secretion [‘*chiottes*’, ‘*braveuse*’], ‘cunt’, ‘blood’, ‘penis’, bones: the low, the sexual, violence, mortality.

In *Histoire de l’œil* violence extends to Bataille’s use of and choice of language. Following Barthes, Patrick Ffrench, Elizabeth Mosimann and Leslie Anne-Boldt (for example) examine Bataille’s mutilation of the sign – language – and the violent rupturing of the limits of the signified and the fracturing of boundaries between signifiers and associations. Like Barthes, they focus on the book’s linguistic ‘violence’ much of which involves punning around word and sound association (obviously lost in the English translation): *Oeuf* [egg]– *Oeil* [eye] – *Soleil* [sun] – *Couille* [testicle] – *Cul* [vagina/anus] – *Cuvette* [lavatory bowl, into which Simone and the narrator throw boiled eggs] – *Assiette* [plate, white and round, like the eggs and eyes, in which are placed the balls of the bull and into which Simone twice places her ‘cul’].¹ These critics and others, such as Michel Foucault in ‘A Preface to Transgression’² compare the novella’s use of language and Bataille’s transgression of the role of language and social taboo (language being culture’s accepted symbolic medium)³ to the violent sexual acts portrayed in *Histoire de l’œil*. Within the novella itself however, the violence – as the above quote and the brief consideration of Bataille’s violation of the codes of language both illustrate – is not always explicit. By ‘explicit’, I mean that the novella’s violence – its obscene violation of the (human) form – is not always associated with literal dismemberment. Often, when describing the sexual act, Bataille uses the *language* of violence: people orgasm violently and the verbs most often

¹ Ffrench, *The Cut*, 94-100 summarises this process.

² Michel Foucault, ‘A Preface to Transgression’, *Language, Counter Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. Donald Bouchard (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977): ‘The questioning of language by language in a circularity which the “scandalous” violence of erotic literature, far from ending, displays from its first use of words’ (50); ‘The upturned eye ... indicates the moment when language, arriving at its confines, overleaps itself, explodes ... incessantly fractures the unity of its discourse’ (48).

³ See Chapter One, ‘Obscene Words’.

used describe violent movements. The first sexual encounter with Marcelle provides a typical example:

a brutal frenzy ['Une frénésie brutale '] drove our three bodies ... huge booms of thunder shook us, heightening our fury, wresting forth our cries of rage ['De grands coups de tonnerre nous ébranlaient et accroissaient chaque fois notre colère, nous arrachant des cris de rage '], which each flash accompanied with a glimpse of our sexual parts ['nos parties sexuelles ']. Simone had ... my head locked in her soil-covered legs ['ma tête serrée entre ses jambes souillées de terre '], her face wallowing in the puddle, where she was brutally churning Marcelle's cunt ['elle agitait brutalement le cul de Marcelle '], one arm around Marcelle's hips, the hand yanking her thigh, forcing it open ['l'ouvrant avec force ']. (12-13/16-17, my emphasis).

Here, the violence of the sex act is desperate, animalistic and obscenely 'low' – characters wallow in mud in a storm, furiously fucking (no other word accurately conveys the violence of this act) like animals. In Bataille's writing (and the above passage is a simple example), sex is a desperate act intimately related to darkness (in the above passage the sun is blotted out by storm clouds), impurity and filth (the characters wallow in mud) and violence. By extension, all these factors (let alone the literal portrayal in the novella) associate sex with death. As another example, during the chapter titled 'Obscene Animals' (*Animaux obscènes*) we find a description of Simone's orgasm (which occurs next to a pig-sty) during which she 'thrashed about on the ground like a headless chicken, hurting herself with a terrible bang on the door fittings. Sir Edmund gave her his wrist to bite on and allay the spasm that kept shaking her, and I saw that her face was smeared with saliva and blood' ['*se déchaîna par terre comme une volaille égorgée, se blessant avec un bruit terrible contre les ferrures de la porte. Sir Edmond lui avait donné son poignet à mordre pour apaiser le spasme qui continuait à la secouer et elle avait le visage souillé par la salive et par le sang*'] (46-47/49). This may be a moment of intense pleasure for Simone, but it is also a moment of fear, violence, and pain, where the physical boundaries of the human are fractured (saliva and blood break through) and the boundaries which define the human are lost. Here we find some evidence of the way the obscene, violence and death accompany the pivotal sexual acts in the text. Within lines of Simone and the narrator's first voyeuristic sexual encounter they run over a pretty female cyclist – a morbid (obscene) scene which is also charged with sexuality and the voyeuristic. Later, Simone and the narrator lose their virginity next to Marcelle's corpse; the sexual encounter quoted above, occurs during the bull-fights where horses are

impaled by bulls; Simone's insertion of the bull's testicle into her vagina occurs at the instant Granero, the toreador, is killed in the bullring; Simone's rape of the priest kills him.

To briefly sum up the salient points which require further exploration, throughout, *Histoire de l'oeil* emphasises the obscene. Obscenity appears in the form of obscene language and an emphasis of the impure within the conventionally innocent (childhood). The novella's obscenity also manifests itself as violence (in and to language – 'cul', word for 'arse', is used to refer to the 'cunt' – and to bodies) which emphasises the fragility of borders and the permeability of social boundaries. The same themes resonate within the story's portrayal of death, human excreta and the sexual act. All these themes, we should add, are linked: obscenity, death, violence, sex (as an example: the 'con' produces life but the 'cul' produces dead waste). As Sontag notes, 'What Bataille exposes in extreme erotic experience is its subterranean connection with death'.¹ Yet the obscenity of Bataille's work exposes more than a link between the erotic and death. These themes – violent rupturing of boundaries, sex, the animal, the low, the obscene – are also linked to the gaze and the eye. To briefly anticipate later sections of this chapter, if we see the sexual as life-giving or emblematic of life itself, then we find Bataille repeatedly emphasising the presence of death within life. The two appear intertwined. As the narrator observes, compounding and hence rupturing the boundary which conventionally separates the view of sex (life) and death, 'Death was the sole outcome of my erection' [*la mort étant la seule issue à mon érection*] (30/33).

In its focus on the death within living flesh and life, or, more accurately, an unsettling interdependence of one value on its opposite, *Histoire de l'oeil* illustrates the shattering of the life-death boundary, and not just the life-death boundary, but the purity-obscenity boundary too. This is one of the core themes running throughout Bataille's writings. Interlinked with the operation and purpose of obscenity, within Bataille's work it appears in a number of ways and using a number of motifs. One of these returns to the bicolour theme which appears in the novella's first scene: black and white and pink and black. It is this motif and its relation to the novella's obscene themes which I now wish to explore.

Denis Hollier reminds us that, occurring within Bataille's novella in quotation marks, the quote "pink and black" ("*rose et noire*") occurs twice in the novel: once, as noted, when Simone's 'cul' is first 'unveiled' to the narrator; and later in the pivotal scene when Simone inserts the bull's testicle into her 'cul' ('the white ball of the bull had been thrust into

¹ Sontag, 'Pornographic', 61.

Simone's "pink and black" cunt, bared in the crowd' [*[le] couille blanche de taureau était entré dans le cul "rose et noir", dénudé dans la foule, de Simone*] (54/57). Similarly, the same colours carry through to the 'pink cape' [*'une cape rose'*] worn by Granero which is penetrated by the black monster of the bull [*'Le premier taureau ... une sorte de monstre noir'*] (50/53) the testicles of which Simone inserts into her vagina.¹

Hollier observes that Bataille's quotation, "pink and black", 'sports the colours of Lola de Valence'.² This is a reference to a Spanish dancer of the early 1860s. In turn, 'Lola de Valence' alludes to, on the one hand, the poem *Lola de Valence* (1863) by Charles Baudelaire (the lines in Baudelaire's poem use the metaphor of a jewel to transform Lola de Valence's genitals into a precious thing, a beautiful, glittering, pink and black jewel: 'un bijou rose et noir')³ and, on the other, to the lithograph/portrait which Baudelaire initially intended his short verse to embellish: the portrait of Lola de Valence (which carries the name of its subject, *Lola de Valence*, 1862) by Édouard Manet.⁴ Patrick Ffrench extends Hollier's observations to locate the same "pink and black" in one of Baudelaire's other poems, *Tout entière* (*Entire*, 1857).⁵ In *Tout entière*, Satan asks the poet what he finds loveliest of all the 'black and rosy features' [*'les objets noirs ou roses'*] which compose the body of his lover. The poet-lover is asked to choose between her 'rosy' or her 'dark' charms. Ultimately, the poet answers that such divisions are impossible.⁶

As Hollier and Ffrench have noted, these allusions are significant in terms of interpreting the themes of Bataille's novella and, we can add, in interpreting the novella's obscenity. We will consider these themes in a moment. Firstly, it is appropriate to add another connection to the web of allusions cast by Bataille's "pink and black" quotation. Via the title of Baudelaire's *Tout entière* we are led to lines from Sade's *Juliette*. There, a

¹ Denis Hollier, 'Bataille's Tomb: A Halloween Story,' trans. Richard Miller, *October* 33 (1985), 81.

² Hollier, 'Bataille's Tomb', 80. Also Susan Suleiman, 'Pornography, Transgression, and the Avant-Garde: Bataille's "Story of the Eye",' *The Poetics of Gender*, ed. Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 127; Ffrench, *The Cut*, 105-114 (see below).

³ Charles Baudelaire, *Lola de Valence* in *Baudelaire: The Complete Verse*, trans Francis Scarfe, (London: Anvil Press, 1986), 295.

⁴ Henri Perruchot, *Manet*, trans. Humphrey Hare (London: Perpetua Books, 1962), 99-100.

⁵ Ffrench, *The Cut*, 105. Ffrench's exploration echoes many of Hollier's findings as well as presenting new perspectives on the implications of Bataille's 'intertextual' appropriation of 'Rose et noir', 105-114.

⁶ Charles Baudelaire, *Toutes entière* in *Baudelaire: The Complete Verse*, 109. The original reads, '... Parmi toutes les belles choses / Dont est fait son enchantement / Parmi les objets noirs ou roses / Qui composent son corps charmant.'

footnote in the novel chastises the *philosophes* La Mettrie and Helvétius for not having revealed ‘truth’ [*la vérité*] more fully. The footnote concludes, ‘Let us now speak out, since we can; and since we owe the truth to men, let us entirely unveil her to them’ [*Osons donc parler aujourd’hui, puisque nous le pouvons; et puisque nous devons la vérité aux hommes, osons la leur dévoiler tout entière*] (*Juliette*, 175).¹ Of course, taken from *Juliette*, this quote leads us back to themes already considered in relation to *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*. ‘The obscene,’ writes Marcel Hénaff, ‘... is formulated as the challenge to “say everything”’.² *Tout entière* means everything in its entirety. This alludes to the ‘excess’ – the telling all – of Sade’s fiction, excess which Hénaff observed formulates one aspect of Sade’s obscenity. In one sense this indicates another layer of obscenity which *Histoire de l’œil* shares: it too could be said to contain the obscenity of ‘saying everything’, of excess, of *tout entière*. In ways similar to *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*, Bataille’s novella refers to the low, the vulgar, the obscene (and uses obscene language) alongside and using the language of high culture. Within *Histoire de l’œil*, this obscene linguistic excess could be said to include Bataille’s rupturing of the boundaries between words through their slippage of associations. To return to the sentiments of Baudelaire’s *Tout entière*, ‘saying everything’ could also be figured as saying or including the pink *and* the black. This is an intertwining of what Hollier calls, the attractive *and* the repulsive; pure and impure: ‘The attraction of the colour pink is far removed from the repulsive colour black,’ Hollier writes, but in Bataille’s novella as in Baudelaire’s *Tout entière* one cannot be separated from the other.³ This is not the only parallel between Sade’s footnote and Bataille’s novella.

Following a tradition of gendering and embodying ‘truth’ as female (see Chapters One, Three and Five), in Sade’s footnote ‘entirety’ is associated with ‘truth’ and we find ‘truth’ – ‘her’ – as naked, revealed, unveiled just like the unclothed female form. Recall now the narrator of *Histoire de l’œil*’s wish to ‘unveil’ (*sans aucun voile*) Simone’s genitals. In Bataille’s novella the unveiling of ‘truth’ – ‘her’ – explicitly involves an unveiling of Simone’s ‘obscene’ or ‘shameful’ genitals. Note in this respect the narrator’s words: ‘*ses parties impudiques*’ (9-10/13). This ‘truth’ is obscene, but not *just* obscene in the sense of ‘ill-omened’ i.e. linked to death (in the sense that, in Bataille’s work, sex is always associated

¹ I have altered the Seaver and Wainhouse translation to more accurately reflect the original. See Warman, ‘Jewels’, 88-90 for her commentary on these lines from Sade.

² Hénaff, ‘Encyclopaedia’, 166. See also Chapter One, ‘The Most Impure Tale Ever Told’.

³ Hollier, ‘Bataille’s Tomb’, 78.

with death – see ‘Death Is The Sole Outcome Of My Erection’). Bataille emphasises that the obscene motif of the ‘cul’ is obscene – bestial and dark – but also pure (elsewhere the narrator refers to Simone’s ‘cul’ as ‘lovely and pure’ [‘*aussi beau, aussi pur*’]) (12/16) and pink. Thus, in *Histoire de l’oeil*, just as death is intertwined with life so the impure, filthy, black and obscene is also pink. The repulsive (in Hollier’s terms) is also attractive. This is in itself – that purity is impure and the impure pure – an outrageous suggestion and another form of outrage which contributes to the novella’s obscene reputation. It is also obscene in that it provides another example of, in Kristeva’s terms, the horror-invoking abject: something which, let alone evoking man’s powerful, ambivalent response to the female genitals, ‘does not respect boundaries, position, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite’.¹

Nearly thirty years after publishing *Histoire de l’oeil*, in a discussion of the work of Marcel Proust, Bataille returned to the same bicolour metaphor which appears in his first novella’s web of obscene motifs. Writing on Proust, Bataille makes the connotations carried by each colour and the relationship between them explicit: ‘If the luminous intensity of Good did not give the night of Evil its blackness, Evil would lose its appeal,’ writes Bataille. He continues,

If love is sometimes pink, pink goes well with black, without which it would be a sign of insipidity. Without black, pink would surely lose that quality which affects the senses ... If pink has to be contrasted with black in order to suggest desire, would this black be black enough had we never thirsted for purity? ... Impurity is only known by contrast by those who thought they could not do without its opposite, purity.²

From this passage we can see that black carries connotations of impurity and evil; pink, purity and good, yet, as Bataille concludes, one cannot exist without the other. Although conventionally placed in opposition, Bataille points out that these ‘opposing’ values are inexorably and inevitably intertwined: ‘What emerges from this,’ Bataille writes, ‘is the rectification of the common view which inattentively sees Good in opposition to Evil’.³

In the same way therefore as Simone rises from the saucer and the binary oppositions of black and white blur – the white milk drips down her thighs onto the black of her

¹ Kristeva, *Powers*, 4.

² Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, 142-43. Cf. Hollier, ‘Bataille’s Tomb,’ 80; Ffrench, *The Cut*, 105.

³ Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, 144.

stockings (10/14) – we can see that, at their core, Bataille’s appropriation of Baudelaire’s motif ‘rose et noire’ carries connotations of *rose* as pink, purity, youth, sex (and life), good, while *noir* is darkness, night, anal, death, impurity and evil. Indivisible, mutual, both are combined in Simone’s “‘pink and dark’” ‘cul’. ‘Cul’: the obscene ‘truth’ which is unveiled as dark, night, impure, repulsive, is also ‘pink’, pure and attractive. Further, both are combined throughout the novella: the sun blinds, night allows us to see, the bull (symbol of the sun) is black and blinds the toreador; throughout the low is elevated. These are issues to which I return. Ffrench neatly summarises the function of Bataille’s “‘pink and black’” quotation/motif as, ‘a signal of the transgressive erotics of the text which will always associate the pure with the impure’.¹ We can add that these themes are independent neither from that of sight and unveiling nor that of (feminised) ‘truth’. The following section considers how the functions and themes underlying the novella’s obscenity are presented in the second part of the novel. I then explore how these themes relate to Bataille’s later theoretical writing.

2. ‘An Obscene Composition’²

Thus far I have not considered the second part of *Histoire de l’oeil*: the essay (*Coïncidences* or *Reminiscences*) which follows the *récit*. *Coïncidences* is a sort of framing meta-narrative which explains the function of the preceding story as a cathartic exercise. Thus, the *récit* is described as ‘a partly imaginary tale ... animated above all by the desire to forget ... the things I can be or do personally’ [*‘ce récit en partie imaginaire ... incité surtout par le désir d’oublier ... ce que je peux être ou faire personnellement’*] (69/73). However, this claim, alongside *Coïncidences*’s apparently ‘real’ autobiographical content, does less to clarify the nature of *Histoire de l’oeil* – is it real? Is it fiction? – than to further efface the fiction-reality distinction. If the tale is ‘partly imaginary’, which parts are imaginary and which are not? This breaking of the categories of reality and fiction returns us to a realm seemingly ubiquitous to obscene narratives: Freud’s uncanny (recall Freud’s words: ‘An uncanny effect

¹ Ffrench, *The Cut*, 105.

² 72/75.

is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced').¹ As Ffrench has observed, although the narrator of *Coïncidences* claims that 'he' is the *compositeur* of the preceding tale, as part of the tale and enclosed within the same book which was published under the pseudonym 'Lord Auch', both *Coïncidences*'s narrator and 'his' interpretations assume a fictional status – albeit a fictional status which, as Ffrench observes 'situates its subject in a strange (uncanny) position as if on the limit between "fiction" and the real'.²

Accepting that the phrase 'the desire to forget ... the things I can be or do personally' to refer to obscene acts and the narrator to equate to the 'author' of the novella, Ffrench goes on to point out that (as a cathartic exercise) *Coïncidences* suggests initially that the 'obscenity of the text ... is intended to erase or purge the obscenity which dominates the author's personality and his deeds'.³ In fact *Coïncidences* goes on to contradict this initial statement. It reveals that the process of writing uncovers (could we say 'unveils'?) a fundamentally obscene region deep within the writer's mind:

I ventured to explain such extraordinary relations [a reference to the slipping word associations of the novel] by assuming a profound region of my mind [*'une région profonde de mon esprit'*], where certain images coincide, the elementary ones, the *completely obscene* ones, [*'où coïncidaient des images élémentaires, toutes obscènes'*] i.e. the most scandalous, precisely those on which consciousness slides indefinitely [*'sur lesquelles glisse indéfiniment la conscience'*], unable to endure them without splintering [*'éclat'*] or aberration. (71/75, Bataille's emphasis).

The obscene – the 'elementary', 'scandalous', 'low' ('low' because obscene and it comes, figuratively, from a 'profound' region of the mind) – is presented as fundamental. Obscenity underpins consciousness and consciousness is unable to confront its underlying obscenity without dire consequence. Indeed, although translated as 'splintering', the word Bataille uses – *éclat* – has connotations of more than simply fragmentation: *éclat* also denotes light especially, 'brightness', 'sparkle' or 'radiance' and the related word *éclatant* can mean 'dazzling', 'brilliant' or 'bright'.⁴ Thus, carried within the same word which conveys

¹ Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', 367.

² Ffrench, *The Cut*, 157.

³ Ffrench, *The Cut*, 162.

⁴ These associations recall Severin's moments of *Verblendung* in *Venus im Pelz*.

fragmentation we can find an image of brilliant illumination. It would be possible to say therefore that, according to this narrator's view of obscenity, the moment consciousness perceives the obscenity upon which it slides can lead to a moment of illumination – but illumination which also involves destruction ('splintering'). Obscenity – 'certain images ... *completely obscene ones*' – becomes conflated with a process of rupturous revelation. The revelation itself, however is *of itself*: the nature of obscenity as fundamental and underpinning consciousness.¹

Further commenting on the tale, the narrator notes how freeing the obscene allows things to 'slide'.² It allows the emergence of forgotten 'personal memories' [*souvenirs personnels*] through and within the 'agonizing images that had emerged during the writing of this obscene composition [*Histoire de l'oeil*] [*images déchirantes qui avaient émergé au cours d'une composition obscène*]' (72/75). Among these memories is a scene involving the narrator's blind, mad, syphilitic father howling at the young narrator's mother and a doctor "Let me know when you've finished shafting my wife!" [*Dis donc, docteur, quand tu auras fini de piner ma femme!*"] (73/77). The narrator notes of his father's words

That utterance destroyed in the blink of an eye the demoralising effects of a strict upbringing, left me with something like a steady obligation, unconscious and unwilled: the necessity of finding an equivalent to that sentence in any situation I happen to be in; and this largely explains *Histoire de l'oeil*.

[*cette phrase qui a détruit en un clin d'oeil les effets démoralisants d'une éducation sévère a laissé après elle une sorte d'obligation constante, inconsciemment subie jusqu'ici et non voulue: la nécessité de trouver continuellement son équivalent dans toutes les situation où je me trouve et c'est ce qui explique en grande partie Histoire de l'oeil*]. (73/77).

If we are to believe the narrator, *Histoire de l'oeil*'s obscenity exists to confront, or evoke in the reader, the same 'blink of an eye' destruction – *éclat* – of all the effects (and one might add, beliefs) of 'a strict upbringing'. The safe beliefs of a moral upbringing are shattered; the dark within the pink is unveiled alongside the obscenity upon which we 'slide' and the death which is inextricably part of life. As mentioned, obscenity does this by revealing itself:

¹ Ffrench, *The Cut*, 168. Ffrench writes, 'obscenity is proposed as part of a process of revelation, part of the overcoming of repression ... obscenity is at the same time a deep level of the mind ... Obscenity overcomes or exceeds its own repression'.

² Ffrench, *The Cut*, 167.

revealing the 'truth' of a 'fundamental' underlying obscenity. Recalling Severin's moment of *Verblendung* which sees a blinding moment of illumination/revelation, within Bataille's text this moment appears as a kind of brilliant seeing everything while the eyes are closed/blinded ('in the blink of an eye'): *toutes obscènes* meets and is '*Tout entière*'.

Ffrench observes that in its staging of the writing process, of telling *tout entière* as part of a cathartic process of curing the self, *Coïncidences* 'ties the text to the psychoanalytic context of its time'.¹ This was a 'context' with which Bataille was familiar.² *Coïncidences* refers to, plays with, and as Ffrench notes, ultimately transgresses these codes: confronting an underlying obscenity does not cure the narratorial subject of 'what he can be and do'; instead, as the narrator recognises in the last lines of the book, it unleashes obscenity: obscene memories and an obscene composition (74/78).³

Yet, as Ffrench notes elsewhere, the novella's intertextuality 'ties' into more than just the cultural context of psychoanalysis. As Ffrench says, 'The history of avant-garde cinema is scattered with images of aggression against vision: visual shocks, violence done to the apparatus of projection, holes torn in the screen, dislocated frames, punctured celluloid ... This violence is figured as violence against the imaginary body of the spectator'.⁴ This violence done to vision can not be viewed as independent from the ethos of psychoanalysis for both represent similar concerns. Martin Jay observes that the eye, gaze and its violation are powerful symbolic components of Freudian psychoanalysis (consider for example the role of the eye in the Oedipus complex, the connection between blindness and castration anxiety, the role of vision in fetishism, creating ego-ideals and self-recognition).⁵ So too is the way of viewing the world anew by challenging the 'real', 'seen' world and how it is perceived by revealing a somehow 'truer' underlying 'reality'.⁶ *Histoire de l'oeil* is part of this tradition, a

¹ Ffrench, *The Cut*, 172.

² According to Hollier, *Against Architecture*, 108, Bataille 'preferred texts on the subject of collective psychology ... or texts that were at the time commonly rejected as being speculative'. These two groups included Freud's 'Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego'; 'Totem and Taboo' and 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'. Ffrench, *The Cut*, 161 notes that Bataille read Freud as early as 1923.

³ Ffrench, *The Cut*, 157-174

⁴ Ffrench, *The Cut*, 1.

⁵ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley et al.: University of California Press, 1994), 331-334.

⁶ Harrison, *Censorship*, 210.

tradition which does not just challenge conventional vision but portrays this challenge through explicit violation of the visual organ.

Within the novella the eye joins Bataille's web of motifs which binds violence, sex and death. As Michel Foucault notes 'the great scenes that interrupt Bataille's stories invariably concern the *spectacle* of erotic deaths'.¹ *Histoire de l'oeil's* climactic act provides an exquisite example. Sexualised, the priest's enucleated eye penetrates Simone's vagina; a spectator, the narrator confronts the obscene eye gazing back at him from Simone's vagina and not only him but at the dead priest lying among the symbols of a sacrifice (the violated Eucharist and ciborium of the Catholic Mass). Dead, not only does this eye not see, it is the eye of the dead girl Marcelle, for the eye is no longer the priest's: as the narrator says, 'in Simone's hairy vagina, I saw the wan blue eye of Marcelle, gazing at me' (67/69, Bataille's emphasis).

Violation of vision is not limited to the novella's climax. During the *spectacle* of the killing of bulls at the bullfight, the narrator remarks that the terror these scenes evoke in Simone 'mainly expressed a violent desire' [*expressive surtout d'un violent désir*] (47/50). At the same time, the play between toreador and bull gives the *spectators* 'that feeling of total and repeated lunging typical of the game of coitus. The extreme proximity of death is also felt in the same way ... at such moving moments of the bullfight the women jerk themselves off merely by rubbing their thighs together' [*Le sensation de projection totale et répétée, particulière au jeu du coït. L'extrême proximité de la mort y est du reste sentie de la même façon ... à ces moments pathétiques de la corrida les femmes se branlent par le seul frottement des cuisses*] (47/50). Furthermore, the bullfight scene anticipates the story's climax for it is then that Simone inserts a dead bull's testicle (according to the semiotic play of sounds and images an object which is also simultaneously an eye and an egg) into her vagina. At the same moment, she and the other spectators witness Granero's eye spurt from its socket. Recall also the novella's opening and the narrator's voyeuristic encounter: Simone and the narrator do not touch, hardly speak, only watch each other. The same is true of their encounter with the road crash victim. And so it continues: throughout *Histoire de l'oeil*, voyeurism accompanies every violent/sexual moment of the novella, just as it accompanies every violent/sexual moment in Bataille's theoretical work.

It is to Bataille's theoretical work that I now wish to turn, for if (as they are) death, sex and the (violated) eye and gaze are central to *Histoire de l'oeil*, then these themes also

¹ Foucault, 'A Preface to Transgression', 47. (My emphasis).

stand at the core of Bataille's wider oeuvre. It is there – in later works, such as *L'érotisme* – that we find the recurrence, or what can be read as a kind of explanation for Bataille's portrayal of the violent shattering of divisions; divisions which, within his first novella, occur between sex and death, darkness and light, pink and black, the high and the low, and the apparently paradoxical association of light with blindness and blindness with sight: the *éclat* of revealed 'truth' occurs in the 'blink of an eye'. As such these works allow me to attach a (brief) theoretical framework to the themes expressed in Bataille's first novella and, more importantly, give a theoretical framework to aid an understanding of *Histoire de l'oeil*'s obscenity.¹

3. 'Death Is The Sole Outcome Of My Erection'²

Georges Didi-Huberman is among the critics who note that the articles and longer studies Bataille wrote subsequent to *Histoire de l'oeil* often rearticulate the themes and motifs introduced in his first novella.³ Parallels are recognisable between *Histoire de l'oeil*'s emphasis of the essential presence of violence and death (whether 'physically', or, as we have seen, through the language used and the fracturing 'obscene' slippage of signifiers within the sexual act) and the principle themes of Bataille's later volumes. Consider for example phrases such as 'the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation',⁴ 'the urge towards love, pushed to its limit, is an urge towards death',⁵ and 'underlying

¹ My summary emphasises the link between sexual activity and death in enough detail to inform my later reading of the obscenity in *Histoire de l'oeil*. In doing so, I bypass the issues of expenditure and economy which forms another significant strand of Bataille's thought.

² 30/33.

³ Georges Didi-Huberman, *La ressemblance informe, ou, le gai savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille* (Paris: Éditions Macula, 1995), 79. French, *The Cut*, 19 also notes that 'The Documents [a slightly later journal which Bataille wrote for and edited] project is, I think, informed by a structural operation which Bataille works out in earlier texts [including *Histoire de l'oeil*']'. Julia Kristeva writes, 'Bataille's novels are inseparable from his theoretical positions and give them their real value'. Quoted from Suleiman, 'Pornography', 122.

⁴ Bataille, *Eroticism*, 16.

⁵ Bataille, *Eroticism*, 42.

eroticism is the feeling of something bursting, of the violence accompanying an explosion'¹ all of which repeat the sentiments of *Histoire de l'oeil*'s 'death was the sole outcome of my erection'.

In works such as *L'érotisme* and *L'histoire de l'érotisme*, Bataille explains that death is inextricably part of sexual activity. For him, death is the destruction of civilised order and selfhood, but not of 'life'. Bataille argues that the human world – our perception, or 'reality' (bounded by taboos, laws, beliefs about ourselves and the nature of existence) – is limited. Beyond these ideological borders lies a state beyond the comprehension of the human world. Bataille presents this domain as boundariless, a 'continuity' (*Eroticism*, 14). In Bataille's thought, death is not the destruction of life, but a sign of life; death binds all living things. As Bataille writes, 'life brings forth ceaselessly, but only in order to swallow up what she has produced' (*Eroticism*, 86). Because mankind is a reproductive being, it is driven by the instinctual knowledge of death to reproduce, in other words, to create new life. This *life*, is formed by the *death* of two cells – sperm and ovum. Bataille's work on eroticism emerges from this fact: the paradox of life is that at its centre lies death ('death, and death alone, constantly ensures the renewal of life')² and that life itself emerges from death and putrefaction ('life is not distinct from the putrefaction of life which death is').³ Therefore (recalling the interpenetration of pink and black in *Histoire de l'oeil*) sex is a response to, carries with it our awareness of, and is intimately bound to, death. In these terms there exists a 'connection between the promise of life implicit in eroticism and the sensuous aspect of death' (*Eroticism*, 59).

Although Bataille's talk of 'continuity' is not limited to the human body I shall use this association as a simplified illustration of what 'continuity' involves. Thus, the intact human body, explains Bataille at the beginning of *L'érotisme*, is a barrier and each subject is isolated, alone, trapped as it were, in its individual flesh container: 'Between one being and another, there is a gulf, a discontinuity ... You and I are *discontinuous* beings' (*Eroticism*, 12. Bataille's emphasis). To shatter this discontinuity and bridge the abyss between individuals, the body must be opened. The penetration of one body with another – as occurs in sexual intercourse – creates a momentary bond, an 'instant of continuity', a 'fusion, all barriers gone' (*Eroticism*, 14 and 129).

¹ Bataille, *Eroticism*, 93.

² Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share II*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 84.

³ Bataille, *Accursed Share II*, 81.

According to Bataille, the awareness of our nature provokes an ambivalent response. Sex, as much as death, is necessary to our being but both acts disrupt man's normal, self-contained state; both involve a 'dissolution' of man's being. This occurs in terms of individual subjectivity and on the wider stage of causing the dissolution of the ordered patterns of society (taboos, rules, laws, categories) that regulate mankind's discontinuous existence. As Bataille writes, death does not 'stop at the limits traced by respect and custom which give human life its social pattern ... death turns the rightful order topsy-turvy' (*Eroticism*, 82). The sexual too, 'always entails a breaking down of established patterns, the patterns ... of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals' (*Eroticism*, 18). Man fears this loss of boundaries and order. The concept of fusion and its association with primeval life-forces – putrefaction, decay, and ferment – from which life emerges, evoke responses of disgust in 'civilised' man. After all, man does not wish to be reminded of that 'rank and heaving matter ... a ferment of life' (*Eroticism*, 56) from which he emerged. Man reacts to the uneasiness experienced at the sight or thought of decay, and death (all representing the 'threat of imminent decay') (*Eroticism*, 57) with reactions of 'fear, the basis of disgust' and 'horror' (*Eroticism*, 57). Parallels between Bataille's writing on death and Kristeva's very physical abject (Kristeva of course wrote after Bataille and was influenced by his writing) and the emotional responses both evoke are obvious and confirmed when Bataille goes on to add more elements or forces which induce these responses:

The horror we feel at the thought of a corpse is akin to the feeling we have at human excreta. What makes this association more compelling is our similar disgust at aspects of sensuality we call obscene. The sexual channels are also the body's sewers ... though the relationship defies clear definition, there do exist unmistakable links between excreta, decay and sexuality. (*Eroticism*, 57-8).

Although Freud and Kristeva, forged a theoretical link between the same elements – excreta, sexuality, decay, death – and theorised man's ambivalent emotive responses to them, (Freud called aspects of this reaction 'the "uncanny"' and linked it to the death instinct; Kristeva named similar objects and reactions 'abject'), only Bataille *explicitly* notes that this is the realm of what 'we call obscene'. Just as Freud's and Kristeva's subject is repulsed by and fears reminders of its fragility and is attracted to what repels it, so Bataille notes that man's 'fear', 'disgust' and 'horror' veil fear of the self-dissolution implicit within these sights and experiences. Thus, mankind clings in terror to his isolated, discontinuous state and

to society's comforting laws and structure. The latter provides a rigid order that hides man's proximity to 'the ferment of life'. Within this terror, however (again, echoing Freud's uncanny and anticipating Kristeva's abject) man desires that which revolts him. Man longs to dissolve his separate self and fuse with others into that boundariless flow and the primal life forces which 'we call obscene'. 'We yearn for our lost continuity,' writes Bataille, '... our obsession with a primal continuity' (*Eroticism*, 15). So it is that, driving man in the other direction from his fear and disgust at death, is a desire *for* death and that which 'imperils our life' (*Eroticism*, 86). *Continual* dissolution or continuity is only possible in death. Bataille states quite plainly that 'death is to be identified with continuity' (*Eroticism*, 13). However, other acts besides death provide a momentary experience of sought-after 'continuity'. The interpenetration of bodies during sexual intercourse (especially at the moment of orgasm) is one example.

Bataille also relishes attention on the role sacrifice once had in society. He notes that although literal sacrifice is absent from contemporary Western civilisation, it persists in the Catholic Mass. Bataille compares sacrifice to the act of intercourse: in both, the lover and the victim are penetrated, both lose the barriers which isolate them from the continuity of being (*Eroticism*, 90). Furthermore, both acts reveal the naked flesh and both cause the body to violently convulse, taking the subject beyond control, reason, will and society's accepted order. However, whereas intercourse is an individual experience, ritualistic and religious sacrifices provide a communal glimpse of the continuity experienced in death. Bataille writes,

the victim dies and the spectators share in what his death reveals. This is ... the revelation of continuity through the death of a discontinuous being ... what the tense onlookers experience in the succeeding silence, is the continuity of all existence with which the victim is now one. (*Eroticism*, 22)

Sacrifice is the principle act Bataille uses to support his argument that glimpses of mortality fascinate mankind. Other acts are also capable of momentarily satisfying man's urge towards the experience of self-dissolution. Among these Bataille mentions the thrill – that tension between fear and excitement – engendered by reading detective fiction and, in another passage, notes that in this way 'literature is in fact religion's heir. A sacrifice is a novel, a story, illustrated in a bloody fashion' (*Eroticism*, 86-87).

Amid the motif in both these examples is the ever-present gaze: death 'reveals', it gives 'revelation', there are 'onlookers' and readers see the illustrations of death which written stories provide. In this sense alone, the title of Bataille's novella is appropriate for it introduces this core motif. The motif is that of the eye, the gaze, the spectator and the spectacle of the obscene. The same motif of sight recurs in *Coincidences* where the narrator describes the obscene as 'a profound region of my mind, where certain *images* coincide, the elementary ones, the *completely obscene* ones, i.e. the most scandalous, precisely those on which consciousness slides indefinitely' (my emphasis on *images*). These are 'images' not sounds or sensations. Thus, whether watching the sacrificial victim, reading the words of a detective novel, studying cave-paintings, or gazing at naked flesh, the eye (vision, spectator, gaze...) dominates Bataille's oeuvre. So it is that, in appropriately ocular terms Bataille describes the effect of these images and acts – detective story, sacrifice, naked flesh – as 'open[ing] onto death *like a window onto a courtyard*' (*History of Eroticism*, 153, Bataille's emphasis). Sex, sacrifice and reading; the lover, the spectator and the reader: all require eyes to focus on a spectacle which provides a glimpse of the instinctively longed for dissolution – *éclat* – of the self. Individual and social order ruptured, a glimpse is given to the terrifying and yet seductive state that lies beyond. Just as they are in Bataille's first novella, the visual act and the visual organ are explicitly linked to the violent – obscene – violation of the body and to death.

To conclude this excursion into Bataille's theory it appears that throughout Bataille's work (let alone his first novel) death appears in all its potent and horrifying materiality as an obscene force/image/motif, which serves to give a glimpse of something most people prefer not to see or at least admit (an issue returned to below). Throughout Bataille's oeuvre, as much as his narrator says of Bataille's first *composition obscène*, obscenity is part of a revelatory, unveiling process.

The exploration of these core themes – notably the relation between sight, death, 'truth' and sex – at the heart of Bataille's theory and fiction has allowed recent critics, including Martin Jay, Rosalind Krauss, Georges Didi-Huberman and Patrick Ffrench to present important readings (which this chapter is indebted to) of Bataille's work. At the heart of these readings is awareness of all that the eye represents in Western culture and the way that Bataille uses this loaded symbol.¹ As Didi-Huberman points out, the eye is a culturally

¹ Ffrench, *The Cut*, 85. Ffrench notes that *Histoire de l'oeil* is 'all about the eye, it's a matter of the eye, this is a story that touches upon the eye'.

powerful organ: it is the ‘window to the soul’, ‘the most noble of our tools of knowledge’ and an object of taboo – the eye should not be ‘touched’.¹ Adding to the ambivalence surrounding this organ, Miller adds that the eye is also ““vile jelly””.² The same concerns aid in exploration of *Histoire de l’oeil*’s obscenity. In this respect (as Hollier, Didi-Huberman, and Martin Jay among others have noted),³ a short article called ‘Oeil’ (‘Eye’), written by Bataille a year after *Histoire de l’oeil*’s publication illustrates Bataille’s awareness of the power and cultural associations of the eye.

In ‘Oeil’ Bataille reminds us that ‘civilised’ man is subject to many inexplicable terrors [‘*l’homme civilisé est caractérisé par l’acuité d’horreurs souvent peu explicables*’].⁴ He mentions in this respect man’s fear of insects. He then describes another source of fear ‘able to provoke acute and contradictory reactions’ [‘*des réactions aiguës et contradictoires*’]: the eye. Just as *Histoire de l’oeil*’s narrator describes the decapitated girl-cyclist as ‘nauseating in part, and in part very beautiful’ (11), in this article, Bataille compares the eye to the edge of a blade [‘*un tranchant*’] as an organ both ‘seductive’ and ‘at the limit of horror’ [‘*à la limite de l’horreur*’]. Bataille was aware that we cannot watch a man pull wide a young woman’s eyelids then slice through her sclera, iris and lens, bringing the eye’s clear jelly spilling onto the razor-blade, without experiencing a potent emotional response. Those who have witnessed this, the opening scene from Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel’s film *Un chien andalou* (dir. Luis Buñuel: France, 1929), know that even in grainy black and white, this close-up, eye-level shot (figure 5) evokes disgust, unease, anxiety and nausea – exactly those reactions Bataille associated with mankind’s glimpse of the things ‘we call obscene’, things we can add, which threaten man’s discontinuity (*Eroticism* 57-61).

¹ Didi-Huberman, *Ressemblance*, 75-76, 78.

² See Miller, *Disgust*, 89-91 for a summary of the ‘eye’ in Western culture in which Miller notes that the Eye has often been regarded as a sexual organ – an association which further binds it to Bataille’s web of interlinked motifs.

³ Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 225-226; Hollier, *Architecture*, 77-78; Didi-Huberman, *Ressemblance*, 75-78. The following discussion relies on the suggestions made by these critics.

⁴ Georges Bataille, ‘Oeil,’ *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 187.

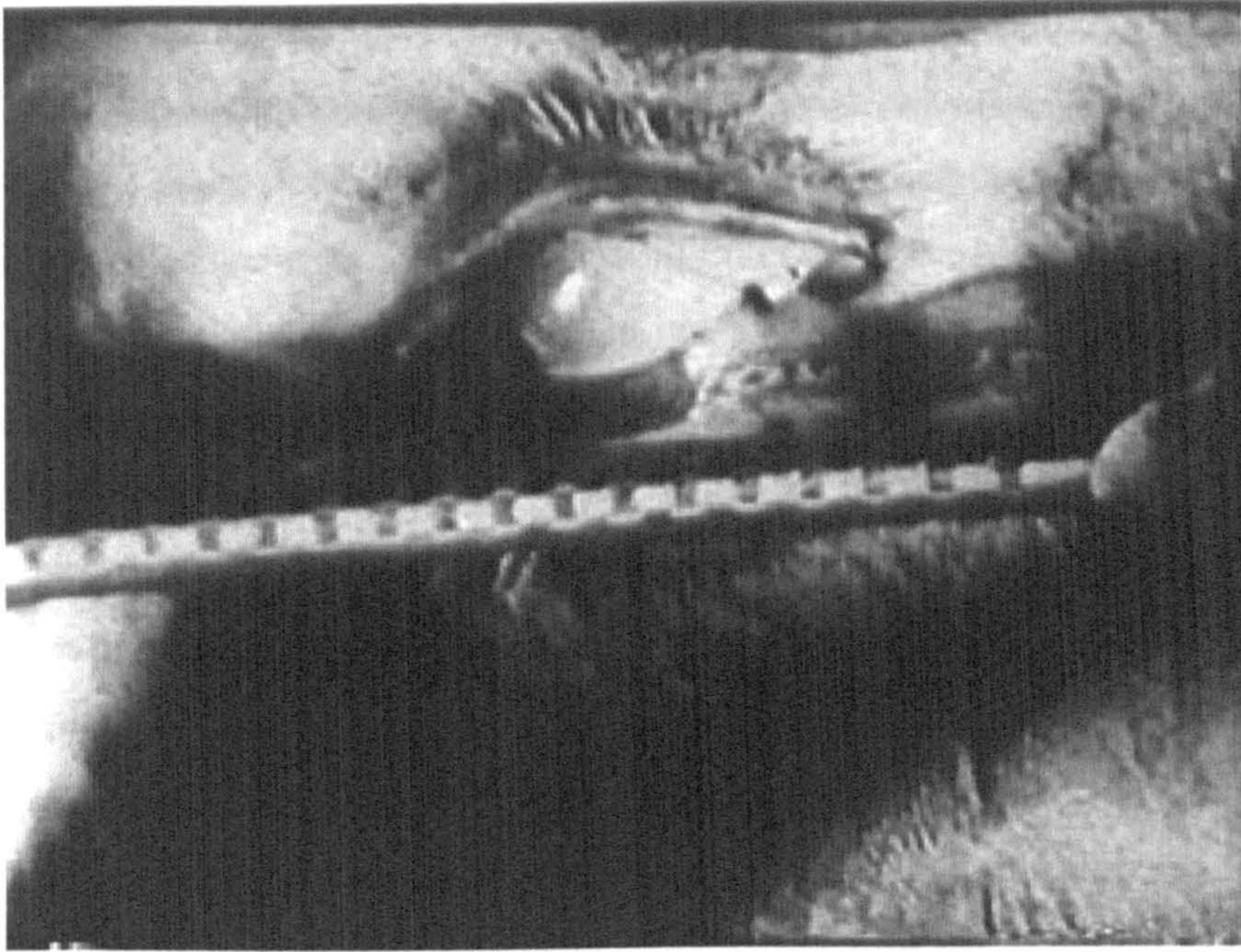


Figure 5: Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, *Un chien andalou* (film still), dir. Buñuel and Dalí: France, 1929. Reproduced by permission of Contemporary Films U.K. Ltd.

This scene from Buñuel's film forms one focus of Bataille's short article. He describes how two cultural objects of terror and fascination meet in the image of the razor cutting the eye – or, in Bataille's words again stressing the sexual, these two objects 'making bloody love' [*'amours sanglantes'*]¹ – in the opening shots of the film. Bataille asserts that Buñuel's film is more effective in engaging its audience than an adventure film because with no logical plot progression, the spectators – as much as, says Bataille, its creators – do not know when the chain of scenes will end and don't know what horror will next occur. For Bataille, this is a remarkable achievement, rendering the film's creators and spectators 'equals': horror and nausea penetrate the spectators, just as (Bataille remarks) Buñuel was ill for eight days after filming the slicing of the eye.

The language Bataille employs in his article is significant. He talks of the images of *Un chien andalou* as having an immediacy about them, of 'taking the audience by the throat' [*'pris à la gorge'*] and 'penetrating' [*'pénétrant'*] them.² Here, we find echoes of the themes which dominate *Histoire de l'oeil* as well as an embryonic analogy of Bataille's later image

¹ Bataille, 'Oeil', 187.

² Bataille, 'Oeil', 187.

of the spectators at a sacrifice receiving the vicarious revelation of 'the continuity of all existence with which the victim is now one'.

Supporting French's observation that 'the history of avant-garde cinema is scattered with images of aggression against vision ... violence is figured as violence against the imaginary body of the spectator,' Buñuel said of *Un chien andalou* that 'This film has no intention of attracting or pleasing the spectator – indeed, on the contrary, it attacks him to the degree to which he belongs to a society with which Surrealism is at war ... this film is meant to explode in the hands of its enemies'.¹ It seems plausible to draw a comparison between the intentions of one artist and those of another; between the spectator-victim and the society 'to which he belongs' and the images of Dalí and Buñuel's film and the reader-victim and violent images of Bataille's *Histoire de l'oeil*. Just as, in Bataille's words, the spectators of *Un chien andalou* are violently 'taken by the throat' and 'penetrated' by the horrific images of the film, so the readers of Bataille's novel are 'penetrated' by the sights of *Histoire de l'oeil*. In 'seeing' the enucleation of Granero and the priest we are like the spectators of a sacrifice or the spectators of *Un chien andalou*; the reader's vision too is mutilated. However, this is only one level upon which Bataille's text operates in its intertwining of the gaze and the obscene. The eye is attacked in ways which are not always physical. Indeed, as we saw in Bataille's later work in which the spectators of a sacrifice 'share in what [the victim's] death reveals ... the revelation of continuity through the death of a discontinuous being', even when 'vicarious', violence towards eyes opens them onto aspects of culture and human nature to which they are usually blind.

4. 'Decent People Have Gelded Eyes'²

Following the remarks quoted earlier made by Didi-Huberman, it can be suggested that, ever since Plato's 'cave simile' Western epistemology has seen the pure light of the sun and the eye which perceives that light as symbols of enlightenment, knowledge and truth.³ 'The eye,'

¹ Quoted from Amos Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), 60.

² 42/44-5.

³ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 316-325. Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 27-30 for the eye in Plato and ancient mythology. Didi-Huberman, *Ressemblance*, 75-76.

writes Ffrench, is the ‘privileged organ of human knowledge, perception ... the eye and its culture is partly what defines the “human”’.¹ The sun illuminates the world and it is through the eye – and traditionally the eye alone of the senses – that (Western) civilisation contemplates, speculates, considers, and ultimately ‘understands’ the world’s secrets. Martin Jay refers to this as ‘the tenacious hold of ocularcentrism over Western culture’.² For Freud too, writing at the same time that *Histoire de l’oeil* was published, it was man’s adoption of an erect posture and its privileging of the visual which raised man, literally (and figuratively) from the ground, the animal, ‘the olfactory’, and allowed the primacy of sight and the ‘fateful process of civilisation’ to begin.³ As Rosalind Krauss succinctly notes, ‘Man’s upright posture [is seen to] bring with it the possibility of distance, of contemplation, of domination’.⁴ Jay’s history of the visual in European culture also reminds us that the long-standing connection between sight, light, knowledge, truth and the operation of ‘civilisation’ is evident in etymological as much as metaphorical terms. It is no coincidence that the French *voir* (‘to see’) makes up part of *savoir* (‘to know’), or that in English ‘to illuminate’ can mean to cast both a literal and a metaphorical light (i.e. knowledge and understanding). Meanwhile ‘to study’ can mean both ‘to look at closely’ and to ‘gain knowledge of’. Furthermore, the term The Enlightenment – with emphasis on ‘light’ – refers to (as discussed in Chapter Two) a period of European optimism which emphasised rational, visual study and perception, allowing science to reveal the world’s ‘truths’.⁵ In some ways therefore, the eye/vision, as much as the sun, symbolises ‘civilised’ Euro-American culture.⁶ In relation to *Un chien andalou*, violence towards eyes symbolises opening them onto aspects of culture and human nature to which they are usually blind. Thus, just as Buñuel’s razor violates the sanctity of the eye as organ of knowledge, *Histoire de l’oeil* challenges sight, perception, what is seen and, by extension, known.

¹ Ffrench, *The Cut*, 31.

² Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 236.

³ Sigmund Freud, ‘Civilization and its Discontents,’ trans. James Strachey, *Civilization, Society and Religion*, Penguin Freud Library, vol. 12 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 289.

⁴ See Krauss’s commentary on this passage, *Optical*, 246-247. Cf. Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 222 and 333.

⁵ Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 1-13. Lack of direct quotation from Jay’s study does not indicate the depths to which this chapter is indebted to his exploration of these themes.

⁶ Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 27-57 gives a fuller account of the sun in western philosophy and Bataille’s reaction against it.

In *Histoire de l'oeil* violence done to the eye is not limited to physical violation. Another form of violence involves the noble eye's violation (and/or contagion) by other sounds and signifiers. Susan Cokal notes that 'the mutilation to language [in *Histoire de l'oeil*] ... mirrors harm done to bodies'.¹ By 'harm done to bodies' Cokal includes the violence inflicted on the eye. By 'mutilation' of language, she refers to the semiotic slipping of words and signifiers which occurs in the text; the way, for example that some words (*Oeil* [eye] – *Oeuf* [egg] – *Soleil* [sun] – *Couille* [testicle] – *Cul* [vagina/anus] – *Cuvette* [lavatory bowl]) form a homophonic chain winding through the novel. Once the sound association has been made between these words, a shattering of distinctions occurs. Thus, during the climactic church-scene, Simone asks the narrator, "Do you see the eye [of the priest]? ... It's an egg." ["Tu vois l'oeil? ... C'est un oeuf"] (65-66/67).

In a way similar to the narrator's use of the word 'cul' to refer to the vagina, the rupturing of distinction between the words 'eye' and 'egg' and 'sun' collapses distinction between both the images *and* the cultural associations surrounding each word/image. As a result (Ffrench notes), a network of associations – apart from those which are homophonic – bind each piece of the chain to those around it: eyes, eggs, testicles, lavatories are white; eyes, eggs, the sun, testicles, the opening of the vagina, the anus and the lavatory bowl are round or ellipsoid;² the excretion from the anus links it to the lavatory; the testicle, the vagina and the egg are linked to reproduction and fertility; without the sun, the eye cannot see. Fusing them with slang names for the genitals and excretory organs this semiotic slipping also violates the eye and the sun as symbols of 'civilised' knowledge and enlightening perception. Ffrench succinctly states, that it presents 'an undermining of the whole edifice of "speculative" "enlightened" human culture ... the refusal of the eye as organ of knowledge and phenomenological orientation'.³

Another example of *Histoire de l'oeil*'s word/image slippage it is worth noting (here I quote from the extant English translation by Joachim Neugroschel)

Upon my asking what the word *urinate* reminded her of, she [Simone] replied; *terminate*, the eyes, with a razor, something red, the sun. And egg? A calf's eye, because of the colour of the head (the calf's head) and

¹ Susann Cokal, 'Wounds, Ruptures and Sudden Space in the Fiction of Georges Bataille,' *French-Forum* 25:1 (2000), 92-95.

² Ffrench, *The Cut*, 94-95.

³ Ffrench, *The Cut*, 30.

also because the white of the egg was the white of the eye, and the yolk the eyeball. The eye, she said, was egg-shaped. (34)

[*Et comme je lui demandais à quoi la faisait penser le mot uriner, elle me répondit: buriner, les yeux, avec un rasoir, quelque chose de rouge, le soleil. Et un oeuf? un oeil de veau, à cause de la couleur de la tête (la tête de veau) et aussie fait que le blanc d'oeuf est du blanc d'oeil, le jaune d'oeuf la prunelle.*] (38)

I do not wish to dwell on the image slippages – the ‘white of the eye’ and the ‘white of the egg’ – and (in French) the sound associations that contribute to the gradual dissolution of elements in the novel; others such as Barthes, Ffrench and Cokal, have already done so. My interest lies in a different direction. In attempting to carry through the homophonic rhyming of the original French, the translator has substituted a word with an utterly different meaning to that used by Bataille. Bataille rhymes *buriner* with *uriner* (‘to urinate’). *Buriner* does not mean, as it has been translated, ‘terminate’. It means ‘to engrave’. This correction has an important implication for the meaning of this line and for the text. What Simone is *really* reminded of is ‘to engrave, the eyes, with a razor ...’.

Only words or pictures can be engraved into something. This image explicitly recalls – or in terms of chronology anticipates – the literal *drawing* of the razor across the eye and what Bataille calls the ‘penetration’ of the spectators by *Un chien andalou*’s horrific scenes, just as the reader is ‘penetrated’ by the words of a novel.

The image of words or pictures being cut into the eye is also uncannily reminiscent of the execution machine in Franz Kafka’s story, *In der Straskolonie* (*In The Penal Colony*, 1919). Ffrench recalls that, in Kafka’s story, criminals are executed by having a machine write with needles into their flesh the words of a quite literal death ‘sentence’.¹ Of particular interest in the story is less that each execution takes place before an audience, but that this audience awaits (like the spectators in Bataille’s work on sacrifice) the moment when ‘enlightenment’ comes to the criminal. It is in the *eyes* of the convict that ‘enlightenment’ can be seen: ‘Enlightenment comes [to the criminal] ... It begins around the eyes,’ writes Kafka, ‘From there it radiates. [It is] A moment that might tempt one to get under the Harrow [the needles of the torture machine] oneself’.² In Kafka’s story ‘Enlightenment’ (my emphasis) – understanding/knowledge – radiates from the eyes of the dying criminal. It is different from

¹ Ffrench, *The Cut*, 124.

² Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis, The Penal Colony and Other Stories*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 204.

and beyond lived experience. The seemingly paradoxical situation is that unseeing eyes can see more than living eyes; that our knowledge is incomplete or flawed, that living eyes are somehow blind.

Kafka's story is scathingly ironic; Bataille displayed a very different attitude towards violent death. In 1925 Bataille was given a photograph. The photograph (one of a set of four reproduced in Michel Surya's *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*) shows the execution by 'The Torture of a Hundred Pieces' of a Chinese man convicted of murder. In these photos, the criminal is gaunt, naked, tied to a stake, streaked with blood from gaping wounds in his chest. An official cuts off the still-living criminal's leg at the knee. Fixated, a crowd of spectators watch. Perhaps most disturbing of all is the criminal's expression: his hair is on end, his lips stretch in an enigmatic grin, his eyes roll back, white, unseeing. Bataille had no doubt that this was the face of ecstasy.¹

This image of eyes rolled back into the skull so that only their whites can be seen reminds us that *Histoire de l'oeil* depicts more than one type of eye and more than one type of sight. The obscene image which dominates *Coïncidences* is of the 'author' describing his blind, syphilitic father urinating into a container. 'The weirdest thing was certainly the way he looked while pissing,' says the 'authorial' voice,

Those huge eyes went almost entirely blank when he pissed, with a completely stupefying expression of abandon and aberration in a world that he alone could see ... the image of those white eyes from that time was directly linked, for me, to the image of eggs.

[*'le plus étrange était certainement sa façon de regarder en pissant ... ces grands yeux étaient donc presque entièrement blancs quand il pissait, avec une expression tout à fait abrutissante d'abandon et d'égarement dan un monde que lui seul pouvait voir ... l'image de ces yeux blancs à ce moment-là qui est directement liée pour moi à celle des oeufs*'] (72/76, Bataille's emphasis).

This memory is one of the 'agonizing images that had emerged during an obscene composition' (*Histoire de l'oeil*) from which the novella's egg/eye slippage evolves, moving from the blind eyes of the urinating father, via Simone's obscene play (both literal and through word association) with urination, eggs, bulls' testicles and the enucleated globe of the toreador, to the priest, whose eye 'is an egg'. Yet, these 'blind', white eyes are not sightless: like the torture victim in Bataille's photograph, the condemned criminals in

¹ Surya, *Bataille*, 93-95. Cf. Ffrench, *The Cut*, 130-131.

Kafka's story, and the sacrificial victim in Bataille's theoretical work, the father's blind eyes (perhaps, like the blinded toreador, like the blinded priest) see a world inaccessible to the 'sighted': 'a world that he alone could see'. The suggestion is that those who can 'see' are not those who can see clearly. Their knowledge and understanding are flawed, just as it is 'in the blink of an eye' [*un clin d'oeil*] – in the act of *closing* the eye – that the narrator of *Coïncidences* is afforded a shattering/dazzling (*éclat*) revelation of the obscenity ('certain images ... the elementary ones, the *completely obscene*') upon which consciousness slides. The sun does not illuminate all knowledge. Herein we approach the crux of the eye's significance, and, through that, the significance of *Histoire de l'oeil*'s obscenity. A moment which illustrates this occurs when the narrator stretches out on the grass after sex with Simone. It is night and he stares

straight up at the Milky Way, that strange breach of astral sperm and heavenly urine across the cranial vault formed by the ring of constellations: that open crack at the summit of the sky ... To others the universe seems decent because decent people have gelded eyes. That is why they fear obscenity.

[la voie lactée, étrange trouée de sperme astral et d'urine céleste à travers la voûte crânienne formée par le cercle des constellations: cette fêlure ouverte au sommet du ciel ... A d'autres l'univers paraît honnête parce que les honnêtes gens ont les yeux châtrés. C'est pourquoi ils craignent l'obscénité.] (42/44-5).

The narrator privileges his sight – and knowledge – over that of the 'gelded eyes' of decent people. The narrator sees the universe as a place of waste, excretion, and death: sperm shot into a void, urine, the milk which cooled Simone's 'pink and dark' flesh, and the night sky as the inside of a vast, cracked, skull. Unlike those with 'gelded eyes' he comes to recognise and not fear the obscenity (excreta, darkness, death) that he sees in the world.

Translated as 'gelded', '*châtrer*' carries connotations of infertility, sterility, and emasculation. Thus, according to the narrator, 'decent people' who see the universe through weakened and sterile sight, see it as a 'decent' place. These people fear the obscene. Their vision – and knowledge – is limited. The narrator suggests that to those who see clearly, the universe (like its inhabitants) is not sterile and decent. Waste, death, decay and disorder – the obscene – are all around and within; waste, death and decay exist hand in hand with life. The 'obscene' is fundamental, 'profound' and, as is written in *Coïncidences*, upon it all else slides.

Significantly, just as it is in 'the blink of an eye' that the *éclat* of consciousness occurs, the sun – that conventional symbol of knowledge, perception and illumination – does not accompany the narrator's revelation. Cockerel and bull are Mithraic symbols of the sun and throughout *Histoire de l'oeil* both animals appear (or are referred to) as slaughtered. Consider for example the ritual killing of bulls in the arena and reference to how 'one cuts the throats of roosters' [*on égorge les coqs*] (42/45). Similarly, it is a *lunar* – not solar – vision/revelation which shows the narrator something the 'blinding sun' [*un soleil aveuglant*] (53/56) of conventional perception never can.¹ In the vision which Bataille portrays, urine, wasted sperm, images of death – in other words the obscene – cast a different kind of lucidity, but a lucidity nevertheless; a '*vision lunaire*'. Recalling one of the origins of 'obscenity' as deriving from the same root as the word 'obscure', dark (the dark of night, of black, of a lunar rather than solar vision perhaps?), these obscene images show *themselves* to be the violent, filthy, morbid truth feared (and desired) yet disavowed by those who see the world through 'gelded eyes'.

'Your sex,' writes Bataille, in a later article,

is the darkest and bloodiest part of yourself ... it is a sort of half being or animal, alien to your surface habits. An extreme conflict exists between it and what you show of yourself. Whatever your real violence, you present a civilised and polished aspect to others.

*[Ton sexe est le point le plus sombre et le plus saignant de toi-même. ... il est lui-même une sorte de moitié d'être ou d'animal; étranger à tes habitudes de surface. Un extrême désaccord existe entre lui et ce que tu montres de toi. Quelle que soit ta violence réelle, tu présentes aux autres des aspects civilisés et polis].*²

In the climax of *Histoire de l'oeil*, Bataille shatters the 'civilised and polished aspect' and confronts the reader with 'the darkest and bloodiest part' of 'him'self. Indeed, just as this obscene part gazes at the narrator, it gazes back at the reader in a mirror-like image: the reader 'sees' obscenity, the eye penetrates the obscene (vagina – the 'acceptable' word – not 'cul' or 'con' used here by Bataille challenges the arbitrary 'purity' of acceptable language –

¹ Bataille returns to this theme more explicitly in his article, 'Soleil pourri'. 'Rotten Sun,' *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. and intro. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993 ed), 57-58. See also 'Soleil pourri,' *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 231-232. This theme is literalised in the text if we see the bull as symbol of the sun and find it – the sun/bull – blinding Granero.

² Georges Bataille, 'Fragments d'un manuel de L'Anti-Chrétien,' *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 390.

a point discussed further in relation to Ballard, Chapter Six) and in turn obscenity gazes back, penetrating the reader's eye (and mind).

Ffrench has noted that the equivalent which *Histoire de l'oeil*'s narrator finds for his father's formative outburst (““Tell me, doctor, when you've finished shafting my wife!””) is ‘a transgressive revelation of female sexuality, a fascinated stare at (and from) the female sex’.¹ So it is that in *Histoire de l'oeil* the female genitals are *the* novella's recurrent and most obvious obscene image. Consider in this respect how the narrator's initiation into the ‘fundamental’ obscene occurs in the opening scene when he sees Simone's ‘pink and black’ flesh unveiled for the first time. Sexual, ‘base’ the ‘cul’ is obscene. The ‘cul’ leaks urine and semen which offers an obscene image in terms of excreta and dirt and its emphasis on the porous, fragile nature of the human form. In fact, Bataille extends this image to associate the ‘cul’ with other obscene motifs, most notably, the filth of swamps and the Earth's own violent yet fundamental excreta (both of which have primitive, pre-social connotations): ‘Those swampy regions of the cunt, nothing resembles them more than ... the suffocating emissions of volcanoes [which only] ... turn active except, like storms or volcanoes, with something of catastrophe or disaster’ [*Les régions marécageuses du cul – auxquelles ne ressemblent que ... les émanations suffocantes des volcans ... qui n'entrent en activité que, comme les orages ou les volcans, avec quelque chose de la catastrophe ou du désastre*] (22/26). Thus, by extension, these fundamental elements also recall the obscene as the ‘ill-omened’; on one level they are naturally catastrophic; on another their association with ‘swamps’ conjures images of decay, ‘the ferment of life’ and the death-related. Furthermore, evoking the uncanny response which Freud attributes to the female genitals, the narrator fears the thought of Simone naked beneath her pinafore. This thought makes him ‘anxious’ but despite this fear, he ‘was hoping’ that she *was* entirely nude (9/13). Her nakedness – especially the ‘cul’ (throughout the tale the narrator hardly mentions any other part of Simone's anatomy: her breasts, lips, legs, eyes seemingly hold no interest for him) fascinates him. He describes how, for example, Simone ‘let me gaze hypnotically’ at her ‘cul’ [*me laissait regarder comme en hypnose*] (22/26).

As *the* obscene motif, it is to Simone's ‘cul’ that Bataille forces the enlightened eye.² There it gazes into (and indeed out of) that obscene ‘animal’ part which ‘gelded eyes’

¹ Ffrench, *The Cut*, 170.

² Suleiman, ‘Pornography’, 134 fn.10 points out that the sight of the female genitals also plays a part in *Coincidences* and that there is an association in Freudian theory between the gaze of the Medusa and the male's fear of seeing the female genitals.

disavow. Perhaps it should be emphasised once more that this is not simply an act of forcing the privileged organ of Western culture 'down there' in an act of shattering *éclat* and shocking juxtaposition. It is not so much a case of the eye *becoming* debased as Bataille revealing the obscene *within* the 'high'; the 'enlightened' showing the 'low', the bestial, the impure, the regressive as part of itself: the black within the pink; the pink within the black, the blindness of the sighted.

Although not in relation to the image of the eye, Susan Suleiman notes that Bataille 'characteristically displaces things downward'.¹ Thus, the eye is forced out of the head and into the animal and sexual – 'hairy vagina' – while the sun, elevated, illuminating, and all seeing, becomes rotten, urinating, and 'blinding'.² Yet, Bataille's challenge to accepted binary categories, such as 'civilised' and 'base' also involves a simultaneous displacement *upwards* (in terms of significance) of 'baser' acts, words, and objects such as urine, the genitals, wasted sperm, excreta, and corpses – in other words, the obscene. In the narrator's revelation, these 'baser' forces become, literally, heavenly, divine, illuminating the fundamental obscenity which society disavows. This is also true of the climactic scene in which urine replaces the 'blood' of the Eucharist, sperm the consecrated host or body of Christ (61-62/63) and the chalice becomes a 'sacred chamber-pot' (62/64). It is not just the High being reduced to the state of the Low; the Low is also raised to the level of the High.

Finally, in terms of the gaze and the obscene motif of the 'cul', the gaze and unveiling the obscene, it is relevant to note that the obscenity of *Histoire de l'oeil* was not simply textual/linguistic. All its original versions contained explicit visual obscenity. The first, 1928, edition appeared with eight lithographs by the surrealist artist and friend of Bataille, André Masson. The second (1944) edition contained original aquatint engravings by another surrealist, Hans Bellmer (see Chapters Five and Six for more on Bellmer).³ Visual obscenity is an aspect of the obscene unfortunately (but necessarily) lacking from this thesis which instead concentrates on *reading* obscenity in terms of text. The operation of visual obscenity however, is, broadly speaking, identical to that of textual obscenity – it represents the low, the body's fragility, death – but one of Bellmer's illustrations to the second edition

¹ Suleiman, 'Pornography', 127.

² Michèle H. Richman, *Reading Georges Bataille: Beyond the Gift* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 91-92, 94 and 98.

³ Surya, *Bataille*, 106.

(figure 6) provides an opportunity to consider visual obscenity and how this particular illustration presents the high-low dynamics of Bataille's text.



Figure 6: Hans Bellmer, *Histoire de l'oeil* (etching), ca. 1944. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. Permission to reproduce image granted by DACS.

Paralleling the contents of the text, what immediately confronts the spectator of this particular image is the girl's genitals (her features and childish shoes suggest a 'girl': young, a teenager like Simone). Emphasised by perspective and the comparative darkness of the area's shading this obscene motif – sexual, low, a dark hole in the body – is thrust out of the

page towards the eyes of the viewer. Secondly, representing the same dynamic related in the text, the girl's genitals and anus are thrust, not only forwards, but upwards, while the ennobled eyes and head are forced towards the ground: the culturally low and high are inverted. Finally, carrying through other obscene themes and motifs, we find the multiple lines of Bellmer's engraving give the figure a sense of ambiguity: she is half dream-like, half-ghostly, her limbs contorted, tangled. Displaying four legs we are uncertain if this is two figures merging, or overlaid images of the same figure. Her form is beginning to dissolve, or, in more violent terms (the picture is, after all, ambiguous) her self is shattering and violated, her skirt torn open to unveil anus, breasts and vagina.

As mentioned, Didi-Huberman, Krauss, Jay, Ffrench and others have shown that Bataille's later writing rearticulates many of the issues and motifs which appear in his first novella. Following the work of these critics, to gain a sense of the ways in which the obscene develops and recurs within Bataille's oeuvre, it is of interest to consider some of his later articles. Earlier I considered 'Oeil', but another example which many critics cite is Bataille's brief article 'Le gros orteil' ('The Big Toe', 1929). Echoing the inversion of cultural hierarchies played out in *Histoire de l'oeil* and Bellmer's illustration, this article also evokes the significance which Freud was attributing to man's verticality – his erect posture¹ – in 'Civilisation and its Discontents' which Freud was writing at about the same time. Thus, in 'Le gros orteil', Bataille observes that within culture,

there is a bias in favour of that which elevates itself, and human life is erroneously seen as an elevation. The division of the universe into subterranean hell and perfectly pure heaven is an indelible conception ... with their feet in mud but their heads more or less in light, men obstinately imagine a tide that will permanently elevate them.²

Debasing such a 'gelded' view, Bataille continues, 'Human life entails, in fact, the rage of seeing oneself as a back and forth movement from refuse to the ideal, and from the ideal to refuse'.³ Consequently, in Bataille's analogy, the big toe represents the obscenity of human life: it is fundamental, as rude, shameful and 'low' as it is in Bataille's article, it is part of us.

¹ Freud, 'Civilization and its Discontents', 289. See quotations given earlier.

² Georges Bataille, 'The Big Toe,' *Vision of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. and intro. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993 ed), 20. See also 'Le gros orteil', *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 200-204.

³ Bataille, 'Big Toe', 20-21.

Moreover, it is a part of us always 'in the mud' which, as Bataille observes, 'is psychologically analogous to the brutal fall of man – in other words, to death. The hideously cadaverous and at the same time loud and proud appearance of the big toe corresponds to this derision and gives a very shrill expression to the disorder of the human body'.¹ Bataille ends his piece with talk of the 'seductiveness' of the base, of the need for man to open 'his eyes wide: opening them wide, then, before a big toe'.² Before, in other words, (and once again) the omnipresent obscene.

Another article of Bataille's which can be linked to his portrayal of the 'fundamental' obscenity is 'Informe' (translated as 'formless')³ which appeared as a definition of the concept of *informe* in the journal *Documents*. As Bataille explains, for him the concept of *informe* describes, on the one hand, objects or forces which have no definite form (Bataille uses the example of 'spit' [*'crachat'*]), yet on the other, '*informe* is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to downgrade things in the world'. In a world in which for philosophers and academics, everything must have form (must be given, in Bataille's terms, which emphasise the absurdity of such an undertaking, 'its own fitted frock coat' [*'une redingote'*]), this all-important form is shattered by admitting its absurdity and the fact that all things have/contain *informe*.

This way of looking at the world, a way which emphasises its ambiguity (is not the obscene so often ambiguous? shattering, defying or blurring boundaries?) describes the conceptual core at the heart of Bataille's *vision lunaire*. Rosalind Krauss gives her own succinct definition of *informe* which emphasises this shared element between Bataille's *informe* and obscenity's ambiguity. For Krauss, *informe* is something which blurs

the distinctions between human and animal and thus to produce a formal rupture that goes deeper than any apparent form. Shapeless matter, like spittle or a crushed worm, says Bataille ... are instances of formlessness ... the *informe* is a conceptual matter, the shattering of signifying boundaries, the undoing of categories.⁴

¹ Bataille, 'Big Toe', 22.

² Bataille, 'Big Toe', 23.

³ Georges Bataille, 'Formless,' *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. and intro. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993 ed), 31. Bataille, 'Informe,' *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 217. All quotes occur on the same page as the original source given.

⁴ Krauss, *Optical*, 156-7.

Recalling what we have noted regarding the interdependence of the obscene and the pure in Bataille's thought, Krauss goes on to remind us that 'Informe is not 'the opposite of form': 'Instead, let us think of *informe* as what form itself creates ... let us think of it not as the opposite of form but as a possibility working at the heart of form, to erode it from within'.¹ Thus, *informe* ('formless') is intrinsic to and produced by that 'embodiment' of the ideal, enlightened worldview, the Platonic Form.²

I evoke 'Informe' because parallels can be drawn between Bataille's (and Krauss's) definition of *informe* and the sentiments accompanying obscenity in *Histoire de l'oeil*. There we find *nothing* independent of the obscene: as the narrator of *Coincidences* says, the entire 'obscene composition' slides on the surface of obscenity, resting on it, containing it, relying on it, just as the obscene relies on and is a product of a need for 'purity', categories and boundaries. In his insistence on the presence of the *informe*, Bataille persistently undoes categories, binaries, oppositions, in other (Bataille's) words, 'the common view which inattentively sees Good in opposition to Evil'³ (to which we could perhaps substitute 'Pure' and 'Impure', 'Barbaric' and 'Civilised', 'Knowledge' and 'Ignorance', 'Acceptable' and 'Obscene' . . .).

Further parallels can be drawn between this rupturing of boundaries, man's ambivalent response to that which he fears (as described by Bataille in his later work and embodied in the fascinated gaze of *Histoire de l'oeil*'s narrator) and Freud's uncanny (I have gestured towards similar parallels with Kristeva's abject). As Krauss notes, *informe*'s shattering of the border between life and death, 'allowing one to contaminate the other ... is a message of the uncanny'.⁴ Thus, like obscene aspects of Sade's *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* and the 'unheimlich' aura of Sacher-Masoch's *Venus im Pelz*, so Bataille's *informe* and his obscenity return us to Freud's uncanny. Without being overly repetitive in this respect, it is possible to recognise shared obscene motifs including violated bodies, blinded eyes, the fear and attraction of the female genitals and a rupturing of boundaries. Throughout *Histoire de l'oeil*, as much as any other categories, we find the rupturing of two particular boundaries which figure prominently in Freud's essay: that between the real and the world of dreams: 'we had abandoned the real world', says *Histoire de l'oeil*'s narrator, '... Our

¹ Krauss, *Optical*, 166-7.

² Hollier, *Architecture*, 99.

³ Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, 144. Cf. Hollier, 'Bataille's Tomb,' 80 and Ffrench, *The Cut*, 105.

⁴ Krauss, *Optical*, 172.

personal hallucination now developed ... boundlessly' [*Nous avons abandonné le monde vraiment réel ... Notre hallucination particulière se développait cette fois sans plus de limite*] (29/33).

The presence of the obscene and the uncanny mean that, besides the more explicit references to death in the novella, we find ourselves once again before death and Freud's death-instinct. Bataille read Freud and among the works of Freud which Bataille preferred was 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' – the work in which Freud introduced his theory of Eros and Thanatos.¹ Yet, despite similar motifs and awareness of the subject caught between attraction and repulsion in its attitude to death (consider the way female spectators become sexually aroused by the violent spectacle in the bull-ring), 'death' in Bataille's theory and fiction cannot accurately be seen as it is in Freud's essay where death features as a return to a Nirvana-like state free from external stimuli.² Freud's death-instinct is not death *per se*. It is a force, a drive attached to an ill-omened awareness of mortality. This death manages to remain comparatively distant – certainly when compared to the view presented by Bataille. For Bataille, death is 'a general ferment ... the virulent activity of corruption ... That nauseous, rank and heaving matter' (*Eroticism*, 56). Freud's death-instinct lacks the medieval physicality which Bataille ceaselessly portrays. For Bataille, life, not just death, 'is not distinct from the putrefaction of life which death is'.³ Life is pink *and* black. Despite his recognition of an urge towards death in life and 'civilisation', Freud's is a sanitised death: an instinct without decay, putrefaction, or decomposition. Indeed, Freud's model could be said to represent one element of that disavowal of death's physicality against which Bataille's work struggles and to which he attempts to open our eyes.

Interpreting these two factors: conceptual oscillation – Low to High and High to Low, Simone's 'cul' for example being bestial ('fuming', 'hairy') yet also 'pure' – and the *informe* within the form leads us back to Bataille's first novella and the narrator's comment on the nature of the *récit* as an attempt to articulate the effect his blind father's outburst had. In other words, a tool for destroying 'the demoralising effects of a strict upbringing'. If this comment accurately describes the operation of the novella which I read as using multiple kinds of obscenity to splinter the beliefs imposed firstly by an ideological view of existence as pure, and secondly violate the 'gelded eyes' of the reader who sees the world bathed in the

¹ Hollier, *Architecture*, 108.

² Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', 329.

³ Bataille, *Accursed Share II*, 81.

'blinding' light of the sun, then 'this' – by which I mean the 'necessity' of finding an equivalent to the narrator's father's sentence – could be said to 'explain' more than just *Histoire de l'oeil*. Although very selective in the works I have discussed, from the works considered it is possible to see not only in Bataille's first novella but throughout Bataille's vision of the world that his work intentionally revolves around and unveils what 'we call obscene'. In his first novella these multiple layers include the obscenity of excess – *tout entière* (and *toutes obscènes*). There is also obscene language. Bodies are fragile (easily penetrated, often excreting/leaking) and there is emphasis on the obscene nature of the 'cul'. There is the obscenity of fearful (yet attractive) ambiguity – the *informe* – and recalling Mary Douglas's assertion that dirt and filth are that which fall beyond the boundaries of categories (see Chapter One, 'Obscenity and Society'), this *informe*/ambiguity and disorder, extends to filth, impurity, cadavers, waste, excreta. These concepts and substances are rendered threatening and powerful through their underlying association with obscenity as 'ill-omened' and linked to death. All invoke parallels between Bataille's concept of the obscene and Freud's uncanny (and, although to avoid repetition I have said little of this connection, also Kristeva's abject). Bataille's obscene insists on the dark/black opposed to the acceptable light of the 'blinding' sun. His is, in many ways, an 'obscure' obscenity. Yet, for all its darkness, this obscenity reveals: it is the obscene 'truth' of the female sex – from where life emerges – unveiled, violently opening eyes 'wide' to what is normally kept 'off the stage' and indeed, doubly so: not only is the 'cul' revealed, but also the *obscene* within its pink aspect is emphasised just as the pink within the blackness of obscenity is emphasised, just as life emerges from death. In doing so, like the literal opening of the eye with a razor, this obscenity evokes emotional responses of terror and also fascination. It is a realisation/revelation which, Bataille notes, mankind prefers to leave 'off the stage' as much today as (we may speculate – considering the possible Latinate origins of 'obscene') it did in ancient times.

'At the present time,' wrote Bataille in an article a few years later, 'mankind, sickened and cowardly, flees from the multiple horrors that make up the tableau of existence, I think that it is only in complete darkness that it is possible for us to find what we have always been searching for'.¹ For Bataille, the uninterpretable – but certainly not glorified –

¹ Georges Bataille, 'L'esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions', *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 273. Certain parallels exist here between Socrates's speech to Glaucon in Book Seven of Plato's *Republic*. Socrates suggests that the inhabitants of a cave would turn away from the truth presented to them, believing their own 'truth' was far truer. (Plato, *Republic*, 318).

truth of existence lies in recognising the lowest, the vilest, the most grotesque, the most obscene and the most violent, the darkness which is produced from and part of the pure, the light, the acceptable. Life depends on death; order on disorder; purity on obscenity; the sacred on the profane; 'rose' on 'noir'; good on evil. Bataille continued in the same article, by asserting that until 'cowardly man' has the courage to confront the filthy truth of 'his own decay', mankind will only ever have a limited understanding of himself and 'the tableau of existence'.¹ Mankind, for Bataille, was obscene – obscene yet cowardly: 'surrounded by a halo of death, a creature who is too pale and too large stands up, a creature who, under a sick sun, is nothing other than the celestial eye it lacks'.²

Of course, as Ffrench notes, within 'the psychoanalytic context of its time, and ... its history'³ to which *Histoire de l'oeil* repeatedly 'ties' itself, Bataille is not unique in suggesting that what we 'see' (and hence know and understand) is limited and that a more authentic 'truth' exists behind, beyond, or beneath conventional sight or epistemology. The same themes have always been a privileged locus of philosophy and poetry (not least of which, as we have seen, is their presence within the West's erotic tradition). As far back as Plato it has been said that mankind is only capable of seeing and knowing inadequate shadows of 'true' objects. Bataille's surrealist contemporaries presented similar concerns. Repeatedly placing the gaze at the centre of their work they too challenged what it was to see and the nature of what is seen.⁴ Their art defied visual (realist) conventions and the eye (often represented as blinded, mutilated or enucleated as in *Histoire de l'oeil*) became a frequent motif in their work.⁵ Mention of Freud recalls on the one hand Freud's writing which draws attention to man's ocularcentrism and the way that the 'eye' and sight developed as a privileged symbol in Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalytic thought.⁶ On the other hand we are reminded that psychoanalysis is based on a similar premise, that the fundamental, 'true' 'meaning' behind our actions and desires is not immediately knowable but, violent and

¹ Bataille, 'L'esprit moderne', 273.

² Georges Bataille, 'The Pineal Eye,' *Visions of Excess*, 90. See also 'Dossier de l'oeil pinéal,' *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 13-47.

³ Ffrench, *The Cut*, 172.

⁴ John Lecht, 'Surrealism and the Practice of Writing, or The "case" of Bataille,' *Bataille: Writing the Sacred*, ed. Caroline Bailey Gill (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 121. Also see Surya, *Bataille*, 108 for a discussion of Bataille's relationship to neo-platonism.

⁵ Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 236-262 for a full discussion of the eye in surrealism.

⁶ Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 331-339 for discussion of the eye in Freudian (and Lacanian) theory.

sexual, this ('obscene' because violent and sexual?) 'truth' must be sought. This process too is a type of illumination. Yet, Bataille can be set apart from Platonists and surrealists (among others). Firstly, like Sade, he was certainly more uncompromising in the methods he used and in what he showed than most poets and philosophers. Secondly, Bataille is unusual because his fiction ties into, and in a way illustrates, his own comprehensive philosophical system. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, at the heart of Bataille's thought is neither an Ideal, nor optimistic psychic liberation, but the obscene. Moreover, explicitly or by association, as part of the obscene, Bataille unveils not so much an 'instinct' as death in all its grotesque physicality: decay, putrefaction, corpses, opened bodies and excreta and all that is death-related in the Bataillean sense.

Jonathan Dollimore has suggested that Bataille's preoccupation with death stems from his work as a medievalist. Dollimore writes that, 'In the culture of the medieval and early modern he [Bataille] encountered above all a passionate fascination with death and dissolution; a sense of mutability not as the delicate poignancy felt in the perception of the fall of a leaf, but a potent force of dissolution and decay'.¹ There is no question that Bataille's knowledge of medieval and early modern history had a profound influence on him. So did Catholicism. Between 1917 and 1922, before abruptly losing faith, Bataille wanted to be ordained into the priesthood. Of course, loss of faith does not mean that faith's influence is lost. For the rest of his life and throughout his writing, like the evangelist's contempt of the flesh, Bataille exhibited a contradictory fascination with flesh and 'sex ... the darkest and bloodiest part of yourself'² which he presented as both odious and beautiful, both dependent upon and surrounded by an all too often forgotten shroud of death.³

In fact, if one wished to speculate on the cultural influences underlying the centrality of the obscene and the death-centred in Bataille's vision of life, it is not necessary to reach back to medieval times. One could observe, as his biographer, Michael Surya does, that, Bataille was of a generation 'attentive to the despair and disgust [disgust. . . that emotion related to the obscene] into which the war cast a whole generation'.⁴ Although Bataille never saw action in the First World War (nor did he in the Second), like so many others he was no doubt aware of the cost of war: 1.4 million dead French, 1.7 million dead Russians, 1.8

¹ Dollimore, *Sex, Literature, Censorship*, 69.

² Bataille, 'Fragments', 390.

³ See Surya, *Bataille*, 27-30 for a discussion of the influence of Catholicism on Bataille.

⁴ Surya, *Bataille*, 123-4.

million Germans, 1.2 million Austro-Hungarians, 0.9 million British and 615,000 Italians.¹ According to Jay, the horrors of war *were* responsible for a ‘violent inflection’ to the artistic interrogation of accepted civilised ‘truths’ in the decades which followed.² So much death and waste challenged received ‘truths’ about ‘civilisation’ and raised fundamental questions: Is ‘civilisation’ really morally good? Is the ability to cause mass destruction what ‘progress’ is about? Can ‘civilisation’ really call itself ethical? Where is the recognition of this potent force of dissolution within which ‘civilisation’ is so emphatically embedded? No doubt also simply “why?”.

Years after writing *Histoire de l'oeil*, Bataille embraced war as illustrative of his theories – after all, there could be, he argued, no human world in which war did not exist for progress includes regression and civilisation barbarity just as purity depends on its opposite. For Bataille, the question “why?” could be easily answered: ‘Like you and I, those responsible for Auschwitz had a human nose, mouth, voice and reason, they were able to make love, have children; like the pyramids or the Acropolis, Auschwitz is a fact and sign of mankind’.³ Recall (Chapter One, ‘The Etymology of “Obscene”’) the German encyclopaedia entry on obscenity which gives war [*Krieg*] as an example of the obscene and we see that, once again – in this case in war – Bataille is focusing on mankind’s co-existence with obscenity.

This observation, like *Histoire de l'oeil*’s obscenity, is unsettling. It shatters the safe belief in progress as good, in mankind as pure – or ‘civilised’ and somehow no longer bestial or barbaric. Perhaps also appropriately, given the carnage of its recent history, there is, as the narrator comments, a ‘disastrous sadness’ a sort of desperate acceptance, rather than any glory about *Histoire de l'oeil* and its *vision lunaire*. From this perspective it is certainly not, as the feminist critic, Andrea Dworkin, once described it, a tale of the ‘romanticization of death’ or a confession that ‘force leading to death is what men most secretly, most deeply, and most truly value in sex’.⁴ *Histoire de l'oeil*’s obscenity, like Buñuel’s razor, is trying to open mankind’s ‘gelded eyes’ to this fact: to ourselves, to the obscene and that threatening force of dissolution – death – which Bataille regarded as the fundamental ‘truth’ disavowed

¹ Statistics from Martin Pugh ed., *A Companion to Modern European History: 1871-1945* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 283.

² Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 211.

³ Georges Bataille, ‘Notes: Sartre,’ *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 11 (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 226.

⁴ Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London: The Women’s Press, 1981), 176.

by a 'cowardly', blinded, mankind. Bataille's first novel can be seen as an illustration and signpost to the themes which came to dominate his later theoretical writing. Its obscenity is revelatory and the novella can be read as an embodiment of all that Bataille attributes to the obscene; all that 'gelded eyes' are blind to. Like a razor, its obscene passages serve to slice through the facades of culture to unveil a 'material reality', the 'fundamental' obscene, as Bataille writes in a later article, using the now familiar terms of sight, unveiling, 'truth' and dark radiance (that *vision lunaire*), 'like the sudden gust of night wind which, for one or two brief moments, opens a window to life; suddenly lifting the veil which hides that which we are not allowed to see'.¹

¹ Bataille, 'L'esprit moderne', 273. [*'comme un coup de vent nocturne qui ouvre une fenêtre, de vivre ... en soulevant tout à coup les tentures qui cachent ce qu'il faudrait à tout prix ne pas voir'*].

CHAPTER FIVE

**THE DISROBING OF O:
HISTOIRE D'O AND THE MYSTERY OF WOMAN**

IN 1940 MAX ERNST PAINTED *L'habillement de la mariée* (*The Robing of the Bride*), a painting which merges the feminine, the sexual and the sinister (figure 7). Combining grace with morbid sexuality it shows a naked woman or perhaps a half-woman-half-bird creature standing, dressed in a cloak of blood red feathers. Behind this figure hangs a mirror-like portrait in which the same image appears sketchily drawn. In Ernst's painting the woman's face is masked with the likeness – or perhaps with the head – of an owl. Behind and to the left of her/it (hovering between the human and animal the indefinite pronoun is justified) stands another naked female form with a swollen throat and wild hair. To the central figure's right is a dark stork figure. Wearing breeches and carrying a phallic spear and beak the stork combines the human and animal but this time appears to be gendered as male. These figures appear surrounded by floor tiles, stone walls and stark, angular shadows which create a sense of enclosure or imprisonment. The image's atmosphere of sinister sexuality is further embodied in the tearful homunculus – bloated, a dirty green, ambiguously gendered (it has male genitals but two pairs of female breasts) – in the bottom right corner.

For David Hopkins the homunculus, like the other figures, indicates some of the multi-layered significance of the painting's narrative. Principle in Hopkins's interpretation are elements of alchemy and witchcraft.¹ As Hopkins says, 'in alchemy the "Bride" was a term given to the perfected "stone" after its "stripping" and "robing" (colour changes) in the furnace'.² Alchemy is a process of transformation and/or perfection but the distorted figures in Ernst's painting (they are far from 'ideal' or 'perfect') suggest that this process of transformation portrays alchemy or transformation gone awry.

¹ David Hopkins, 'The Robing of the Bride,' *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, ed. Jennifer Munby (London: Tate Publishing, 2001), 76.

² Hopkins, 'Robing', 76.



Figure 7: Max Ernst, *L'habillement de la mariée* [*The Robing of the Bride*] (1940), Oil painting (black and white, detail). Reproduced by permission of DACS.

Recalling that (the German national) Ernst painted this image while an ‘enemy alien’ interred in France at the beginning of the Second World War, Hopkins perceives another layer of the image as ‘redolent of one of the “witch trials” of the Middle Ages’.¹ In this light, the distorted female figure with her wild hair becomes ‘a reworking of the “weather witches” of German legend’² and her puffed-up throat is evidence of a scene of exorcism: ‘grotesque swellings,’ writes Hopkins, ‘were alleged to occur in witches’ bodies prior to the expulsion of demons’.³ Viewed from this perspective,³ the stork figure becomes one of the inquisitors whose job was to search suspected witches for incriminating ‘witch marks’ and

¹ Hopkins, ‘Robing’, 76.

² Hopkins, ‘Robing’, 76.

³ Hopkins, ‘Robing’, 76.

the homunculus and the face emerging from the chest of the principle figure appear as expelled demonic presences. Finally, adding another layer of interpretation to Ernst's painting, Hopkins notes that the distorted and/or 'possessed' female figure on the right exemplifies 'the surrealists' attitude towards female sexuality'.¹ Talking of the self-professed leader of the Paris-based surrealist circle, André Breton, Nicholas Harrison provides a useful summary of 'the surrealists' attitude towards female sexuality':

First, women are viewed as creation's highest achievement, and the answer to all men's problems. [André] Breton, for instance, wrote in 1933: "It is the earth which, somehow, gives orders through woman. ... That is why love and women are the clearest solution to all the world's mysteries"; and in 1944 he [Breton] was still talking of "earthly salvation through woman". Secondly, and relatedly, women are considered close to nature and so to provide access to the "real" world ... [Thirdly is] an idea of women as irreducibly other and mysterious: in the second manifesto, for instance, Breton notes that "the problem of woman is the most marvellous and disturbing thing in the world". Similarly, sex retains something dark and enigmatic about it: in Breton's words, "even these days the sexual world, despite the supremely memorable investigations carried out in modern times by Sade and Freud, has not, to the best of my knowledge stopped setting against our desire to penetrate the universe its indestructible nucleus of *night* [nuit]".²

Now let us consider *Histoire d'O* (*The Story of O*) for this is a novel written in the early 1950s about a young woman called O whose flesh is whipped, branded, pierced, raped, and bloodily inscribed. Ultimately, O is driven to fulfil a form of self-destructive desire.

Histoire d'O's often sinister portrayal of female sexuality is seldom compared to artistic representations of the female in general or surrealism and the surrealists' depiction of women in particular.³ Like *Venus im Pelz* however, the novel contains frequent reference to art's portrayal of the female. As well as being a fashion photographer who takes photos of female models (55-7/77-80), O likens her experiences to a painting called '*La correction familiale*' ('Family Discipline') (71/94), a statue in the Luxembourg Gardens (127/151), and in the novel's climax there appears to be an explicit reference to Ernst's *L'habillement de la mariée* (173-74/199-200) – a moment to which I return below ('Open. . . There Lay Her

¹ Hopkins, 'Robing', 76.

² Harrison, *Censorship*, 162. Harrison translates *nuit* as 'darkness'. I have chosen the translation of 'night' to connect more directly with certain themes within *Histoire d'O* and the *vision lunaire* of the previous chapter.

³ Cf. A. Phillips, *Masochism*, 70 also makes a connection between *Histoire d'O* and Ernst's painting. The sum of Phillips's comment on the subject is: this is 'possibly another reference, in this case to a painting by Max Ernst'.

Raison d'Être'). These references might invite a comparison between the women depicted in *Histoire d'O* and those in a Western artistic tradition.

Secondly, the novel was contemporary with the later surrealists. Although completed two years earlier,¹ this tale first appeared under the pseudonym 'Pauline Réage' in France in 1954. *Rétour à Roissy* (*Return to Roissy*), a sequel of scant literary merit and critical interest followed in 1969. Both books were published by Jean-Jacques Pauvert – the publisher of Sade, Bataille, and some post-war surrealist journals. Réage's first novel – the focus of this chapter – carried a preface by the French intellectual, writer, critic, and member of the surrealist circle, Jean Paulhan. Besides forging a tentative link between the novel and the surrealists, this short, accompanying essay provided *Histoire d'O* with a certain literary cachet. This was confirmed by a positive review from Georges Bataille in 1955. In the same year, *Histoire d'O* won the minor literary award, *Prix des Deux Magots*.² Despite various attempts to ban *Histoire d'O*, it has never yet been out of print; it has been a best-seller, and has firmly established itself within France's tradition of sexually violent narratives (it is, for example, one of the French texts at the core of Sontag's 'The Pornographic Imagination').³ As with other books of a similar nature, not long after its French publication, an English translation followed (1956, re-translated in 1957). The English translation was first published by Olympia Press, a publishing house responsible for producing many literary, sexually graphic works of the time, including novels by Henry Miller, Alexander Trocchi, and Jean Genet.⁴

Finally, when considering the relevance of comparing *Histoire d'O* to the surrealists' female figures, it is necessary to consider what was, for nearly forty years, one of the principle mysteries of the novel: its author.

Identity – its creation and its destruction – is a significant theme within this novel. As John Phillips observes, even in its title identity is a tempting mystery: who, after all, is O? Is it a story *of* O or *by* O (the French 'de' is ambiguous)?⁵ Moreover, for several decades, for many, as the novel was published under the name 'Pauline Réage' another pressing question was who created O? Being a pseudonym, 'Pauline Réage' is also a construct, a self (or indeed non-self) made out of words and a self which becomes part of the novel's fiction.

¹ Phillips, *Forbidden*, 87.

² Mickelson, 'X-Rated O', 165.

³ Sontag, 'Pornographic', 48-59.

⁴ Phillips, *Forbidden*, 16-17.

⁵ Phillips, *Forbidden*, 91-92.

Perhaps for this reason, as Phillips reminds us, in much criticism of *Histoire d'O*, the question of identity has spread beyond the book's central protagonist so that, for decades, questions about whether this novel of violent subjugation of the female was a male fantasy of woman as a wilfully subservient sex-slave or – as Paulhan suggests in his preface¹ – an honest description by a woman of a woman's desire, became recurrent and apparently important in attempting to 'understand' the novel.²

In 1994, the mystery of authorship was apparently solved. John de St. Jorre established once and for all that 'Pauline Réage' was a woman called Dominique Aury (although this too may be a pseudonym). Significant in terms of reading *Histoire d'O* in relation to surrealism however, is that Aury was one-time secretary and mistress to Jean Paulhan. This is the same Paulhan who wrote the novel's preface, who knew Bataille,³ who is favourably mentioned in the first surrealist manifesto,⁴ and who in 1922-3 (eighteen years before painting *The Robing of the Bride*), Ernst had deemed important enough to the burgeoning surrealist movement that he painted Paulhan into the centre of a canvas called *Au rendez-vous des amis (At the Gathering of Friends)*. This picture is a kind of 'who's-who' of the early surrealists and alongside Paulhan appear pivotal personalities such as André Breton, Luis Aragon, Max Ernst, Paul and Gala Eluard, Jean Arp, Robert Desnos, Benjamin Péret and Giorgio de Chirico.⁵ Another link between the novel and the surrealist circle is forged.

Considering that the author's identity and gender had been hotly debated for decades, it might seem that St. Jorre's was a dramatic unveiling destined to change forever how the book was viewed. Yet, in fact, St. Jorre was confirming a long-established belief among most English-speaking critics. Back in 1966, John Fraser observed that the novel was the work of a woman.⁶ In 1974, Carol Cosman pre-empted St. Jorre by asserting that '[*The Story of*] *O* is probably one of the few works of erotic literature to have been written by a

¹ Jean Paulhan, 'A Slave's Revolt: An Essay on "The *Histoire d'O*"', [unattributed translator] *Histoire d'O* by Pauline Réage (London: Corgi, 1992), 180-181.

² Phillips, *Forbidden*, 91.

³ Ffrench, *The Cut*, 39.

⁴ André Breton, 'The First Surrealist Manifesto,' *Manifestos of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lore (Michigan: Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1972), 17.

⁵ This painting is reproduced in Gérard Durozoi, *History of the Surrealist Movement*, trans. Alison Anderson (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 40. Also Sarane Alexandian, *Surrealist Art* (1969), trans. Gordon Clough (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001), 60

⁶ Fraser, 'A Dangerous Book, 53-54.

woman'¹ and in 1981 (without great fanfare), Patrick Kearney identified 'Pauline Réage' as 'Dominique Aury ... Jean Paulhan's secretary'.² Thus, although St. Jorre's confirmation of the author's identity – and his interview with her – had the potential to shift opinion of the novel from a work penned by a 'perverse' misogynist, to a work of female sexual liberation, overall, readings of the novel have shifted little. True, the few critics who claimed that *Histoire d'O* had to be the work of a man were proved wrong,³ but, after 1994, it seems that knowing the author's identity and gender has not greatly changed interpretations of the novel. Knowing that this obscene story is the work of a woman means that feminist critics can no longer see O as a misogynistic male fantasy, but they can still present it as evidence of how women are corrupted by internalising the misogyny of patriarchal culture. The basic argument remains unchanged: *Histoire d'O* provides evidence of the patriarchal objectification and destruction of women. Furthermore, for critics writing on the book after 1994, the identity and gender of the author remain just as central to understanding this novel as it has always been.⁴

That said, the author's gender is a prime reason why *Histoire d'O* appears in this study. This violent sexual novel is commonly seen as a unique literary landmark, especially in terms of obscene literature: it is 'one of the few works of erotic literature to have been written by a woman'.⁵ Nevertheless it is worth noting that, although perhaps the first, *Histoire d'O* is not the only such work by a female author. A year after *Histoire d'O*, Olympia Press published *The Whip Angels* (1955), a sexually violent novel attributed to Georges Bataille's wife, Diane. Rumours (neither, to the best of my knowledge, proved or disproved) persist that another classic of violent French 'erotica', *L'image* (*The Image*, 1956) is the work of either Alain Robbe-Grillet or his wife, Catherine. Illustrating a close relationship between the Gothic (and grotesque) and the obscene novel, a writer of popular

¹ Carol Cosman, "'Histoire d'O'", *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Review* 2 (1974), 26.

² Patrick Kearney, *The Private Case: An Annotated Bibliography of the Private Case Erotica Collection in the British (Museum) Library*, Intro. G. Legman (London: Jay Landesman, 1981), 103.

³ Louise J Kaplan, *Female Perversions: The Temptations of Emma Bovary* (New York and London: Doubleday, 1992), 336; Maria Marcus, *A Taste for Pain: On Masochism and Female Sexuality*, trans. Joan Tate (London: Souvenir Press (E&A) Ltd., 1981), 205 assert that *Histoire d'O* is the work of a man.

⁴ Phillips, *Forbidden*, 86-103.

⁵ Cosman, "'Histoire d'O'", 26. Exactly why so few women produce obscene literature is an interesting question which remains to be adequately explored. According to psychologists and psychoanalysts it is not only men who go through stages of sadistic and masochistic sexual development. Both sexes have a capacity for hatred, violence, and sexual 'perversion'. It could be argued that male authors of obscene texts are depicting a misogynistic urge, however this perspective is blind to the fact that in two of the most notorious such texts already considered (*Venus im Pelz* and *Histoire de l'oeil*) it is not the male, but the female figures who dominate these narratives' violence.

horror novels, Anne Rice, is another female author who has written several 'sodomasochistic' novels (including *The Beauty Trilogy*, 1983-1985) under the pseudonym A. N. Roquelaure. Setting *Histoire d'O* apart from these however, is the fact that it remains one of the few such works of 'erotic literature' to have attracted significant critical attention.

'Erotic' is, however, only one possible adjective to describe this novel of sex and violence. All three – desire, death, violence – can be aspects of the obscene and in this sense while the novel's purely erotic or pornographic status can be questioned,¹ the description 'obscenity' can certainly be applied. Indeed, as Sontag observes, *Histoire d'O* 'is clearly obscene by the usual standards'.² Although the obscene appears in some respects to be a universal force these historically specific 'usual standards' remain a significant qualification when considering the 'obscene'. Yet, the 'usual standards' of late 1960s America from which Sontag wrote her essay are neither dissimilar from the 'usual standards' which prevail in Western cultures today nor the standards of 1950s France in which the novel was written and first appeared. *Histoire d'O* still evokes the reactions – fascination and disgust – as well as portraying the themes – dehumanisation, defilement, death and elements of the uncanny – which have emerged as central factors in what the modern West deems obscene.

This chapter considers the way that the novel's obscenity, especially within this obscenity the literal and figurative 'opening' of O's body, resonates within an established tradition of portraying female sexuality in Western art. The first section, 'Open ... There Lay Her *Raison d'Être*', introduces the obscene elements of the novel – what, exactly, is obscene about this story? – and then starts the process of interpreting this obscenity in relation to an ongoing tradition of exploring and depicting the 'female as truth' in Western depictions of the female body (this theme was introduced in Chapter Two and also in Chapter Three with Wanda from *Venus im Pelz* as well as recalling the obscene motif of the unveiled female genitals presented in *Histoire de l'oeil*). This leads to a further comparison of O with aspects of surrealist art from the war and post-war period. The second section, 'Her Own Inner Night' discusses how the 'truth' which is associated with O parallels aspects of this surrealist art which, influenced by the atrocities of the Second World War, increasingly portrayed woman as a sinister, mystical force.

¹ David Mickelson has argued that *Histoire d'O* is far from pornographic or erotic in style and content. Mickelson, 'X-rated O', 166-170.

² Sontag, 'Pornographic Imagination', 40.

1. 'Open ... There Lay Her *Raison d'Être*'¹

O's story spirals towards self-destruction. Mostly the tale is narrated in the third person (sometimes this shifts to include an authorial 'I', the identity of which is problematised by the pseudonymous identity of the author) but told through the eyes of its young female protagonist. The opening pages relate how, one autumn day on the streets of Paris, O enters a taxi. Her lover, René, accompanies her. In the back of the taxi René strips O of her underwear and identity papers. From her first appearance, the eponymous heroine is described in terms of passivity and submissiveness.² René, like all the men who O encounters, addresses O in commands: 'Unhitch your stockings ... undo your garter-belt ... take off your panties ... You're not to sit on your slip or on your skirt, pull them up and sit on the seat without anything in between ... Now put your gloves back on ... Don't move' [*Défais des jarretelles ... Défais ta ceinture ... ôte ton slip ... Il ne faut pas t'asseoir sur la combinaison et ta jupe, il faut les relever et t'asseoir directement sur la banquette*] (5-6/25-6).

The taxi takes O to a château in Roissy, a Parisian suburb. René tells O to go to the château door, ring the bell and do exactly what she is told. Immediately, the novel begins again. 'Another version of the same beginning was simpler, more direct,' says the narrator [*Une autre version du même début était plus brutale et plus simple*] (7/27). So, via a slightly different route, the story progresses once again to the moment when O enters the château and the secret society of Roissy. Here, O's identity and clothes removed, O's education as a submissive sex-slave begins.

Like Sade's Silling, Roissy, the creation of a wealthy brotherhood, is seemingly isolated from the 'real' world. It has opulent rooms furnished in rich shades; a library (recalling Silling's story-telling room), fur-covered beds, roaring fire-places. Reminiscent of Silling too is the way that Roissy has strictly enforced rules and a hierarchy of domination: male 'masters' at the top, then male valets, then female initiates. Ultimately, like Silling, Roissy is also an educational establishment (of sorts) where, by means of sexual abuse and daily punishment, Roissy's masters instil in O the realisation that 'you [O] are subject to constraint and to teach you that you utterly belong to something apart from and outside

¹ 124/148.

² Marcus, *Taste for Pain*, 196.

yourself' [*'vous êtes entièrement vouée à quelque chose qui est en dehors de vous'*] (17/38). As one master explains to O, this punishment (invariably flagellation) is 'less for our pleasure than for your instruction' [*'ce n'est pas tant pour notre plaisir que pour votre instruction'*] (17/38). Out of devotion for René, O accepts these conditions and the rules that govern her punishment and behaviour. She may never speak before the masters unless asked, never look at the masters' faces – only their genitals – never touch her own body, and above all, her body must remain 'open' [*'ouvert'*] for her masters' use whenever and however requested.

As if some of these elements are not enough to evoke Sade's work (let alone the world of the classic eighteenth-century works of French erotica and nineteenth-century 'flagellatory' literature), the inhabitants of Roissy dress in eighteenth-century costumes. Men wear tights, masks and robes and, 'like eighteenth-century chambermaids' [*'comme de jolies servantes du dix-huitième siècle'*] (7/28), the female initiates wear whalebone bodices, capes and starched linen petticoats designed to display their breasts and provide easy access to anal and vaginal orifices.

O stays at Roissy for two weeks. Over this period, through flagellation, rape, being chained in dungeon-like rooms, and having progressively larger shafts inserted into her anus, O reaches a state of near-total sexual submission. Upon leaving Roissy, O is presented with a ring that she must wear at all times. To those who are aware of its significance this ring is a mark of who, and what, O is. Thus, although outside Roissy, she remains bound to its rules.

Demonstrating how the lessons of Roissy have educated O, René hands her to his older half-brother, an aristocratic Englishman called Sir Stephen. A member of the Roissy brotherhood, Sir Stephen subjects O to an ever more intense series of experiences including anal rape and flagellation. Ostensibly out of devotion to René, O consents to her brutal treatment. Recalling Severin's written contract with Wanda, O pledges her consent: "I acknowledge your and Sir Stephen's right ..." says O to her lover,

the right to dispose of her body as they [the men who use her] saw fit, in whatever place and in whatever manner they pleased, the right to keep her in chains, the right to flog her as a slave is flogged or as one is sentenced in punishment ... the right to ignore her pleadings and outcries, if they were to make her cry out. (67/90)

During this time, O's body is 'shared' between René and Sir Stephen. Furthermore, O is encouraged to seduce another woman, Jacqueline.

As summer comes, the setting shifts once again. Sir Stephen removes O from Paris to an all-female, 'educational' establishment in rural Samois ('*Sannois*' in the French) presided over by an older lesbian, Anne-Marie. In Samois, O, like the small group of other female submissives, is stripped of all clothes and leads a life of comparative luxury, interrupted only by the ritual daily flagellation of one of the female inhabitants. To signify her absolute ownership to Sir Stephen, O's buttocks are branded with his initials – S.H. – and heavy iron rings bearing his name and coat of arms are inserted into her labia. The novel's climax occurs when Sir Stephen, René, O, Jacqueline and Jacqueline's fifteen year old sister, Nathalie, go to the South of France. Here, at a party in some remote ruins, Nathalie leads O by a chain attached to her labia. O is naked apart from an owl mask. Mute, O becomes dehumanised, an object of fascination and horror – a kind of obscene spectacle – for the guests at the party.

Although only one is printed in the English translation, the story has two endings. As the party ends and dawn breaks, Sir Stephen and another man from the Roissy brotherhood called 'the Commander' sexually assault O. The two endings are printed separately on the unnumbered recto page. The first reads, 'In a final chapter, which was removed, O returned to Roissy, where Sir Stephen abandoned her' [*Dans un dernier chapitre, qui a été supprimé, O retournait à Roissy, où Sir Stephen l'abandonnait*]. The second (and the only one printed in the English edition) reads 'There existed another ending to the *Histoire d'O*. Seeing herself about to be left by Sir Stephen, she preferred to die. To which he gave his consent' [*Il existe une seconde fin à l'histoire d'O. C'est que, se voyant sur le point d'être quittée par Sir Stephen elle préféra mourir. Il y consentit*] (175/201). Although evidence within the novel suggests that O subsequently returns to Roissy (150/175) and it could be argued that, within the novel, O does not actually die for the sketched endings are simply that – sketches which were not written and are not part of the novel itself – the fact that both appear printed in the novel, for me, certainly makes them part of O's story. Unlike *Coïncidences* in *Histoire de l'oeil* and the other additional texts printed in the English translation of Bataille's novella (which include Bataille's notes for a sequel or the various essays printed in the same volume as *Historie d'O*) *Histoire d'O*'s endings are not separated as appendices or under separate headings – either would mark them as separate from O's story. In addition, in terms of form, these twin endings echo the novel's twin beginnings. Lastly, in terms of content, there is little doubt (to me) that O's story moves inexorably towards a total loss of self/identity, in other words, her ultimate destruction.

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Perhaps because its author and its protagonist are female the most influential body of criticism written on *Histoire d'O* has been by feminist critics. Kaja Silverman's essay, "'Histoire d'O": A Disciplined and Punished Body' (1983), is one of the most interesting. Although written long before St. Jorre's *dénouement* of the author's gender, Silverman's reading does not doubt that *Histoire d'O* is the work of a woman. Silverman argues that O's body is a blank space, forcibly colonised, territorialized and inscribed with significance by phallic 'discursive power'.¹ O is denied self-expression and her acts, self, and body become remodelled and reconstructed by an alien, masculine, language. According to Silverman, the mutilations O receives and the way she is transformed by a society of men into a sexual object, reflect the process suffered by women throughout patriarchal culture. '*Histoire d'O*,' concludes Silverman, 'is more than O's story, it is the history of the female subject – of the territorialization and inscription of a body whose voluntary internalisation of a corresponding set of desires [i.e. male desire] facilitates its complex exploitation'.²

The argument underlying Silverman's essay corresponds to a number of other feminist readings of the novel. Andrea Dworkin, for example, asserts that *Histoire d'O* 'claims to define epistemologically what a woman is ... [namely] cunt, lustful, wanton. she [sic] [woman] must be punished, tamed debased'³ by man, the powerful 'master' of culture. For Maria Marcus, *Histoire d'O* is 'the story of woman as male society sees her'.⁴ Susan Griffin regards Réage's novel as a reflection of male culture's attempt to conquer nature (as represented by the female).⁵ Jessica Benjamin reads the penises that violate O as signifying male power over womankind. Each penis that forces itself into O asserts man's superior position towards her and forces her into the position of a slave.⁶

The work of these critics is valuable. They recognise the importance of culture in shaping O and her violent story yet they see this cultural context only in terms of a 'patriarchal society'. They do not consider *Histoire d'O* in relation to the erotic and obscene

¹ Kaja Silverman, "'Histoire d'O": The Story of a Disciplined and Punished Body,' *Enclitic* 7:2 (1983), 73.

² Silverman, "'Histoire d'O'", 79.

³ Andrea Dworkin, "Woman as Victim: "Story of O",' *Feminist Studies* 2:1 (1974), 107-108.

⁴ Marcus, *Taste for Pain*, 206.

⁵ Susan Griffin, 'Sadomasochism and the Erosion of Self: A Critical Reading of "Story of O",' *Against Sadomasochism*, eds. Robin R. Linden et al. (Palo Alto: Frog in the Well, 1982), 191-94.

⁶ Jessica Benjamin, 'Master and Slave: The Fantasy of Erotic Domination,' *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, eds. Ann Snitow et al. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 288.

literary traditions. However, what strikes me as most limiting about these interpretations of Réage's novel is that these critics see O's objectification as principally relevant to feminism and the female self. Of course, this is not the only interpretation that has been offered. In 'The Pornographic Imagination' Sontag refers to *Histoire d'O* as representing 'ascent through degradation',¹ in other words, the telling of a profound human need to transcend the personal and individual as well as *be* a person and individual. 'Whatever the cost in pain and fear,' writes Sontag, 'she [O] is grateful for the opportunity to be initiated into a mystery. That mystery is the loss of the self'.²

Raising this issue is not to say that O's gender is neither central to understanding how her body is depicted nor that her story does not have particular resonance to female readers. That said, the feminist readings mentioned above do not consider how O emerges from a Western tradition of representing the female as a powerful locus of 'truth'. Furthermore they do not consider how she may have been influenced by this tradition and contemporary attitudes towards, or depictions of, femininity. An aesthetic history such as this – one which combines depictions of women in erotica *and* a wider aesthetic context – is complex to say the least so to fully consider O in this way is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, combined with the depiction of women in the Western erotic tradition discussed in Chapter Two ('To Reveal Secrets Which Ought To Be Sunk In Obscurity') and the portrayal of women in the nineteenth-century artistic tradition discussed in Chapter Three ('A Truly Modern Attitude') I hope that extending this history into the twentieth century is enough to indicate how O and the opening of her body emerge from this wider context. I begin by considering O's links to the erotic tradition then widen this consideration to include other aesthetic and more general portrayals of women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This returns us to surrealism and, finally, post-war depictions of the female figure in surrealist art and the 'truth' these figures portrayed. First, the erotic tradition.

Within the context of the West's erotic tradition, Peter Cryle reminds us that *Histoire d'O* often emphasises its place within the conventions of the post-Aretino Western erotic narrative.³ It, like so many others in this tradition, is a story of initiation, education and confession ('Classical erotic texts ...,' writes Cryle, 'are characterised by the *mise en abyme*

¹ Sontag, 'Pornographic Imagination', 55.

² Sontag, 'Pornographic Imagination', 55.

³ Cryle, *Geometry*, 244-257.

of instruction')¹. O receives instruction and education which transform her into a submissive sex slave. In addition, the novel carries the traditional convention of the 'erotic' confession for O is, as Cryle notes, 'attentively surrounded by masters who wish to lead her to full confession'.² This is confession both through talking (at one point Sir Stephen questions her 'with a judge's firmness and the skill of a confessor' [*avec un fermeté de juge, une adresse de confesseur*]) and quite literally a 'reading' of the 'truth' inscribed in O's flesh (discussed below). At times, *Histoire d'O* is quite explicit in its reference to earlier obscene works: the novel's title echoes that of Bataille's *Histoire de l'oeil* and Sir Stephen recalls Bataille's Sir Edmund. At a stretch, reference to the 'pink and black' [*rose et noir*] curtains of O's bedroom could be said to echo the pink and black motif of Bataille's *Histoire de l'oeil* (see Chapter Four, 'Pink and Black'). Reaching further back into the tradition, we have already noted how the isolated Roissy château and its wealthy, secret brotherhood with their eighteenth-century costumes, evoke the world of Sade's obscene novels and France's booming eighteenth-century erotic tradition. Moreover, like the protagonists of earlier obscene texts, *Histoire d'O*'s characters are wealthy, educated, privileged members of their 'civilised' culture, who despite – or more significantly *because of* this background – are led to 'uncivilised' acts of sexual violence, degradation and destruction.

As John Phillips reminds us, within the erotic tradition, 'the act of voyeurism is frequently represented, *mis en scène*, within the narrative itself.'³ *Histoire d'O* is no exception. At one point, like Duclos in *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* and Thérèse in *Thérèse philosophe*, Sir Stephen watches O having intercourse with Jacqueline from a hidden vantage point (168/194). Recalling the theatre metaphor of both Sade and Sacher-Masoch, we find that Roissy's eighteenth-century costumes introduce a sense of performance and, by extension, the spectatorial. In terms of one obvious aspect of obscenity however, there is little obscene language within Réage's novel. Rather, in this sense, the obscene sexual parts and acts remains unspoken: *le ventre* is used to refer to the 'womb' or O's 'belly' rather than *con*; *sein* ('breast') instead of *téton* ('tit'); the euphemistic 'the narrower passage' [*un chemin au plus étroit*] (11/32) is used rather than *cul*. Nevertheless, direct slang reference to acts and organs does not remove them from the novel; despite polite words and euphemisms, low – obscene – sexual acts and sexual organs remain at the centre of this narrative. Furthermore, in the light of certain motifs of performativity (the

¹ Cryle, *Geometry*, 71.

² Cryle, *Geometry*, 246.

³ Phillips, *Sade*, 107.

costumes being one), we find obscene events – obscene in the sense of graphic sexual acts, physical defilement, dehumanisation, and physical violation – placed (at times) literally onto a ‘stage’.

Theatrical motifs within the novel include descriptions of a character as ‘dressed like an operetta valet’ [‘*comme un valet d’opérette*’] (20/41). Later in the novel the theatrical theme recurs at Samoï and at Sir Stephen’s apartment: in both locations, the violent whipping of O is presented as a performed spectacle placed literally on raised, stage-like platforms [‘*une estrade*’] (134/159 and 150/175). In terms of the obscene this theatricality presents, on the one hand, a link to the origin of the word which sees it as ‘that which is off the stage’ – here placed (as in *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*) centre-stage; and on the other hand we are reminded (once again) of Freud’s uncanny in which revealing the concealed assumes uncanny powers.¹

In fact, in keeping with the obscene texts so far considered, multiple uncanny motifs run through Réage’s novel. One such is the dissolution of distinct categories of ‘reality’ and ‘unreality’. (‘An uncanny effect,’ echoes Freud, ‘is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced’).² The costumes and performative aspects of the story are motifs which contribute to this breakdown. At other moments, while Severin asks ‘what had I experienced and what had I merely dreamed?’ (*Venus*, 43), and *Histoire de l’œil*’s narrator asserts that ‘we had abandoned the real world ... Our personal hallucination now developed ... boundlessly’ (*Eye*, 29), *Histoire d’O*’s narrator relates how, for O, ‘the reality of the night and the reality of the day were going to be the same reality’ [‘*la réalité de la nuit et la réalité du jour seraient la même réalité*’] (99-100/123) and that ‘dream or nightmare prison scenery, party costumes, people in masks, all this had denied reality, transported her out of the realm of her everyday life and conveyed her away to where there is no certain gauging of time’ [‘*Rêve ou cauchemar, décors de prison, robes de gala, personnages masqués, tout l’éloignait de sa propre vie, et jusqu’à l’incertitude de la durée*’] (68/91). In addition, moving towards its conclusion, O’s ‘real’ world becomes increasingly unreal, increasingly, in other words, uncanny. Midi palm trees ‘looked as if they’d been jig-sawed out of sheet-metal, the strollers like ill-cast wax dolls animated by some extremely queer mechanism’³ [‘*l’air découpés dans le tôle, les promeneurs de*

¹ The uncanny is that which is ‘concealed, kept from sight, so that others do not get to know of or about it’. Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’, 344.

² Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’, 367.

³ Original translation reads ‘ill-cast wax statues’. I translate *mannequin* as ‘doll’ to create more direct parallels to Freud’s uncanny, Bellmer’s *Puppe* and later references within *Histoire d’O* to women as dolls.

mannequins de cire mal fondue, animés par une mécanique absurde] (161/187). In the drive to the ruins and O's final experience, it is said that 'there was nothing true nor real in this countryside which night made imaginary' [*Rien n'était vrai dans ce pays, que la nuit rendait à l'imaginaire*] (172/198). In *Histoire d'O* the boundaries of a 'real' world of geographically accurate landmarks (such as Paris and Roissy), become overwhelmed or contaminated. As the narrator remarks (injecting another layer to interpretations of the eponymous 'O' of the novel – which here becomes a 'circle'), 'what had formerly had no reality save in a closed circle, in a sealed off domain, was all of a sudden getting ready to contaminate ... her daily life' [*ce qui n'avait de réalité que dans un cercle ferme, dans un univers clos, allait soudain contaminer tous les hasards et toutes les habitudes de sa vie quotidienne*] (68/91). Into this world, several characters – especially women – assume the status of that uncanny symbol, the doll.

In many ways, with her extreme submission, O becomes an object, a 'mannequin'. Other female characters – including Jacqueline – are, literally, mannequins [*mannequin*] (56/78), modelling clothes for O's fashion photographs. Indeed, at one point in the novel, Jacqueline is not only a mannequin, but explicitly compared to a doll: 'as behind the porcelain exterior there must inevitably be some little mechanism which makes the doll cry' [*qui devaient exister quelque part à l'intérieur de sa peau dorée, comme sous la porcelaine le mécanisme qui fait crier les poupées*] (159/185). Continuing to explore the novel's uncanny themes and associations we find that O exhibits an uncannily ambivalent response – fascination and repulsion, fear and attraction – to her treatment: 'O wondered why such a great mildness mingled with the terror within her, or why terror should have such a sweet taste' [*O se demandait pourquoi tant de douceur se mêlait en elle à la terreur, ou pourquoi la terreur lui était si douce*] (23/44). Elsewhere, aware of the defilement through excreta, violation through penetration and emphasis on her body's fragility – its obscenity – which she suffers, the narrator remarks, 'soiled by saliva and sperm, by sweat mingled with her own sweat ... [by being] the vessel of impurity, the gutter whereof Scripture makes mention' O becomes 'as though ennobled ... It [dignity acquired through defilement] illumined her as if from within' [*Elle en était éclairée comme par le dedans*] (42/63). Through degradation, or experiencing degradation, O attains a kind of peace, dignity and illumination – recalling the obscene *éclat* of *Histoire de l'oeil* – a kind of enlightenment or knowledge (the nature of which is considered in 'Her Own Inner Night').

Having located uncanny themes within the novel, pursuing a reading of *Histoire d'O* in terms of its uncanny elements would, in many ways, repeat my reading of *Venus im Pelz*. It would lead back towards Freud's death-instinct and man's ambivalent response to

death and the disavowed fragility of the human form and 'civilisation'. For variety, although the outcome may be the same, I want to follow a different route. To do this, I want to consider how, at the core of the novel's obscene and uncanny motifs, its violence, defilement, theatricality and role-playing, we find O. O is the centre of every scene. With O we encounter themes of voyeurism, especially the gaze; from the gaze we move to a process of 'reading' and opening the female body, specifically O's body. These themes are not new. I have gestured towards *Histoire d'O*'s occasionally explicit references to the West's erotic and obscene tradition in which these themes occur. Yet there is another legacy to which O belongs and it is not confined to that of erotica – or rather, the female body in the erotic tradition appears as one articulation of a wider cultural tendency. Seen in these wider terms, we find this process of reading the female body is deeply embedded within the art and culture of the West. O's relationship to, and emergence from, this tradition is what I would now like to consider.

Some have argued that the physical body has become culturally (by which I refer to Western culture) more important over the past three centuries (or so) and that this body has acquired associations with 'truth'. As David Canter notes, since the eighteenth century, underlying modern Western perceptions of the body and self, is awareness that 'with the demise in the belief in the soul there is a temptation to believe that only the [human] body matters'.¹ Michel Foucault offers similar sentiments: 'The emergence of sexuality in our culture is an "event" ... tied to the death of God and to the ontological void which his death fixed at the limit of our thought'.² With the body as their central motif and spanning the same period of time previous chapters have shown that obscene literature *also* positions the body at its centre. Indeed, obscene literature can be seen as emerging from the same cultural shift which focuses on the material, physical body (although, of course, not *all* aspects of this material body) and, as we have seen, attributes a certain idea of 'truth' to this body.³ Yet, the same literature illustrates that the body, what it means, and how it is perceived, has not remained constant over this time.

¹ David Canter, 'The Violated Body', *The Body*, eds. Sean Sweeney and Ian Hodder (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 66.

² Foucault, 'Preface', 50.

³ Cf. Michelson, *Unspeakable*, viii: 'Obscene poetics are the coherent (as distinct from aberrant or ephemeral) product of the continuing dialogue between aesthetic idealism and materialism and that their emergence as a genre of legitimised literature and art is a reflection of the modern and especially contemporary assertiveness of the latter.'

Indeed, perceptions of the body have not remained constant for far longer than the past three centuries. It has shifted from being the image of God, to a symbol of culture and civilisation, to the embodiment of the self. In ancient Greece and Rome the body's sexual aspect was accepted, worshipped and celebrated. In Judeo-Christian society, physical desire involving anything other than procreation within marriage was officially condemned.

Recognition that the body has not remained a constant symbol lies at the heart of Foucault's influential work on the body. In other works too, Foucault argues that supposedly universal categories – such as the self and the body – are not 'universal', but cultural constructions that change through time. As discussed in Chapter One ('Obscenity and Society'), in *La volonté de savoir*, Foucault posited that the meaning and nature of the body was constructed by society. Foucault presented the body as a site over which cultural power relations play; it is a surface given meaning by culture and he describes the importance of realising and studying this model of the human body as one that manifests 'the inscribed surface of events (traced by language ...), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration'.¹ Foucault goes on to argue that genealogists must 'expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body'.²

I will return to other aspects of Foucault's argument in due course. For now, though, I would like to suggest that, over history, the body has been presented in two basic forms. Firstly, it has often appeared as the symbol of a bounded system (the kind described by Mary Douglas and discussed in Chapter One, 'Obscenity and Society').³ Secondly, it has often figured as a vessel – for example, as a temple of the soul or Holy Spirit or the vessel of nature opposed to the artificial values of society, while the bodies of 'Others' have figured as carriers of contagion.⁴ Yet, as these commentators observe, while the physical body in general has become culturally significant, it is specifically female bodies rather than male ones which have gained a privileged position in Western culture as vessels or representatives of mysterious 'truth'.

In terms of O as a woman who is part of the erotic tradition, Cryle reminds us that 'traditional erotic literature ... repeatedly claims to speak the hidden truth of female desire,

¹ Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', 83.

² Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', 83.

³ Douglas, *Purity*, 116. 'The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious'.

⁴ Anthony Synnott, *The Body Social: Symbolism, Self and Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 7-37.

and to overhear its most intimate whispers'.¹ In Chapter Two we considered the theme of revealing 'truth' in eighteenth-century erotic literature and the motif of 'truth' being unveiled and rendered as 'naked' to the gaze of onlookers as the unclothed female form. This 'truth', as Nicholas Harrison has shown, was often aligned against the preferred 'truths' of social conventions. In line with the metaphor of the nude female form as 'truth' we find that in undressing the female figure the literal/physical 'truth' of naked, sexual animality was unveiled. This was an animality ('sex and violence converge in the myth of animality, where the respective natures of humans and beasts ... are analogised,' writes Michelson)² which social conventions were erected to protect against.³ Yet, the same motifs were/are not confined to pornographic and obscene literature. It is this wider, cultural tendency – the conflation of the female with hidden 'truth' or secrets (and of course with the gaze) – which I see as appropriate to reading *Histoire d'O*.⁴

Confirming the widespread (and well-established) nature of this cultural conflation of the female with 'truth' and 'secrets' we could recall the images of women – depicted as natural, primitive and thence somehow 'truer' than the artifice of society, or, conversely, artificial and threatening like the 'true' nature of modern society – seen in Chapter Three. In addition, Anne McClintock has observed that cartographers filled unknown oceans – oceans which retained their secrets and mysteries – with feminine monsters such as seductive mermaids and sirens. In the age of colonisation, newly discovered lands were feminised as 'virgin territories' which relinquished their secrets to male explorers.⁵ In terms of the female body, 'truth' and the gaze, Thomas Laqueur relates how, since the first anatomical dissections in the 1500s, the female body became an important object of the male gaze throughout Europe. Her body was opened up, and explored, to reveal 'Truth'. As Laqueur says, 'the new science ... proclaimed so vigorously that Truth and progress lay not in texts, but in the opened and properly displayed body'.⁶ Laqueur illustrates this cultural urge by giving numerous engravings dating from the Renaissance to the twentieth century of female figures displayed in reclining, often erotic poses, literally opened – sections of

¹ Cryle, *Geometry*, 246.

² Michelson, *Unspeakable*, 35.

³ Harrison, *Censorship*, 214.

⁴ In French and German this association is literalised in the gendering of 'truth' as feminine: *La vérité* and *die Wahrheit*.

⁵ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 24.

⁶ Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 70.

their abdomens removed – to reveal the mysteries of ‘Truth’ which lay inside.¹ As Laqueur (echoing Foucault) makes clear, what the male surgeons and scientists saw – or rather, represented – was dictated by political and cultural ideology more than accurate scientific observation. ‘Anatomy, and nature as we know it more generally, is obviously not pure fact, unadulterated by thought or convention, but rather a richly complicated construction based not only on observation, and on a variety of social and cultural constraints on the practice of science, but on an aesthetics of representation as well’.² In this way, for several centuries, women’s bodies have adopted the fears and demands of culture (a fact discussed in Chapter Three in relation to nineteenth-century depictions of women).

With their new technologies and supposedly ‘objective’ science, the late nineteenth and twentieth century were no exception. As Linda Williams’s study *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* shows, modern technological culture – especially in the sciences of ‘seeing’, from early cinematography to the Internet – has not broken from this tradition. Instead they have adopted the West’s fascination with unveiling the prohibited (the female genitals) and perpetuated the motif of the female body as an object of the gaze and a vessel of mysterious ‘truth’.

Evidence of this technological rearticulation of female sexuality can be found in the work of Eadweard Muybridge, an English pioneer of cinematography. In the 1870s, Muybridge achieved renown by using stop-action photography to provide the visual, scientific ‘truth’ that in the process of galloping, all four horse’s hoofs leave the ground at the same time. Using the same technology, Muybridge continued the precedent of gazing at the (female) body by amazing audiences with moving images of animals and people. In 1887 Muybridge published *Animal Locomotion*, an eleven-volume study of men, women, children, and animals captured in a series of twelve or twenty-four stop-frame photographs while they performed a range of tasks. The human figures in these photographs (as they were in Muybridge’s films) are naked or semi-naked.

Writing on these films, Linda Williams observes that the actions of the female subjects exhibit a gratuitous, sexual element.³ In these photos, men chop wood, throw balls, shoot rifles, wrestle, and run. In contrast to these pragmatic activities, women blow kisses at the camera, lie down on beds, wash their breasts, wave scarves, and pour water over one another. Contributing to the women’s more sexual connotations is the way that most of the

¹ Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 70-88.

² Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 163-164.

³ Williams, *Hard Core*, 36-48.

men wear coverings over their genitals but the women in Muybridge's photographs (at least those reprinted in the abridged 1955 edition of *The Human Figure in Motion*) are almost always naked. If not naked, they are clothed in transparent drapery.¹ As Williams notes, beyond the use of technology there is nothing unusual in Muybridge's fetishisation of the naked female form – the same fetishisation that had been occurring for over two hundred years already. What Williams identifies as significant, and in a sense 'new', about Muybridge's works is less their fusion of the concepts of 'truth', the naked female figure, and the voyeuristic gaze of male 'scientific' discovery but the fact that this voyeuristic pleasure in the female form could be displayed to audiences across the United States. 'With the invention of cinema ...' says Williams, 'fetishism and voyeurism gained new importance and normality through their link to the positivist quest for the truth of visible phenomena'.² Williams's choice of language is significant. Playing on the West's 'ocularcentrism' (see Chapter Four) and using a new technological development to show the naked female performing tasks which had never-before-been seen constituted a new kind of knowledge; a new kind of 'truth' was unveiled to the spectators' gaze. Furthermore, while the male figures appear natural, purposeful, the females' tasks are enigmatic, as if, even after centuries of scientific dissection, the female retains her sense of mystery and requires further exploration.

Williams notes that Muybridge's photographs influenced another set of photographs which also exhibit a 'pleasure of seeing previously hidden parts, or motions, of the woman's body'.³ An early mentor of Freud, Jean Charcot's *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (1878-1881) are a series of photographic images, contemporary with Muybridge's, that show bodies in (in Linda William's words) a 'carefully staged theatre' or ritual display of the body. Again, these bodies are mostly female and in a state of undress. They are contorted in the grip of hysterical fits. Like the enigmatic depiction of the naked female in Muybridge's studies, Charcot's images of hysterical women represent them as a kind of visual 'confession' of the 'truth' underlying the female body. Both men were working at a time when the scientific classification of sex and sexuality – sexual types, eugenics and various forms of categorising the human species (recall for example that Krafft-Ebbing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* appeared in 1886) – was flourishing. Yet, despite their modern methods we can suggest that Charcot's and

¹ Eadweard Muybridge, *The Human Figure in Motion*, intro. Robert Taft (New York: Dover Publications, 1955).

² Williams, *Hard Core*, 46.

³ Williams, *Hard Core*, 53.

Muybridge's combination of knowledge, science, observation, confession, and a construction of the sexual body – particularly the naked or partly clothed female – emerged from an established tradition of representing the female figure.

Evoking Muybridge and Charcot provides more than examples of cultural/'scientific' evidence of the female-truth-gaze trinity which has also appeared ubiquitous to the obscene literary tradition. Moving from Muybridge to Charcot leads in two directions. Firstly, it leads to aspects of Foucault's 1970s theory of 'anatomo-politics' and a comment he made regarding Charcot's photographs. As part of his writing about the body, Foucault observes that Charcot's pictures depict not *just* a body demanding observation and explanation but that this body is female and, above all, not just sexual but sexualised. For Foucault, the spectacle created at Charcot's Salpêtrière was representative of the Western ideological shift which

constructed around and apropos of sex an immense apparatus for producing truth ... the essential point is that sex was not only a matter of sensation and pleasure, of law and taboo, but also of truth and falsehood, that the truth of sex became something fundamental ... in short, that sex was constituted as a problem of truth.¹

Although already discussed in Chapter One ('Obscenity and Society') at this stage it is worth recalling that Foucault's 'sex' is not just 'sex' as gender but 'sex' as sexuality, identity, sexual desire, an object of study, and sexual practice. For Foucault, the Enlightenment marked the beginning of a shift in the role of the body in society and an explosion in discourses surrounding the 'confession of the flesh'² which, through dividing practices, scientific classification and subjectification turned the human species and body into something dominated and controlled. According to Foucault, writers such as Charcot and Krafft-Ebing were reinforcing a link between sex – especially the female sex – and 'truth'. Thus, Foucault (and perhaps it is worth noting that Foucault was influenced by Sade and other writers of obscene literature) argues that ever since the Enlightenment, sex and the secrets of the self and human nature have become central to Western culture. 'What is peculiar to modern societies ...,' writes Foucault, is 'that they [the 'West'] dedicated themselves to speaking of it [sex] *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the secret*'.³ Obscene

¹ Foucault, *Will to Knowledge*, 56 (Foucault's emphasis).

² Foucault, *Will to Knowledge*, 19.

³ Foucault, *Will to Knowledge*, 35 (Foucault's emphasis).

literature can be seen as part of this explosion of discourse. Sex (often the female sex) joins the trinity of female-gaze-‘truth’.

Before returning to Muybridge and Charcot’s visual studies, I want to keep Foucault’s theory in mind and consider the extent to which O shares these themes – for certainly, O’s story displays the same group of themes and motifs: the gaze, feminine sexuality, ‘truth’ and mystery.

In terms of the gaze, we find that upon entering Roissy, O enters a world of eyes and mirrors. Yet, if O is placed (as she often is) as an object to be studied on a stage, she is not only the object of another’s gaze but also the gaze of herself. The first thing O is ordered to do on entering Roissy, is remove her clothes then sit, legs open, before a huge three-sided mirror ‘so that every time she glanced up she caught sight of herself, of her open body’ [‘*elle se voyait, ainsi ouvert, chaque fois que son regard rencontrait la glace*’] (8/28). O watching herself, watching herself, watching herself. . . creates an infinite, circular gaze (a scopic O in the *Histoire d’O*)¹ that consists of two elements: O’s opened body and O’s opened eyes. Throughout the novel, like Severin and Wanda, O is confronted with her reflection captured like a work of art, ‘spectator to herself’ [‘*n’ayant qu’elle-même pour spectateur*’] (53/76). Faced with her reflection, O’s body becomes objectified, an object of others’ gazes and also her own. Most crucially, perhaps, in terms of the obscene acts of the novel, O’s education involves her gradual transformation not just into an object but into an open(ed) body. The very fact that the permeability of this body is emphasised lends this body and the novel a significant obscene motif.

Réage’s narrative turns the opening of O’s body into a central theme. What’s more, O’s opening or openness becomes equated with identity. As such, O’s opening occurs in various ways. Firstly, there is the violent opening of O’s flesh: its branding, piercing and the blood drawn from repeated whippings. These acts can be described as obscene (and uncanny) in their representation of the fragility of the body. At times ‘fragility’ itself is a word used to describe O: her ‘fragile’ breasts (76/99) ‘the fragile lips of her sex’ [‘*les fragiles lèvres de son ventre*’] (78/101) and her comparison of herself with a marble statue which she feared ‘would snap’ [‘*qu’on avait peur que le marbre ne cassât*’] (127/152).

On the other hand, and also significantly, these wounds or ‘openings’ which O suffers are described as *marques*. ‘*Marque*’ translates as ‘mark’, ‘inscription’ or ‘sign’ (the English translation uses only the first two possibilities). In this way O’s opening

¹ Cf. Phillips, *Forbidden*, 96.

simultaneously involves her being marked or inscribed. Like writing *marques* are readable.¹ This is true of O's wounds: the men who use O 'judge' the 'livid, durable marks traced in her [O's] flesh by the whips' [*jugeant ... par les traces ... que les fouets laisseraient sur sa peau*] (13/33-4). O's *marques* include the brutal inscription of Sir Stephen's initials – S.H. – 'three inches high and half an inch deep' (144/170) branded into O's buttocks. O's name is another factor that contributes to her inscription. A single letter, it is her identity, moreover an identity which combines themes of inscription, opening, and femininity: 'O', as Sontag notes, 'suggests a cartoon of her sex'.² It is also a letter that critics have never tired of interpreting – as a vagina, O's worthless nature (zero), her emptiness (nothing), and as an abbreviation for 'open' (*ouvert*).³

When compared to the violation of bodies in earlier obscene narratives, the inscription of O's flesh is of interest. Although psychoanalytic and sexological theory suggests that Severin and O are masochists, Severin's body/flesh is never inscribed; if there are any marks on his flesh they are never 'read' and his body is never 'opened'.⁴ O's treatment does, however, raise a parallel with Bataille's *Histoire de l'oeil*. Compare the letters cut into O's flesh with the engraving – *buriner* – of words on eyes described in Bataille's novella. Yet these two inscriptions are not identical. In Bataille, the engraving of the eye represents the violent opening of vision to a darker obscene 'truth' about humanity and life. 'Truth' penetrates the spectator or reader with images of death. In *Histoire d'O*, although O is perpetually described as 'opened', her body is not opened to allow 'truth' *in*. Instead, O is opened to discover the truth of the self *within*. In this respect it is important to note that O's violent inscriptions are only mutilations if we consider them from the point of view (usually adopted by feminist critics) of O as victim. To René, Sir Stephen, Anne-Marie, Nathalie, and even O herself, the marks on her flesh are not marks of horror. It is said that 'From these irons, from these marks, O derived an insane pride' [*De ces fers et de ses marques, O éprouvait une fierté insensée*] (144/170). For those who can read these inscriptions and symbols, O's brandings, the Roissy ring and the rings inserted into her labia, are, on one level signs identifying O as Sir Stephen's property. Perhaps more

¹ Cf. Silverman, "'Histoire d'O'", 73: 'Whipping makes O's body *readable*'. (Silverman's emphasis).

² Sontag, 'Pornographic Imagination', 55.

³ Sontag, 'Pornographic Imagination' 55-56; Dworkin, 'Woman as Victim', 108; Marcus, *Taste for Pain*, 204; Phillips, *Forbidden*, 95-96.

⁴ These are among many other differences which exist between these two 'masochistic' protagonists. The two novels are rarely compared and much can be said regarding the development of 'masochism' through a comparative reading of them. Anita Phillips is the only critic I know of who has considered both depictions of 'masochism'. Even there, however, detailed comparison is lacking. A. Phillips, *Masochism*, 67-72.

significant, however, is the fact that these inscriptions serve to construct O as a vessel of truth and to reveal a hidden message within her body. This process of revelation is described in the text by the opening of O's existing orifices.

Stressing the body's permeability, its (obscene and uncanny) fragility, O relates how 'she opened herself in every part of her body which could possibly open ... there lay her *raison d'être*' [*elle s'ouvrait en effet de toutes les parts de son corps qui pouvaient l'être ... que ce fût sa raison d'être*] (124/148). O's body is always opened to others. In terms of obscenity, O never excretes: the emphasis is on her permeability or invasion from the outside. Continuing the process initiated as soon as O enters Roissy, this 'opening' marks another aspect to the inscriptive process which her flesh undergoes. There (as previously noted), the first thing O is forced to see is 'her open body' (8/28). O confronted by mirrors reflecting her opened body is an image which recurs throughout the novel. The rules of the Roissy society forbid her from closing her mouth or crossing her legs (16-17/37). The ebonite shaft inserted into her anus 'opens' her anal passage better for penetration (40-41/62). Furthermore, her orifices are usually described as 'openings': comparing O to an animal – comparison which (obscenely) dehumanises her – Sir Stephen is said to expose her and open 'her secret parts the way one opens the mouth of a horse' [*l'entrouvrant comme on entrouvre la bouche d'un cheval*] (75/98). Elsewhere, 'she offered herself ... a reflected view of her body as perfectly open as if an invisible lover had withdrawn from her and left her belly agape' [*partitement ouverte qui si un amant invisible s'était retiré d'elle pour la laisser entrebâillée*] (101/125). Just as it was for early anatomists, the female body opened before the gaze is a recurrent motif. But what is significant about this opening of O?

As part of the wider tendency within Western culture discussed above, we find that O's 'opening' could be said to belong to the same search for 'truth', secrets and 'mysteries' within feminine sexuality as occurred in *Thérèse philosophe*. Consider how, upon meeting O, Anne-Marie (who, appropriately lives near the 'Observatoire') (120/149) opens O's labia and examines her vagina just as people 'pull open the mouths of horses to show you the teeth' [*On soulève ... sur les champs de foire les babines des chevaux*] (126/151) to gain insight into O's physical health. There is also the way Sir Stephen open 'her secret parts' (75/98, my emphasis: although 'secret' is an emphasis made by the translators; the French simply reads 'opens her' *l'entrouvrant*). Like this examination of O's body, the marks on O's flesh can be said to reveal O's inner self by breaking, as it were, her body's facade. The 'readers' of these marks (René, Anne-Marie, and Sir Stephen) regard them as authentic articulations of 'the truth concerning' O. Breaking the body's surface (or boundary) reveals

internal secrets; these marks are ‘visual proof’ [*‘en voir la preuve’*] (13/33-4, 103/127). It is said that while most people keep their secrets hidden, O’s innermost secret – the ‘truth’ about herself which she carries within – is displayed on her skin in the form of violent inscriptions, brandings and piercings for all to see (104/127). O’s is not the only body to which this concept of a vessel of ‘truth’ applies. In *Histoire d’O*, René is said to desire

the underlying explanation of Jacqueline, the fundamental thing about Jacqueline, the truth concerning Jacqueline [*‘la vérité de Jacqueline’*], which must exist somewhere within her golden hide, as behind the porcelain exterior there must inevitably be some little mechanism which makes the doll cry. (159/185, my emphasis)

With its intertwined themes of ‘truth’ and confession, the gaze, education and femininity, *Histoire d’O* can be read as a recent articulation of a long-established literature which appears, not only in the West’s erotic tradition, but also as part of a more pervasive cultural tendency of seeing, or at least portraying, female sexuality as associated with mysterious ‘truth’. Earlier, I considered Muybridge’s and Charcot’s visual studies as examples of this Western tendency. I now want to return to their – or more accurately Charcot’s – visual studies and allow them to lead us this time, not to Foucault or the erotic tradition, but in a different (although not unrelated direction), towards artistic portrayals of female sexuality contemporary with O’s creation.

In 1928, Charcot’s studies recurred in the context of an artistic movement contemporary to *Histoire d’O*’s creation: surrealism. As part of *La révolution surréaliste* the surrealists reprinted six of Charcot’s Salpêtrière studies and gave them the name ‘Les attitudes passionnelles en 1878’ (‘Postures of Passion in 1878’).¹ The surrealist’s resurrection of these particular images was not an isolated moment; it indicates the degree to which surrealism’s articulation of the same web of themes – female sexuality, the gaze, mystery, ‘truth’ – is a rearticulation of older sentiments. Recall Breton’s words, quoted at the beginning of this chapter: “‘the problem of woman is the most marvellous and disturbing thing in the world’”. Within surrealism, sexuality – but most notably, recurrently and importantly female sexuality – retains something fascinating, mysterious and enigmatic: in Breton’s words, “‘even these days the sexual world, despite the supremely memorable investigations carried out in modern times by Sade and Freud, has not, to the

¹ David Lomas, ‘The Omnipotence of Desire: Surrealism, Psychoanalysis and Hysteria,’ *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, ed. Jennifer Munby (London: Tate Publishing, 2001), 72.

best of my knowledge stopped setting against our desire to penetrate the universe its indestructible nucleus of *night* [nuit]”¹.

Within surrealist art and literature, female hysterics such as those in Charcot’s study provided a recurrent image of ‘the problem of woman’ as ‘the most marvellous and disturbing thing in the world’. It was also part of the surrealists’ valorisation of the work of Freud.² Thus, David Lomas reminds us that the surrealists adopted hysteria as a form of expression which, like dreams, articulated ‘a dialectic of desire and repression’³ ‘redefined’ by the surrealists as a seductive and subversive force.⁴ This attitude – particularly the seductive power of the hysteric – is evident in the title (‘Les attitudes passionnelles en 1878’) given to the reprint of Charcot’s photographs. Female hysterics were not the only female figures recurrent in surrealist art (and thought). Other types of marginalized women – representatives of social disruption as well as sexual and psychic liberation – were valued tropes: recurrent figures included the Papin sisters, Violette Nozières, mad women and prostitutes.

Examples of surrealist depictions of women that carry through the knotted motifs/themes of female sexuality, the fascinated gaze and ‘truth’, are easy to come by. Consider the photographic work of Man Ray, the sexual symbolism of Salvador Dalí’s early works (such as *Scatological Object Functioning Symbolically*, 1930) or the collages of the Czech surrealist, Jinrich Styrsky. In terms of literature, the enigmatic heroine of André Breton’s novel, *Nadja* (1928) provides one example; Bataille’s Marcelle and Simone in *Histoire de l’oeil* provide others from the same artistic milieu (Bataille, of course, was never a surrealist). The contorted shape of Hans Bellmer’s second *Puppe* (*Doll*, 1935-1939, figure 9, Chapter Six) – the photos of which show a ‘female’ doll which resembles part-corpse, part-horror, part-human, part-voyeuristic object, part-sexual fetish – serves as another example of the surrealist’s depiction of the female. As such, and in relation to the figure of O, Bellmer’s project deserves a moment’s comment.

¹ Harrison, *Censorship*, 162. My discussion focuses on the surrealists but Anita Phillips reminds us that in relation to depiction of the female, ‘If the pleasurable image is considered sacrilegious in religious cultures that emphasise a strict verticality, it is understandable that even in a post-Christian culture the image of the woman may be considered disturbing. In the Catholic context, the image of the woman is often that of the Madonna, or one of the female saints. In the twentieth-century secular context, images of women’s bodies are thoroughly sexualised.’ The centrality of the sexualised female, it would seem, remains in Western culture. A. Phillips, *Masochism*, 97.

² Lomas, ‘Omnipotence’, 55-77.

³ Lomas, ‘Omnipotence’, 63.

⁴ Lomas, ‘Omnipotence’, 69. Lomas talks of Ernst attributing to the female hysteric ‘the capacity to destabilise or subvert patriarchal power and authority’, 72.

Bellmer, the surrealist artist who later illustrated Bataille's *Histoire de l'oeil* and *Madame Edwarda*, created two *Puppe*'s. His original 1933 model was intended to have a hollow torso. Inside the torso would be six illuminated panoramas, each representing the 'dreams of a young girl'. These panoramas could be viewed through a hole in the naval and rotated by pressing one of the doll's nipples. Talking about his *Puppe* Bellmer says, 'I wanted to reveal what is usually kept hidden'.¹ Here we find, as in *Histoire d'O*, the sexualised female as an object to be observed (and photographed). This female form is also a kind of vessel containing mysterious but secret knowledge and truths which can only be seen through an opening in its 'flesh'.² The same, of course, is true of O. Although Bellmer's *Puppe* is commonly seen as a revolt against his father,³ to use the Oedipal scenario overlooks the fact that the themes of the *Puppe* correlate with an older artistic tradition; secondly, the same themes border on – if not cross into – the domain of obscenity (fragility, the visual, truth, the uncanny aura of a doll – echoing, of course, *Histoire d'O*). Finally, within the context of surrealism, Bellmer was far from the only artist to use the sexualised female form as a recurrent motif.

To fully appreciate further the parallels between O and the work of surrealism it is necessary to note that although the female retained her association with 'truth' and knowledge, during the Second World War a significant shift occurred in the nature of the female and her attendant 'mysteries'. After 1939, the erotic, passionate, woman who represented freely expressed desire transforms into something more sinister. The female was portrayed as a sorceress tapped into a disturbing, dark, powerful kind of 'truth'. Raoul Ubac's photographs (for example, *Group 1*, 1939) take the techniques of Man Ray but turn their female subjects into splintered body parts. As further examples, consider images such as André Masson's *Gradiva* (1939), an obscene image, which, with its contorted shape – part-flesh, part-statue, part putrid corpse – and a gaping maw of a vagina, is in some ways reminiscent of Bellmer's *Puppe*. Unlike the *Puppe* however, this *Gradiva* appears, like O, as violently opened and violently sexualised. Comparable images of women as mysterious, dangerous, almost nightmarish creatures appear in Max Ernst's *The Robing of the Bride* (1940), *Napoleon in the Wilderness* (1941), and *Alice in 1941* (1941). In addition to these there are the paintings of Dorothea Tanning, which fuse supposedly innocent, fairytale

¹ Quoted from Peter Webb and Robert Short, *Hans Bellmer* (London et al: Quartet Books, 1985), 38.

² Webb and Short, 29-30, 38. Also Jennifer Munby, 'Letter of Desire', *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, ed. Jennifer Munby (London: Tate Publishing, 2001), 49-50.

³ Sarane Alexandrian, *Surrealist Art*, 116.

settings with darker images of horror, such as *Birthday* (1942) and *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (1943). The dream-like but equally sinister war-time (and post-war) canvases of Paul Delvaux are others. In all these pictures the conventionally innocent and beautiful object of the male gaze (female flesh) assumes a sinister aura comparable to the themes of *Histoire d'O*.

The suggestion I would like to make is that the influence on *Histoire d'O* of the surrealists' part-fairytale, part-mythological, part-nightmare women may have emerged from a convergence of similar cultural influences, but equally may have been more direct. In this respect it is worth recalling the link between Réage/Aury as secretary and lover to Jean Paulhan, who was an influential figure to the surrealist circle. It is also worth noting that, on returning to France after the Second World War, André Breton stressed a need to turn away from nightmare images like those produced by Ernst and Tanning. Breton wanted a new mythology for the surrealists, one based on a desire to 'read and look through the eyes of Eros ... for whomever it falls upon to re-establish, in the coming era, the balance which was upset in favour of death'.¹ Breton's desire was for art to counter-balance the events of the Second World War and threats posed to a post-war world which included atom bombs, the coming Cold War, and returning fascism. Many artists within the surrealist movement shared Breton's sentiments: the post-war work of René Magritte for example changed style during and after the war and, compared to his pre-war productions, became much less shocking.² Indeed, after the war some of those who continued to create images of a more sinister nature drifted away from the group (one of the reasons for Roberto Matta's expulsion in 1948 was his continued depiction of graphically sexual and violent imagery).³ Perhaps, at the fringes of the surrealist circle, Aury's novel, written for Paulhan, was touched by this talk of a new mythology. Even if this is not the case, *Histoire d'O* provides an interesting literary echo of the surrealist project of the post-war years. After all, with its slightly mythic feel and sexual content Réage's novel could be viewed as that new mythology which Breton desired. Or rather, it could be a new mythology but not of the kind which Breton would have celebrated.

¹ André Breton quoted in Durozoi, *Surrealist Movement*, 396. This project reached its apotheosis with the surrealists' EROS exhibition in December 1959, Durozoi, *Surrealist Movement*, 587. Also see Durozoi, *Surrealist Movement*, 466, 533 and 545 for surrealist responses to the effect of war – their abandonment of being 'outside' the cultural for example – and their self-declared desire to find a new mythology of Eros.

² Durozoi, *Surrealist Movement*, 461.

³ Durozoi, *Surrealist Movement*, 461.

During the last few pages of the book O completes her transformation from Parisian mistress into a part-animal, part-divine being. Her (obscene) dehumanisation is complete. She is compared to savage goddesses ['*déesse sauvages*'] (171/197), 'a thing of stone or wax or a creature of some other world' ['*de pierre ou de cire, ou bien créature d'un autre monde*'] (174/200). Indeed, as some critics have noted, the mask of the creature she wears is also significant: besides evoking Ernst's painting, the owl mask carries the novel's motif of education for the owl is a symbol of knowledge and wisdom.¹

Thus, analogous to the women of certain war-time surrealists, in the process of O's downward spiral this female figure comes to embody a mysterious but dark form of knowledge. There are similarities with Bellmer's *Puppe*. Both Bellmer's and Réage's creations share themes of fragility, malleability, sex, violence and they are objects of a gaze. Rosalind Krauss has noted that Bellmer's *Puppe* 'is a messenger of the uncanny, a harbinger of death'.² These themes resonate with the uncanny, 'doll-like' nature of O and the other women in the novel, as well as, ultimately, the death towards which O gradually descends. This, of course, is not only the literal death suggested by one of the novel's endings. It is also a death of self, a loss of identity and humanity. We also find parallels between O and the war-time surrealist canvases of Tanning, Ernst, Masson and Delvaux rather than those which Breton endorsed in the post-war period. Indeed, O, naked, wearing the mask of an owl, seems an almost explicit reference to Ernst's *Robing of the Bride* with its naked central figure – half-woman half-owl – dressed in a cloak of blood red feathers. Reminiscent of the omnipresent mirrors of Réage's novel, a mirror-like portrait hangs behind Ernst's central figure. Recalling the painting's themes of alchemy, we find O too, transformed into a 'Bride' – the perfected "stone" after its "stripping" and "robing" (colour changes) in the furnace'.³ Yet, as with Ernst's distorted figures, with O it could be said that the process of perfection/transformation has gone awry. Further comparison could be drawn between the painting's themes of the witch trials in which inquisitors searched suspected witches for 'witch marks' as a process analogous to the way Sir Stephen and others inspect O's body for marks to find out her 'true' nature. Finally, recalling that Ernst painted this image while an 'enemy alien' at the beginning of the Second World War, we find coded reference to the war within the painting's references to witch trials and its sinister yet provocative figures. Although seldom considered similar coded reference can be located within *Histoire d'O* for,

¹ Phillips, *Forbidden*, 210 fn. 34.

² Krauss, *Optical*, 172, 177-78.

³ Hopkins, 'Robing', 76.

like Ernst's 'Bride', O's story – her 'new mythology' – does not disavow Europe's recent history. Ernst's 'bride' is a product of the war. Its themes of witchcraft and witch trials further knit themes of feminine sexuality with a dark kind of truth and cultural fear. Like this canvas (and those of other surrealists mentioned above) O embraces and belongs to an era of pain and death, not a hopeful one of erotic liberation and pleasure.

2. 'Her Own Inner Night'.¹

Marrying the idea of inscribing meaning on the body with his idea that culturally, sex, and the female body have acquired a reputation for 'truth', we find parallels between Foucault's words and the obscene events of O's story. Throughout O's story, O is forcefully inscribed by whips and brands. This presents O's self as Foucauldian: her identity, her 'true' self, is not separate from her physical body, a body which is not stable, but transformable by external forces, readable, fragile and 'imprinted' by history.

In terms of this history it may be obvious to evoke the Second World War as a catchall explanation for many themes in post-war literature, art, and culture as well as the most immediate historical 'imprint' (to return to Foucault's terminology) on O's body. As *Histoire d'O* contains virtually no explicit reference to the war it could be said that approaching the novel from this perspective is wholly erroneous. In fact, in this novel of mutilation, imprisonment and death, the war is all the more noticeable by its absence. At first glance, mention of invading troops, resistance, atom bombs, occupation, collaboration, liberation, or memories of the millions who died, are absent from *Histoire d'O*. Perhaps this is why few critics have considered the novel in terms of the war. But then again, reference to the war in Ernst's painting is far from explicit just as Bataille's references to the horrors of twentieth-century war are rare and subtle.² Moreover, although power relations of domination and subjugation, punishment and rebellion are the dominating themes of *Venus im Pelz*, Sacher-Masoch's novella makes no direct reference to the various rebellions and revolutions which were influential in the formation of nineteenth-century Europe.

¹ 45/66.

² This is true of Bataille's fiction as much as of his later theoretical work. There he explores at length the depiction of conflict in cave paintings, cannibalism and African tribes, but seldom mentions the wars which turned his homeland into a mass grave. See Bataille, *Eroticism*, 75-80 for example.

Compared to these works however, with its single, overt reference to war *Histoire d'O* is shockingly obvious in its evocation of its culture's very recent, violent history. This reference occurs at a moment when O fears that René has rejected her. Evoking Nazi extermination camps, the narrator describes O's feeling as her 'veritable gas-chamber' [*sa chambre d'asphyxiée*] (87/110) from which René usually releases her just in time. O wonders 'wouldn't there come a day of death and ashes, a day among days, when ... the gas chamber would not be reopened?' [*Un jour de mort et de cendres, un jour entre les jours ne viendrait-il pas ... où la chambre à gaz ne se rouvrirait pas?*] (87/110).

Despite this explicit reference, critics seldom consider *Histoire d'O*'s relationship to the war. While they frequently cite Paulhan's assertion that *Histoire d'O* is the work of a woman,¹ few refer to his longer comments linking *Histoire d'O* to the war. Paulhan writes,

The only tortures we inflict [today] are anonymous and unmerited. And upon that account they are a thousand times more atrocious: it is a city's whole population which all at one stroke is roasted over a grill in wartime. The father's excessive kindness, the teacher's or the lover's, is compensated for by air-strikes, by deluges of napalm and the explosion of atoms. Everything moves along as if in the world there existed a certain mysterious equilibrium of violence for which we have lost the taste and of which we have forgotten the meaning.²

Paulhan suggests that, in the face of the anonymous violence of 'our' modern Europe, O recaptures 'one of the simplest truths': that bondage and violence can bring about happiness and liberation; that some people desire bondage, and that bondage, violence and subjugation can be part of love.³

Nancy Huston is another critic for whom the historical 'imprint' of war is central to understanding Réage's novel. For Huston, *Histoire d'O*'s importance lies in its attempt to come to terms with the atrocities of the war. For her, the novel contains

a message that the world badly wanted to hear in 1954 [the novel was written in 1952]: that evil was not really evil, that pain was inseparable from pleasure and therefore acceptable, that the suffering and mutilation of a woman in love could, like the Passion of Christ, offer a form of redemption and absolve us from our sins.⁴

¹ Paulhan, 'A Slave's Revolt', 180.

² Paulhan, 'A Slave's Revolt', 189.

³ Paulhan, 'A Slave's revolt', 187.

⁴ Nancy Huston, 'Erotic Literature in Postwar France,' *Raritan* 12:1 (1992), 38.

These sins were those of the Second World War. According to Huston, O's quest for absolution becomes 'our' quest for absolution. O's guilt becomes 'our' guilt for what occurred during the war. Certainly, throughout the novel O feels guilt, guilt which, in this quote includes another loaded reference to ash: 'She felt like a pillar of salt, a statue of ash, bitter, useless and damned, like the salt statues of Gomorrah. For she was guilt-ridden, a sinner ... she was guilty' [*Elle se sentait statue de cendres, âcre, inutile, et damnée, comme les statues de sel de Gomorrhe. Car elle était coupable*'] (85/108). For Huston, therefore, O is France's post-war saviour, 'a female messiah whose name was the opposite of X, the cross of Christ. She was called O'.¹

Susan Griffin's reading also draws parallels between O's suffering and the horrors of the Final Solution. As if uncomfortable with making them, Griffin often offers these suggestions in parenthesis. At moments Griffin associates René and Sir Stephen with Nazis and Hitler. For Griffin, 'Like Hitler, René cannot bear to cause her [O] physical pain, yet he loves to see others cause her this pain'.² Sir Stephen apparently calls 'up for us all the horrors of the Holocaust'³ and in contrast to the men, Griffin equates O with the victimised Jews. The connection Griffin makes with the war is certainly coloured by her feminist perspective which (in Griffin's argument) equates Jews with women and all patriarchal cultures with Nazi Germany.

This – O's reference to the Holocaust – is certainly a sensitive issue and may explain why comparatively few have explored the novel's references to the war. Even the essays cited above talk in relatively generalised terms extrapolating from an atmosphere within the novel and its date of publication rather than seeking out its parallels with the themes of other contemporary artists who were avowedly influenced by the war or details within the text which might confirm a link between the horrors of history and the death-driven urge of the novel's protagonist.⁴ Understanding this novel, however, cannot afford to ignore the cultural context leaves marks on O as much as the women in surrealist canvases of the war years. Indeed, to search for evidence of this connection reveals that echoes of the recent war resonate throughout O's story.

¹ Huston, 'Erotic Literature', 37.

² Griffin, 'Sadomasochism', 189.

³ Griffin, 'Sadomasochism', 189.

⁴ An exception to this is Griffin's note that Sir Stephen's 'initials S.S. call up for us all the horrors of the Holocaust' (Griffin, 'Sadomasochism', 189). In fact, Sir Stephen's initials are S.H. – at least, these are the initials branded onto O – *not*, as Silverman, "Histoire d'O", 78, asserts, 'the initials S.S. [branded] on each side of O's buttocks'.

Perhaps it is surprising that critics who trace a connection between *Histoire d'O* and the war do not evoke the military-sounding head of the Roissy brotherhood, 'The Commander' (164/190). In French, *le commandant*, provides an even closer phonetic link with the German *der Kommandant*. In another, perhaps coded reference, fires burn and fireplaces appear throughout the novel. They could be symbols of the destructive fires of passion and they could be echoes of the fires perpetually flickering in *Venus im Pelz*. Yet, after Réage's chilling reference to Nazi gas chambers and a 'day of death and ashes' these fires acquire a more sinister echo of ovens in which bodies became ash. Further parallels can be drawn between the paradoxical liberation O feels through enslavement ('The chains and silence which ought to have sealed her isolated self within twenty impenetrable walls, to have asphyxiated her, strangled her, hadn't; to the contrary, they'd been her deliverance, liberating her from herself' [*Les chaînes et le silence, qui auraient dû la ligoter au fond d'elle-même, l'étouffer, l'étrangler, tout au contraire la délivraient d'elle-même*]) (37/58), and the paradoxical motto of the Nazi work camp – *Arbeit macht Frei* ('Work is Freedom'). In addition, although the inscriptions on O's flesh may recall Bataille's engraving into eyes, O's inscriptions turn O into an object and give her identity. By following the novel's reference to Nazi death camps, these marks (and more: recall the removal of O's identity papers in the novel's first scene) parallel the numbers written into – inscribed in – the flesh of concentration camp victims. These victims were robbed of their identity (clothes, belongings, property) inscribed with a number and forced into a process of dehumanisation and suffering, transformed from subjects into objects. Finally, in *Histoire d'O* the language of sex is that of military invasion and conquest. Réage's choice of terminology turns O's body into an invaded territory. Sir Stephen is described as opening O 'the better to invade her' [*Pour mieux l'envahir*] (77/100) and he 'lay[s] her waste' [*la saccageât*] (74/96), while she 'yielded all of a sudden ... and Jacqueline's besieged mouth wished only to surrender' [*qu'il était si facile forcer sa bouche*] (112/136). 'Knowing it was the measure of her defeat [*vaincue*], she knew she was beaten ... the determined resistance [*résistance*] she for her part heartily intended to put up' fails (80/102-103) and as a final example, 'René's love for her had robbed her of every last weapon' [*enlevé toutes ses armes*] (83/106). Admittedly, such metaphors are commonplace in the erotic tradition but this cannot dispel the gravity such language acquires when written at this time and in a novel containing both coded and overt reference to mass genocide.

At the very least, it is problematic to equate O's suffering with that of the Jews and the Holocaust. It seems grotesque to spend much time drawing comparison between one woman's 'masochistic' (as she is often described) drift towards death and the fates of six

million massacred for racial reasons. This is not to say that a connection does not exist. The details above illustrate that, like its protagonist, the novel is not unmarked by its recent history. Genocide can be seen to leave its 'imprint' on O and the sexual violence she is subjected to. O is guilty for and because of (as Huston suggests) recent cultural events. This is speculation, but could this centrality of guilt for the first time among the obscene narratives which I have considered, indicate the weight – the 'imprint' – of recent history? And could this explain why, unlike obscene violence in earlier texts, O experiences her treatment as punishment which aids in her search for atonement: 'pain and the shame of the lash and the outrage inflicted upon her by those who forced her to pleasure when they took her ... seemed to her to be the very redemption of her sin' [*'la douleur et la honte du fouet, et l'outrage que lui infligeaient ceux qui la contraignaient au plaisir quand ils la possédaient ... lui semblaient le rachat même de sa faute'*] (86/108)? Ultimately the self-destructive process that O embarks on leads her to a mute state, bloodily inscribed, pierced, branded with Sir Stephen's initials, naked, save for the mask of an owl. O's gradual dehumanisation and salvation/liberation from herself (and her sins) appears to be complete.

Awareness of historical events and their impact on the modern perception of the body helps us to situate O, details of her obscenity, and her story not only in relation to the war but also the concerns of surrealism and how, within the surrealist movement, the same events of mass destruction influenced representations of feminine sexuality to focus on the sinister, mysterious, and powerful. The same shift from 'innocent' to 'sinister' which I have noted in patterns of surrealist depictions of feminine sexuality can be located in O's story. The beautiful young woman, her lover, and love itself lose their conventional – if you like 'acceptable' – associations of love and romance. In *Histoire d'O* nobody 'lives happily ever after'. In fact, Paulhan was the first to note that the novel reads like a fairytale.¹ Certainly, there is something timeless – an atmosphere associated with fairytales and myths – about O's story and in some ways this atmosphere *invites* the allegorical reading favoured by feminist critics of this work. Yet, care must be taken not to equate O's apparent timelessness with 'actual' timelessness, for although Dworkin refers to O as an enduring, 'mythological figure'² and Sontag sees the novel as set in the 'ahistorical domain of eros'³ O is certainly not timeless. Even if we ignore the many passing references to 1950s life – including make-

¹ Paulhan, 'Slaves Revolt', 179.

² Dworkin, 'Woman As Victim', 108.

³ Sontag, 'Pornographic Imagination', 55.

up compacts, lipsticks, cars, electricians, movie stars, golf games, business-meetings, record-players, identity papers, beauty salons, fashion accessories, cinemas and fashion magazines – O's is not quite the female body of eighteenth-century licentious satires. Certainly she is part of the same cultural tendency to link female sexuality with mystery and thus she carries the same enduring themes as the women in *Thérèse philosophe*. Yet in other significant ways she is a twentieth-century, Euro-American body and self. Seeing O in terms of this wider history of representations of the body – especially the female body – indicates that she is, in Foucault's term 'imprinted' by her time. Thus, O need not be seen solely as articulating the construction of the subjugated female subject. She can be seen to embody the elusive yet fascinating search which Foucault calls, 'the secret', 'the truth of sex'. And she can be seen in relation to the post-1939 work of Tanning, Masson, Ernst, Bellmer, and Delvaux (among others) who carried on the West's fascination with the mystery of woman by portraying femininity as not overtly sensuous, pleasurable and 'erotic', but as a figure allied with more mysterious, powerful, 'truths'.

By the end of the novel, O becomes a 'savage goddess' and the 'truth' which *Histoire d'O* suggests lies within O's opened body, like the truth ['vérité'] which exists within Jacqueline's 'golden hide' like 'some mechanism which makes the doll cry', further echoes the sinister female figures of surrealist art and the 'indestructible nucleus of *night* [nuit]¹ which Breton attributes to female sexuality. Thus, at one point during the novel, Réage offers a glimpse of the 'truth' carried within her protagonist. O is blindfolded. The light that illumines her 'golden hide' is cut and, recalling the themes of *Histoire de l'oeil*, it is not light but darkness which reveals and, perhaps more importantly, which is revealed. Réage writes, 'Blessed night, like unto her own inner night, never had O welcomed it with such joy'² [*Bienheureuse nuit pareille à sa proper nuit, jamais O ne l'accueillit avec tant de joie*] (45/66). Night/darkness falls and O welcomes it for it is like the night/darkness within her. This 'inner night' dominates O's story in which the division between dream and waking reality becomes increasingly uncertain. As if it floods out of her from the openings carved in her flesh and the orifices she is forced to open, darkness comes to surround her and O is drawn inexorably – one could perhaps say 'inwards', following the urge of Freud's uncanny death-instinct – into night.

Night is not just, of course, 'night'. Darkness, black, night, carry strong associations with the darkness of regression, away from the accepted light (like Bataille's *vision lunaire*)

¹ Harrison, *Censorship*, 162.

² Translation altered. Original English translation reads 'Blessed darkness, like unto her own inner night-time ...'

of Western 'civilisation'; there is the darkness of impurity, of dirt, of evil. The 'dark ages' and 'dark continents' of primitive, pre-civilised life. The darkness of death; black, the West's colour of death and funerals. All these are obscene themes. As we have also seen, one of the suggested origins of the word 'obscene' is that it comes from the same root as 'obscure', meaning dark, gloomy, indistinct. In this sense, O carries obscenity within her. The 'truth' O carries is of inevitable darkness/night (*nuit*). In Réage's terms, while the 'mechanism' inside a doll makes it cry, the 'night' mechanism inside O draws her towards destruction. Thus, like the wartime surrealists, the obscenity of Réage's novel dares to reveal a dark aspect to the West's favoured model of 'truth' and knowledge. Comparisons could be drawn between this vision of the world, body, and culture and those of influential cultural critics writing around the same time as *Histoire d'O* appeared. We find sentiments similar to those represented by Adorno and Horkheimer's concept of man and 'civilisation' in which 'The strain of holding the [modern] I together adheres to the I in all stages and the temptation to lose it has always been there with the blind determination to maintain it'¹ – theory which also dates from the years of the second world war – and likewise, Herbert Marcuse, another member of the Frankfurt School wrote shortly after Réage's novel first appeared that, 'The very progress of civilisation leads to the release of destructive forces'.² Although I have not given a reading of O specifically in terms of either Freud's theories of the uncanny or of masochism which would have led, via different routes, to the death-instinct, it is still possible to see O as embodying a satisfaction derived from allowing herself to embrace the obscene, to be defiled, lose her identity, accept rather than disavow the body's fragility, filth, bestial nature and admit a darkness – an obscenity – within.

I briefly return to the issue of who and how others have articulated a similar critique of 'civilised' values in the Conclusion. For now though, although in many ways, *Histoire d'O* firmly locates itself within the obscene literary tradition and the West's tradition of erotic literature, it also indicates how, 'imprinted' by historical events, the obscene tradition evolves. In this sense, therefore, *Histoire d'O* introduces themes which, until this point have been less explicit in the earlier obscene narratives considered in this study. Guilt, absolution, inscribed flesh, Foucauldian bodies which can be read, and which are literally 'imprinted' are all new themes. However, as the following two chapters show, once introduced in this post-war obscene novel, some of these themes do not fade away.

¹ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 33.

² Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (London: Ark, 1987), 4.

CHAPTER SIX

**J.G. BALLARD'S CRASH:
DEATH DRIVING IN SUBURBIA:**

JACOB KULOWSKI'S *Crash Injuries: The Integrated Medical Aspects of Automobile Injuries and Death* (1960) is an unsettling book. Over 1000 pages long, this medical study confronts the reader on every page with the science and graphic evidence of man's fragility. It is full of statistics, graphs, illustrations, and photographs of mangled cars and the car crash injuries sustained by men, women, and children. Kulowski opens his study by noting that between 1899 and 1951, one million people in the United States died as a result of traffic accidents.¹ He goes on to say that his book draws attention to 'the traffic scourge which has killed more people than have all the wars in which this republic [the USA] has been involved'.² *Crash Injuries* continues with pages of photographic records. Among these images we see (real) human heads before, during, and after the instant of collision against car instrument panels; crash impact data and fatality reports from General Motors and Chrysler; graphs comparing pig, human, and monkey tolerances to decelerative forces, and illustrations showing how a one pound weight travelling at twenty-four feet per second will deform the human skull by one quarter of an inch upon impact (complete with photographs of the brains of crash victims killed in this way).

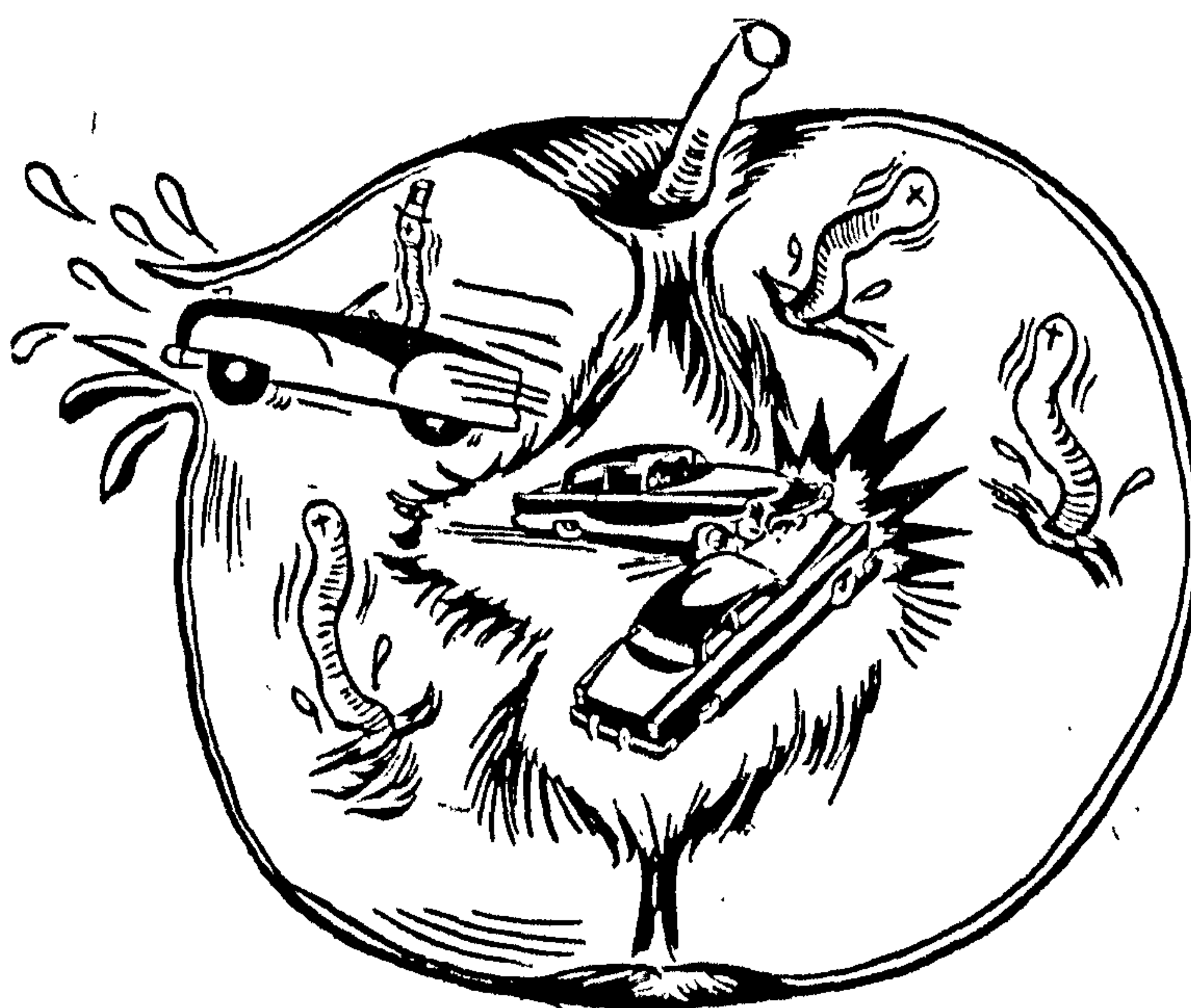
Within Kulowski's study, it is possible to see an implicit challenge to the values of American culture. *Crash Injuries* shows the horrific everyday destruction caused as a direct result of American society's consumer culture and technical progress. (Ironically of course, *Crash Injuries* also depends on the latest medical, scientific, and technological advances to show these things). Although *Crash Injuries* is a medical textbook, underlying its advice is a critique of American culture, in particular its failure to address the 'traffic scourge'. This critique is wittily articulated in a cartoon printed opposite the book's title page (figure 8).

¹ Jacob Kulowski, *Crash Injuries: The Integrated Medical Aspects of Automobile Injuries and Death* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas: 1960), vii.

² Kulowski, *Crash Injuries*, xv.

Above a few apologetic lines from Isaac Newton's 'Preface' to his *Principia Mathematica* (1687) appears the cross-section of an apple.

The significance of falling apples as the inspiration for Newton's laws of motion is well known and Kulowski frequently refers to Newton's laws as the basic principles governing the behaviour (and consequently the injuries) of human bodies during car collisions. In this cartoon the core of 'Newton's' apple is filled with two colliding cars and the pith of the fruit is riddled with worms one of which is driving a car. The cartoon's suggestion is clear: the principles of motion are rotten, riddled with worms, and have decay at their core. The fact that the car-driving worm wears a top-hat suggests that these 'worms' also represent the more privileged members of consumer society – and the 'apple', perhaps, their world.



I heartily beg that what I have here done may be read with forbearance; and that my labors in a subject so difficult may be examined, not so much with the view to censure, as to remedy their defects.
 —NEWTON'S Preface to the *Principia*, 1686

Figure 8: Anon. Untitled cartoon. (ca. 1960). Reproduced from Jacob Kulowski, *Crash Injuries: The Integrated Medical Aspects of Automobile Injuries and Death*. Courtesy of Charles C. Thomas Publisher, Ltd., Springfield, Il.

Newton's third law of motion states that 'every action has an equal and opposite reaction'. This law governs the collision of the two cars at the centre of the cartoon apple. Within these cars the science of the internal combustion engine – literally and metaphorically signifying accelerated progress – leads to destruction. While Newton's laws govern the injuries suffered by human bodies in car collisions, it could be said that this scientific law

expresses similar sentiments to those articulated in the cultural criticism of Sigmund Freud, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse as well as its more uncompromising and physical depiction in the obscene narratives we have so far considered. In Newton's words, all these texts comment on an 'equal and opposite reaction' in the urge towards 'civilised' progress.

According to English novelist, James G. Ballard (1930-), using the now familiar terms of sight, knowledge and truth, *Crash Injuries* is a study that presents 'a way of seeing the human self anew'.¹ It also, in Ballard's words, provides the 'documentary underpinning' for Ballard's infamous novel, *Crash* (1973).² Because of its sexual and violent content, *Crash* – aided by David Cronenberg's 1996 film adaptation of the work – has become notorious for its sexual 'depravity'.³ It is probably worth noting that although all Ballard's novels are sexually charged and sexual 'perversion' runs beneath their surfaces, to date *Crash* is the only one that marries these themes to extreme violence and describes them in an explicit way.

Echoes of *Crash Injuries* can be identified throughout *Crash*. Despite the book's carnage, and its mutilated and excreting bodies, it maintains a curiously aseptic, medical atmosphere. A significant amount of the action occurs in hospitals and, characteristically of Ballard's work, a central character is a medical doctor. Detailed medical descriptions of automobile injuries recur throughout the novel and Ballard's adoption of medico-scientific language to describe body parts replaces the more usual obscene language of obscene literature and gives a certain scientific detachedness to the novel's physicality. Further evoking parallels with *Crash Injuries*, in his 1995 'Introduction' to the novel Ballard, like Kulowski, critiques twentieth-century consumer culture and refers to 'the pandemic cataclysm [the road traffic accident] that kills hundreds of thousands of people each year and injures millions' (6).

In this latter respect *Crash* not only echoes Kulowski's *Crash Injuries* but also other, earlier, obscene narratives. Indeed, critics frequently compare *Crash*'s potent combination of sex and death with the work of Sade. Mikita Brottman and Christopher Sharrett state that 'the pursuit of satisfaction in *Crash* is the pursuit of a Sadean void'.⁴

¹ J. G. Ballard interviewed, *J.G. Ballard: Re/Search* vol. 8/9, eds. Juno and Andrea Vale (San Francisco: Re/Search, 1984), 10.

² Ballard interviewed, *Re/Search*, 10.

³ See Mikita Brottman and Christopher Sharret, 'The End of the Road,' *Car Crash Culture*, ed. Mikita Brottman (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 211 fn1 for some media responses to David Cronenberg's film adaptation of *Crash*.

⁴ Brottman and Sharret, 'The End of the Road', 204.

Brian Baker equates the novel's episodes of anal intercourse with that depicted by Sade;¹ Robert Ziegler sees the 'Sadist's hand' at work in *Crash*,² and Iain Sinclair talks of *Crash*'s 'Sadean dance'.³

In fact, comparing *Crash* to a wider range of obscene texts it is possible to identify more than simply echoes of Sade's obscenity. We find here the inscribed and imprinted bodies seen in Réage's *Histoire d'O*. There is a close correlation with the themes of Sacher-Masoch's *Venus im Pelz*. We can also locate in *Crash* – and Ballard's oeuvre as a whole – the influence of surrealism and a remarkable affinity that has yet to be fully critically explored, to Bataille's theory of eroticism and *Histoire de l'oeil*. In this way, *Crash* is not 'just' a text which displays obscene scenes (violated bodies, dehumanisation, death) reminiscent of those used by Sade. Indeed, via Ballard's later novel, *Empire of the Sun* (1984), I suggest that *Crash*'s seldom-mentioned affinity with *Histoire de l'oeil*, rather than to the work of Sade, is of particular value when reading Ballard's novel (and indeed his oeuvre has a whole).⁴

From what I have already said, it may be obvious that this chapter moves in two directions. It moves 'backwards' to establish *Crash*'s connection to earlier obscene works and to illustrate how it adopts and in some cases adapts themes familiar to us from these narratives. This chapter also moves 'forwards'. Following the historical trajectory of this study, this chapter and the next explore how the concerns of what is generally regarded as a French literary canon of obscene, sexually graphic literature has extended beyond French literature to be rearticulated in modern Anglo-American cultures. In its portrayal of bodies and obscene acts we will see how *Crash* differs in some ways from these earlier works, yet also how it articulates familiar themes transposed onto, and influenced by 1970s urban England.

¹ Brian Baker, 'The Resurrection of Desire: J. G. Ballard's "Crash" as a Transgressive Text,' *Foundation International Review of Science Fiction*, 29 (Autumn 2000), 91.

² Robert Ziegler, 'Reader-Text Collisions in J. G. Ballard's "Crash",' *Notes of Contemporary Literature*, 29:2 (1999), 11.

³ Iain Sinclair, "*Crash*": David Cronenberg's Post-Mortem on J. G. Ballard's 'Trajectory of Fate' (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), 62.

⁴ Baker, 'The Resurrection of Desire', 85-86, 92, mentions thematic connections between Bataille and Ballard in relation to 'transgression'. He does not explore this affinity in more than the briefest and most general terms.

1. 'Perverse Technology'¹

Crash takes the elements of the obscene narrative into a modern urban setting. The novel's backdrop has a very contemporary feel: it is a sterile world of concrete, multi-storey car parks, airport terminal buildings, flyovers, second-hand car garages and petrol stations. By occasionally using American rather than British English – for example 'freeway' not 'motorway' – Ballard emphasises this world's 'modernity' with an Americanised feel. Geographically accurate landmarks such as Western Avenue, Shepperton Film studios and Westway motor interchange locate *Crash* in 'real' west London where everything and everyone seems to be in transit.

Its urban environment is not the only element to set *Crash* apart from the earlier obscene works I have considered. This setting is emblematic of the novel's cultural context, a context which is both embraced by *Crash* and which also dictates the actions that occur. Thus, as urban geographer, Lawrence Knopp, observes, the modern subjectivity and its sexual desires have become inexorably fused with the modern urban environment. Knopp notes how the modern 'Western' city dictates for its inhabitants, 'an eroticisation of many of the characteristic experiences of modern urban life: anonymity, voyeurism, exhibitionism, consumption ... motion, danger, power, navigation and restlessness ... [here] people relate to each other as objects and surfaces'.²

Knopp's observation compares well to the sexual content of *Crash*. The novel's world is an 'overlit realm of violence and technology' (16). Televisions cast images of violence, commodity advertising, sex, and celebrity glamour. All bodies relate to each other as 'objects and surfaces'. Furthermore, recalling the metaphor of the theatre – and with it the definition of 'obscene' as that which is 'off the stage' – characters in Ballard's novel are like machines that play roles; they are 'actors' who seem more like robots in the 'grim drama' of a life that, as *Crash*'s narrator asserts, brings onto this stage 'an unrehearsed theatre of technology' (22). Referring to his relationship with his wife, Catherine, this narrator notes that,

I was already becoming a kind of emotional cassette, taking my place with all those scenes of pain and violence that illuminated the margins of our lives – television newsreels of war and student riots, natural

¹ 71.

² Lawrence Knopp, 'Sexuality and Urban Space: A Framework for Analysis,' *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, eds. David Bell and Gill Valentine (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 151-52.

disasters and police brutality which we vaguely watched on the colour TV set in our bedroom as we masturbated each other. This violence experienced at so many removes has become intimately associated with our sex acts. (37)

At other times this narrator describes the bodies around him as ‘invisible and mysterious mannequins’ (159) and ‘mannequins dressed in meaningless clothing’ (205). These mannequin people – human-like rather than human – are as emotionless as the crash test dummies featured throughout Kulowski’s text and, indeed, Ballard’s. Thus, Catherine becomes a ‘sexual exercise doll fitted with a neoprene vagina’ (51) and her breasts are a ‘soft technology’ (33).

Of course, while some of these observations set *Crash* apart from what we have already seen, the body as a doll or an object to be used like a machine is not a new trope in obscene narratives. The doll recalls one of Freud’s uncanny motifs (discussed more below) and both Severin and O desire to lose their identity and become objects to be used by their mistress and masters. Furthermore, bodies as machine-like objects are not a theme confined to *Crash*.¹

With its repetitive movements and singular goal, the body has long featured as machine-like in sexually explicit narratives. Thus, at the same time as *philosophes* expounded man as a machine, eighteenth-century salacious literature often alluded to the machine-like nature of sexual activity. Consider in this respect, John Cleland’s *Fanny Hill or Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748-49) in which a penis becomes a ‘wonderful machine’² and ‘the engine of love-assaults’.³ Sade provides similar examples with references to the male organ as ‘an engine’ (*120 Days*, 232/51). Yet, in transforming the man-as-machine trope into a central image of the obscene novel, *Crash* differs from these earlier texts. *Crash* does not just *connect* technology and the human in terms of metaphor. On Ballard’s stage of objects and surfaces, where violence, technology, consumerism, and sex fuse, humans become strangely mechanized beings and we find that the car and the spectacle of the car crash – the *broken* machine and the shattered body – merge as the apotheosis of the novel’s themes.

¹ One could add that, as machines have become more commonplace in culture, so art has portrayed a link between man and machinery. In the twentieth century, for instance, surrealism, and Futurist art, frequently portrayed, and sometimes celebrated, man as a machine. As early as the eighteenth century, some Enlightenment *philosophes* (such as La Mettrie and D’Holbach) urged man to realise his purely material, machine-like, nature.

² John Cleland, *Fanny Hill or Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, ed. Peter Wagner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 62.

³ Cleland, *Fanny Hill*, 77.

In fact, despite Ballard's assertion that *Crash* is 'the first pornographic novel based on technology' (6), the fusion of bodies and machines portrayed in *Crash* is more like the unsettling convergence (and not simply that which is literal and bloody) between the human body and the automobile that occurs in *Crash Injuries* than the penetration of bodies found in conventional pornography. Consider for example the following passage from Kulowski's book.

It is logical to assume or imply that to a useful degree man's anatomical, and psycho-physiological characteristics can be expressed in the systematic terms of engineering, and that the nature, source, and magnitude of the stresses set up by man-machine combinations ... [should be identified so that neither the driver nor passengers of a car are] subjected to greater stresses than his body can tolerate without failure of one or more parts.¹

Kulowski continues, '*the same laws which govern engineering practice may be applied by engineers to the physical laws which govern man's physical capacity and tolerances to external (and internal) stresses*'.² In *Crash Injuries*, the human body does not simply collide with mechanically engineered objects and vehicles. It is conjoined with them in the sense that through Kulowski's description and theory, the body becomes a mechanical object. The same rules, scientific and physical laws, shearing forces and impact tolerances that govern car bodywork govern the human body. This 'fusion' anticipates that which occurs in Ballard's text. The human body becomes a 'mechanical system' void of emotion, culture, memory, 'self', and individuality. Instead, in Kulowski's terms, humanity becomes a 'heterogenous visco-elastic substance ... having liquid, solid and gaseous components' which, like a machine, can alter its 'elastic moduli' and 'stress limits' by 'changing its position and physiological state'.³ This is the 'man-machine combination' that dominates Ballard's novel and which is relayed in passages that turn Catherine's body into a 'technology', thus associating her with automobiles, which are described elsewhere (perhaps ironically considering the destruction they wreck), as 'benign technology' (162) and 'benevolent technology' (80, 148).⁴

Catherine's is not the only body to which this 'fusion' applies. All the examples of this 'Kulowskian' breakdown of the artificial and the natural, the biological and mechanical,

¹ Kulowski, *Crash Injuries*, xviii.

² Kulowski, *Crash Injuries*, 6-7 (Kulowski's emphasis).

³ Kulowski, *Crash Injuries*, 6-7.

⁴ I say 'perhaps' because, as becomes evident, in *Crash* death is linked to life; it is not purely destruction.

of humans and machines are too numerable to detail but the following passage is representative.

The plastic laminates around me, the colour of washed anthracite, were the same tones as her pubic hairs parted at the vestibule of her vulva. The passenger compartment enclosed us like a machine generating from our sexual act an homunculus of blood, semen and engine coolant. ... The sheen of moisture on the skin around her mouth [was] like the bloom on a morning windshield ... I took her left breast from the brassière and began to stroke it. Stirred happily by its familiar geometry, I gazed at the jewelled grotto of the instrument panel, at the jutting shroud of the steering assembly and the chromium heads of the control switches. (81-82).

In this scene the car becomes strangely humanised and the human automatised. Skin is compared to a morning windshield, body parts have 'geometry', and interior plastics are similar in colour to pubic hairs. The normal sexual union of a man and a woman also involves the car so that the semen and blood of men merge with engine coolant and create a half human, half machine 'homunculus'. Elsewhere, Ballard notes that 'The crash between our two cars was a model of some ultimate and yet undreamt sexual union' (29). He describes Catherine at her toilet 'like some efficient mechanic servicing herself' (83). Evoking the half-man, half-horse creatures of mythology, Ballard refers to cars as 'the welcoming centaurs of some Arcadian land' (166) and, in a drug-induced scene the narrator describes how 'the bones of my forearms formed a solid coupling with the shift of the steering column' (196).

It could be said that machines are not sexual and that by becoming technological objects, humans lose their sexual aspect. If this is true in some contexts, it is not true of *Crash*. Beneath a metaphorical and often literal fusion of flesh and metal we find a deeper union. Throughout the novel, Ballard emphasises that mankind created the cars they are enamoured with and which cause so much destruction. Consequently, as human creations, cars represent a projection of fundamental human drives – specifically and ironically (almost parodically) the death-instinct (or death-drive). Studying the cars in Ballard's novel, therefore provides an insight into the desires of humanity and the society which Ballard is depicting. Via his narrator, Ballard makes this connection explicit. As the narrator notes, motorway traffic provides 'an invitation to explore the viaducts of our minds' (54) and elsewhere, surveying this sterile world of motorways and traffic jams, he says 'I found myself moving through a terrain whose contours led inside my skull towards an ambiguous

realm' (126). Cars, in this sense, are something born out of science, man's desires and, recalling the fundamental obscenity of the mind unveiled by Bataille (Chapter Four), we find a specifically 'ambiguous' realm of the human mind. As if dreams become real therefore, cars are then ejected into the world where they can fulfil their most perverse possibilities.

On another level in his obscene union of the human and the automobile, Ballard is suggesting that the fates of one are intertwined with the fate of the other. Exactly where this fate leads will be explored below in 'Violent Light' and 'Dreams and Genocides'. Firstly however, it is worth noting that, in all the texts so far considered, the issue of narratorial and authorial identity has often been problematised. We have met the cynical 'I' of Sade's *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*, the anonymous 'frame' narrator of *Venus im Pelz*, and the pseudonymous authors/identities, 'Lord Auch' and 'Pauline Réage' of *Histoire de l'oeil* and *Histoire d'O*, each of whom plays with the suggestion of 'real', 'autobiographical' information. In all these novels, this stylistic trope presents another level at which these works destabilise the conventional distinction between 'reality' and 'fiction' and venture into Freud's uncanny ('an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced').¹ *Crash* too achieves the same blurring of boundaries by allowing the 'author' into the novel's fictional world. In this novel the fictional narrator shares his name – 'James Ballard' – with that of the text's author. In an era of relative permissiveness in terms of printed material (this is post the 1959 revision of the British Obscenity Laws) we cannot see this stylistic move as a form of self-censorship. In fact, given that the character's name *is* that of the author and not a pseudonym, the exact opposite would be true. Instead, Ballard presents us with a post-modern play of reality, fiction and identity (an issue returned to in Chapter Seven).

Like his predecessors, 'Ballard' (I use 'Ballard' and Ballard to distinguish between the character-narrator and the author) a T.V advertising executive, is a wealthy, educated, and successful member of his society. Echoing *Venus im Pelz*, the story is structured cyclically – the novel opens as it ends with the death of Doctor Robert Vaughan – but the story itself begins with a near-fatal car crash that shatters 'Ballard's' privileged life-style and initiates his first encounter with Vaughan.

Vaughan is a once-popular T.V scientist who has become a 'nightmare angel of the expressways' (63). Obsessed with car crashes, their sexual possibilities, the violent 'marriage' of human flesh and technology and the memories of celebrity car crash deaths (those of Albert Camus, James Dean, Jayne Mansfield, and J.F. Kennedy are mentioned)

(135), Vaughan bears the scars of traffic accidents. No longer a media figure, he haunts accident sites, photographing and filming the mangled metal and bodies, staging recreations of fatal celebrity crashes, and collating questionnaires relating to road traffic accidents and (sexual) fantasies surrounding them. Of particular interest in these questionnaires are the imagined car-crash wounds sustained by celebrities in yet-to-occur traffic collisions. One of the crashes Vaughan photographs is 'Ballard's'. While convalescing, 'Ballard' allows Vaughan to guide him and his wife beneath the surface of their world of consumerism, sex, and violence.

The world Vaughan introduces is an 'enchanted domain' (47), an uncertain 'world of dreamlike logic' (121). Here images spill out of 'Ballard's' consciousness and contaminate the 'real' world of west London with sexual fantasies surrounding cars and car crashes. The suggestion is, of course, that these fantasies reveal a more authentic perception of the world around them. In this, of course, *Crash* echoes the fundamental tenet of psychoanalysis and the dreamy ambiguity and the fantasy-like problematising of vision encountered in *Venus im Pelz*, *Histoire d'O*, and *Histoire de l'oeil*. Recall for example how *Histoire de l'oeil's* narrator asserts that 'we had abandoned the real world ... Our personal hallucination now developed ... boundlessly' (*Eye*, 29/33). Likewise, 'Ballard' observes that 'One almost expects to see Breughal and Hieronymous Bosch cruising the freeways in their rental-company cars' (54). Elsewhere he talks about 'an ambiguous realm' (126) where 'potent confusions of fiction and reality' (111) occur.

As 'Ballard' is drawn further into Vaughan's world, the two men cruise the motorways at night. They join crowds of spectators who gather to watch car crashes and they hire prostitutes who Vaughan drapes across the back seat of their car, arranging them in the shapes of crash victims before engaging them in intercourse (145). Vaughan sees violent car collisions and the resulting wounds as the site of a destructive release of sexual energy. Influenced by the doctor, 'Ballard's' sexual focus shifts from natural orifices and erogenous zones – mouth, vagina, breast, anus – to the artificial wounds produced from car-crashes. This, murder, flagellation, or the vagina is the central obscene image of the narrative: disfigured bodies and the transference of sexual desire onto wounded flesh alongside the interpenetration of flesh and metal in a 'marriage of violence and desire' (156). At one point Vaughan draws the outline of his erect penis onto the mangled bodywork of a recently wrecked car, 'celebrating the marriage of his own genitalia with the skull-shattered dashboard binnacle against which this middle-aged woman dentist had died' (169). At the site of car crashes it is said that 'a pervasive sexuality filled the air, as if we [the spectators

¹ [Footnote to previous page] Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', 367.

to the crash] were members of a congregation leaving after a sermon urging us to celebrate our sexualities with friends and strangers' (157). Vaughan's camera focuses on genital mutilations. Likewise, scarred, disabled and mutilated bodies – and car bodywork – become 'Ballard's' sexual focus. He finds himself 'locked into a system of beckoning violence and excitement' (173) where 'the deviant technology of the car-crash provided the sanction of any perverse act' (138). The obscenity we find here is that of the violated human form – violated, penetrated and dehumanised throughout its sexualised fusion with technology.

With 'Ballard' increasingly driven to sexual experimentation, Vaughan's 'research' spins out of control. His new project (which draws together several of the novel's motifs: celebrity, sexual union, and death) involves his own suicide-by-collision with the American film actress, Elizabeth Taylor. Ultimately, Vaughan's project fails: he misses Taylor's car and ploughs off a flyover into the roof of a coach load of tourists. The novel closes with 'Ballard' apparently inheriting Vaughan's fascination with death-by-car-collision. As 'Ballard' confesses, 'Already I knew that I was designing the elements of my own car-crash' (224). The final paragraph of the book is written in the present tense (the rest of the novel is written in the past) and it tells how traffic continues to move and aircraft continue to fly, carrying with them 'Vaughan's semen' which will live on in the myriad of car crashes to come (224).

Despite circling around bodies and sex, and Ballard's statement regarding the 'pornographic' nature of the text, one must take into account what Ballard means by 'pornography' when we apply this to *Crash*. Thus, later in his 'Introduction' Ballard defines pornography as 'the most political form of fiction' (6). This points towards the earlier, explicitly sexual nature of eighteenth-century pornography rather than its more recent connotations of primarily, titillation. Furthermore, within the novel unlike in much conventional pornography, the sexual acts are emotionless and explicitly portrayed as unerotic: 'The erotic dimension was absent' (102) and 'I felt that this [sexual] act was a ritual devoid of ordinary sexuality ... an act divorced from all feeling' (161) notes 'Ballard'. Obscene slang – a staple of conventional pornography – is also absent from *Crash*. On one level this too contributes to the novel's sterile, medical, atmosphere and its uncanny portrayal of bodies as dolls, machines, and objects. On another, Ballard's adoption of the technical and scientific language more common to car manuals and medical studies (such as Kulowski's) creates a tension between the obscene display of the sexual acts described and their description using public, 'acceptable', language. Indeed, used repetitively in graphic sexual contexts, Ballard's choice of language undermines, or at least challenges, the

distinction often drawn between respectable Latinate terms and the violent, 'dirty', low, connotations of obscene language. Medical language too, Ballard seems to be saying, refers to the same organs, the same acts, and its acceptability is arbitrary.

Another important distinction to be made between *Crash* and the bodies of earlier obscene narratives is that, in *Crash*, every character is deformed by collisions. Ballard's text not only emphasises 'the perverse eroticism of the car-crash' (17), but also the *wounded* body. As 'Ballard' asserts, 'the nominal junction points of the sexual act – breast and penis, anus and vulva, nipple and clitoris – failed to provide any excitement for us' (178). As the novel progresses 'Ballard' replaces this conventional sexuality with one overlaid with the memory of violence and death. The deep imprints left by the rending of flesh by steel, glass and instrument binnacles become 'new and exciting orifice[s] ... neither vagina nor rectum, an orifice we could dress with all our deepest affections' (180). In one sexual encounter with Gabrielle (one of Vaughan's circle of friends, a young woman left heavily scarred and disabled by a car crash), 'Ballard' describes how he

unshackled the left leg brace and ran my fingers along the deep buckle groove, the corrugated skin felt hot and tender, more exciting than the membrane of a vagina. This depraved orifice, the invagination of a sexual organ still in the embryonic stages of its evolution [...] My first orgasm, [was] within the deep wound on her thigh ... During the next few days my orgasms took place within her left armpit, in the wounds on her neck and shoulder, in these sexual apertures formed by fragmenting windshield louvres and dashboard dials in a high-speed impact. (177-179)

In *Crash*, every adult body bears the inscription of a car-crash. This includes 'Ballard's' wife, Catherine, who, although never literally involved in an automobile collision, is left marked as if by 'imaginary automobile accidents' (166) after her violent sexual encounter (one could say 'collision') with Vaughan. *Crash's* embrace of the 'mysterious eroticism of wounds' (12) is a motif that must be considered to fully understand the novel.

As one of the novel's most prevalent symbols, 'Ballard' employs a wide range of terms to describe these artificial orifices or 'sexual apertures' (179). In many ways these wounds resemble inscriptions. Wounds can be read like a 'biography' (43) that provides 'answers' (28); 'beacons' set to receive secret signals, (53); a 'coda of death and mutilation' (56); a new 'exact language' (90), 'illuminated medieval manuscripts' (134); a 'new algebra of leg stance and wound area' (136); 'flowers' (146, 180); 'moulds waiting for my fingers' (149), 'codes' (161); 'handholds' (150, 156, 161, 168), 'anthologies' (176), 'signatures' (178), and 'a zodiac of unforgotten collisions' (201). Overwhelmingly these descriptions

present wounds as communicative: 'algebra', 'languages', 'signatures', 'answers', 'anthologies', 'manuscripts'.

Parallels can be made between Ballard's wounded bodies and the inscribed flesh of Réage's *Histoire d'O*. Both texts, it could be said, describe the modern self as violently constructed by external forces.¹ In addition, the association between sex, bodies, and truth already considered in *Histoire d'O*, is implicit in *Crash*. Ballard describes wounds – opened bodies – as 'answers' (28), a code, a form of communication, and 'beacons' set to receive secret signals (53). The sexual acts of the novel – acts concentrated on these artificial orifices – are portrayed in terms of exploration. It is as if, as with the men who 'read' O in *Histoire d'O*, the obscenely violated – opened – body in *Crash* and the sexual act, can somehow provide a lost or undiscovered truth. 'Our sex acts were exploratory ordeals,' states 'Ballard' in relation to his sexual encounters with Gabrielle (176). Vaughan 'explored the limits of that young prostitute's body' (145, my emphasis); 'I would deliberately inspect every orifice I could find ... forcing my tongue into her ear in the hope of finding a trace of the taste of wax, inspecting her nostrils and navel, and lastly her vulva and anus' (112, my emphasis); 'I explored her body and bruises' (166, my emphasis); 'she began to explore this circular crevice [one of 'Ballard's' car-crash scars] with her lips ... I explored the scars on her thighs and arms ... as she in turn explored mine' (178, my emphasis).

Given the accompanying medico-scientific language, these sexual episodes assume the atmosphere of a scientific examination that observes in order to find the underlying 'meaning' of some symptom or anomaly. Yet, where *Crash* is concerned, this connection with a Western tradition of locating 'truth' in the human body (see Chapter Five) and its sexual predilections is not the whole story.

Unlike O's body – whose mutilations/inscriptions can be 'read' by those who belong to the Roissy society – despite the extensive sexual-medical examination which *Crash's* bodies receive, they fail to surrender their secrets. Although, like 'illuminated medieval manuscripts' the mutilated bodies in *Crash* are pregnant with ancient, mysterious, knowledge, it is as if the inscriptions are written in an alien language. Sexualised wounds may serve as a new form of communication, but this language is a 'code' – 'codes of a new marriage of sensation and possibility' (106) – that must be 'solved' (194). For Ballard's characters, the key to this code is missing. At one point 'Ballard' recognizes this situation,

¹ Dennis A. Foster, 'J. G. Ballard's Empire of the Senses: Perversion and the Failure of Authority,' *PMLA*, 108:5 (1993), 525-526 gives a Lacanian reading of *Crash* which is reminiscent of Silverman's reading of the violent cultural construction of bodies in *Histoire d'O*.

All these acts and emotions, were ciphers searching for their meaning among the hard chromium furniture of our minds. A car-crash in which she would die was the one event which would release the codes waiting within her (180).

Although characters continue to search for the key to elusive forms of knowledge and sexual communion, until that key is found all that remains are unfulfilled 'possibilities' (156, 176). As the above quote indicates, while near-fatal violence may inscribe the codes of a secret communication onto the body, ultimately it is only death, not the living body – no matter how opened or how many additional openings it contains – which 'Ballard' presents as the moment which releases inner secrets and sexual possibilities.

Thus far in the sex and violence of Ballard's novel, we have located themes familiar to us from previous works yet changed in subtle ways into something new. The body in Ballard, for example, is not the same as the body in previous narratives. Ballard's body has more in common with Kulowksi's 'man-machine combination'. It is an object, a surface, a mannequin. Ballard's wounded body is not identical to the inscribed and opened flesh of O. O's body was a vessel of truth. *Crash* exhibits cynicism regarding the accessibility – even perhaps the existence – of such a truth within the human body, no matter how 'opened' that body may become. After all, the bodies in *Crash* do not differ significantly from mannequins and dolls and no matter how uncanny dolls may be there is no tradition of seeing *them* as vessels of mysterious truth. Yet, *Crash*'s apparent cynicism in this quarter does not, as we will see, preclude the novel's suggestion of universal 'truths' and cultural criticism – its (to use Ballard's terminology) 'political' intentions. I wish therefore, to set aside for now some of the differences – significant though they are – between the bodies and sex in *Crash* and those of earlier texts, and consider how certain roots in Ballard's novel reach back, like those in *Histoire d'O*, to the surrealists. Perhaps most important of all, is the way that these roots reveal a profound affinity between Ballard's novel and the work of one of the surrealists' contemporaries, Georges Bataille (see Chapter Four).

2. 'Violent Light'¹

'I am going to construct an artificial girl with anatomical possibilities which are capable of re-creating the heights of passion even to inventing new desires'.² This statement, by surrealist artist Hans Bellmer (briefly considered in Chapters Four and Five) anticipates 'Ballard's' concept of additional 'sexual apertures' as 'contact points for future sexual possibilities' (156) and 'new exciting orifice[s] ... [which] we could dress with all our deepest affections' (180).

In the previous chapter, Bellmer and his sculpture/photographic work, *Die Puppe* (*The Doll*) provided an example of an early twentieth-century portrayal of the female form and its association with 'truth'. Yet, it seems appropriate once again to evoke Bellmer's *Doll* albeit in a slightly different way. Rather than focusing on *The Doll* as an image of femininity, in relation to the bodies in *Crash*, *The Doll* provides an uncannily similar fusion of the natural and the artificial, the animate and inanimate, that recalls Ballard's uncanny (with all its Freudian connotations) mannequin-like bodies. Or perhaps, more accurately, Ballard's mannequins recall the child's plaything that Bellmer is overlaying with adult forms of desire. Before photographing it, Bellmer used to arrange his second *Doll* in different surroundings in a range of contorted positions. This draws further parallels between Vaughan's photographs of car-crash victims and his rearrangement of doll-like prostitutes into the postures of those victims (145). One such photograph (figure 9) shows *The Doll* as a collection of jumbled body parts (her/its limbs and torso were jigsaw-like and could be separated and re-attached in various ways), exaggerated breast-shapes and gaping orifices. She/it lies, contorted – or is she/it sensuously reclining? – among the debris of a broken chair. Echoing sentiments expressed either explicitly or tacitly throughout obscene literature (from eighteenth-century 'forbidden' erotica to Réage and Ballard), it was through *The Doll* and violent sexual images such as figure 9, that Bellmer claimed, 'I want to reveal what is usually kept hidden ... I tried to open people's eyes to new realities'.³

¹ James G. Ballard, *Empire of the Sun* (London: Panther, 1985), 202.

² Hans Bellmer quoted in Webb, *Hans Bellmer*, 29.

³ Hans Bellmer, *Anatomie de l'image* (Paris: Le Terrain Vague, 1957), unpag.

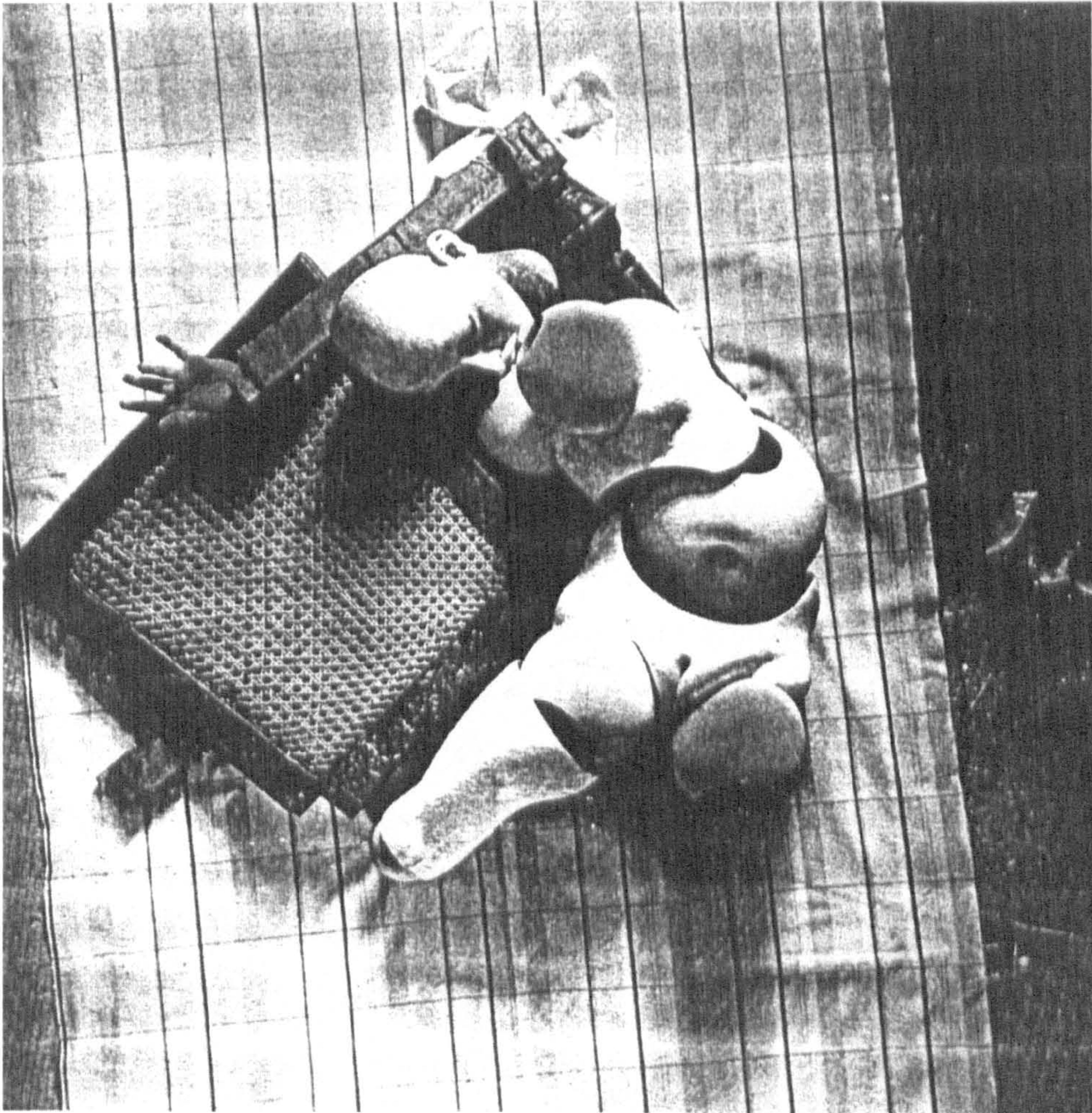


Figure 9: Hans Bellmer, *Die Puppe*
(hand-coloured gelatine silver print, black and white, detail), 1935.

Ballard does not hide his admiration for surrealist art. 'Surrealism is *the* most important imaginative enterprise this [the twentieth] century has embarked on,' he states in an interview, '... for me the ... surrealists have opened windows on the *real* world, and I don't mean that as any literary conceit, I mean that literally'.¹ 'Ballard's' reference in *Crash* to 'Breughal and Hieronymous Bosch cruising the freeways in their rental-company cars' (54) evokes two of the strongest artistic influences on the surrealist movement.² In addition, explicit reference to Bellmer's work appears in what is widely recognized as an early version of *Crash*: Ballard's avant-garde novel, *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970).³ In this earlier book, amid other references to Bellmer and surrealism, an authorial note observes that 'Hans Bellmer's work is now totally out of fashion, hovering as it does on the edge of

¹ Ballard interviewed, *Re/Search*, 23.

² Alexandrian, *Surrealist*, 10-11.

³ James G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) (London: Flamingo, 2001).

child pornography. Yet it is difficult to imagine any paedophile being excited by his [Bellmer's] strange dolls ... his [Bellmer's] vision is far too close for comfort to the truth' (*Atrocity Exhibition*, 89).¹

While *The Doll* may be Bellmer's best-known work, and the parallels between it and the bodies in *Crash* provide interesting points of comparison, it is also important to note that Bellmer's work was profoundly influenced by that of Georges Bataille. According to Hal Foster, Bellmer's *Dolls* were so influenced by Bataille's writing that they are visual explorations of 'Bataillean eroticism'.² Further intertwining the work of Bellmer and Bataille, are the illustrations Bellmer created for Bataille's novels, *Histoire de l'oeil* (1947 edition) and *Madame Edwarda* (1956).³ Indeed, an unused sketch that Bellmer made for *Histoire de l'oeil* draws together all three figures – Bellmer, Bataille, Ballard – and the central motifs of their obscene work: violence, sex, vision, revelation, and 'truth'.

Bellmer's illustration (figure 10) shows Bataille's Simone fused with the inanimate machine of a bicycle. This image reminds us that Bataille's first novel provides a precedent (within obscene literature) for *Crash*'s 'marriage of violence and desire' with death, speed, and technology. Recall how, during the protagonists' hallucinatory nighttime journey on bicycles, *Histoire de l'oeil*'s narrator witnesses

Simone's bare cunt ... jerked by the legs pumping up and down on the spinning wheels ... the [bike's] rear wheel vanishing indefinitely to my eyes, not only in the bicycle fork but virtually in the crevice of the cyclist's [Simone's] naked bottom ... the erection of my penis, destined to plunge into the depths of the cunt sticking to the bicycle seat. (*Eye*, 30/33).

This passage hurtles the characters and plot towards a violent and sexual collision. Another scene from Bataille's novella also anticipates the events of *Crash*. In the first chapter of *Histoire de l'oeil*, while driving a car, Simone and the anonymous narrator fatally injure a female cyclist. Like the spectators who gather around road traffic accidents in *Crash*, Bataille's young protagonists watch the bleeding corpse 'For a long time, fully absorbed in the sight' (*Eye*, 10-11/14-15). Again, this vision of 'nauseating beauty' drives them to embark on a frantic sexual episode.

¹ Roger Luckhurst, *'The Angle Between Two Walls': The Fiction of J. G. Ballard* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997), 105-17 gives an account of the influence of Bellmer and surrealism ('Ballard's debt to surrealism') on Ballard's work.

² Hal Foster, 'Violation and Veiling in Surrealist Photography: Woman as Fetish, as Shattered Object, as Phallus,' *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, ed. Jennifer Munby (London: Tate Publishing, 2001), 216.

³ Webb, *Hans Bellmer*, 188-91. See also figure 6, Chapter Four.

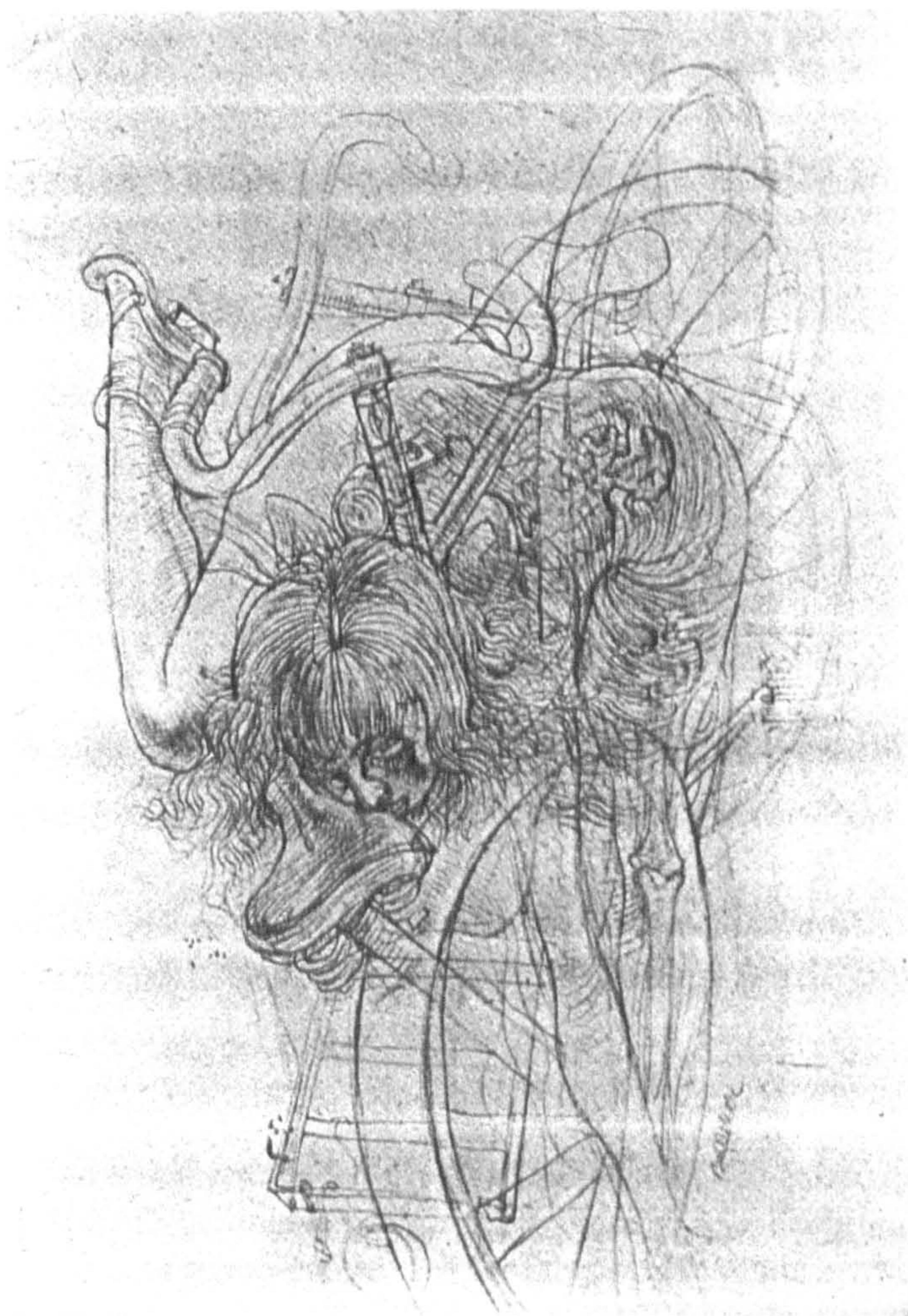


Figure 10: Hans Bellmer, *Unused pencil drawing from "Story of the Eye"*
(Pencil drawing) ca. 1944.

Bataille's emphasis on the sexual aspect of death and the mortal aspect of sex finds ample expression in *Crash*. Naturally, the same could be said of other texts or works of art which illustrate the age-old connection between sex and death. However, I would like to explore how closely the largely unacknowledged way in which *Crash* (re)articulates in a 1970s setting the themes and motifs of a specifically 'Bataillean eroticism'.

Chapter Four showed how Bataille (like Freud) regarded mankind as fearful of, yet inexorably drawn towards self-dissolution. We considered how, for Bataille, death is a moment of (re)union and reintegration with a boundariless 'primal continuity' (*Eroticism*, 15). Death is a fecund but loathsome life-force 'that nauseous, rank and heaving matter, frightful to look upon, a ferment of life, teeming with worms, grubs and eggs ... death will

proclaim my return to seething life' (*Eroticism*, 56-7). For Bataille, the spectacle of mortality provides a glimpse of this rapturous/rapturous self-dissolution. He emphasises the feeling of self-negation experienced by lovers at the moment of orgasm, of spectators at religious sacrifice, and spectators of the cinematic representation of those images – decay, nudity, sex, violated flesh – which he associated with death. These images, acts, and the feelings they instil, rupture social order. This rupture or 'window' gives a glimpse of a darker obscene realm usually disavowed by conventional order and perception. It opens man's 'gelded eyes' to that integral yet disavowed aspect of ourselves: the terrifying, physical, yet seductive state that death is, and upon which life depends.

Comparing these sentiments to the recurrent spectacle of violent death in *Crash* reveals their Bataillean aspect. As *Histoire de l'oeil* does, so *Crash* emphasises a fascination with death and the visual appreciation of violence. This fascination is conveyed in a number of ways: through Vaughan's photographic records (97), on news reports (37) and the staged performance of celebrity car crashes before an audience (108). There are also crash tests replayed in slow-motion film reels (128). At one point an immense crowd gathers to watch the aftermath of a crash. One of the crash victims is a woman. The spectators become 'members of her audience' and 'Ballard' observes how,

the most vivid erotic fantasies would be moving through our minds, of imaginary acts of intercourse performed with enormous decorum and solicitude upon the blood-stained loins of this young woman while she lay within her car [...] This pervasive sexuality filled the air, as if we were members of a congregation leaving after a sermon urging us to celebrate our sexualities with friends and strangers and were driving into the night to imitate the bloody Eucharist we had observed with the most unlikely partners. (156-57)

Here, like Bataille's sacrifice, sacred sexuality pervades this scene. Like Bataille's sacrificial victim, *Crash's* car-crash victims provoke communal fantasies of sexual union. 'Ballard' notes that 'the interlocked radiator grilles of our cars formed the model of an inescapable and perverse union between us' (24-25) and, 'The crash between our two cars was a model of some ultimate and yet undreamt sexual union' (29).

Crash's fixation with the celebrity car-crash death further combines the Bataillean theme of audience and victim united through violent and sexual acts. Vaughan cruises London's motorways in a black, 1963, Lincoln convertible, 'the same make of vehicle as the open limousine in which President Kennedy had died' (64, 130) and 'endlessly [dreams] of the deaths of the famous ... Around the deaths of James Dean and Albert Camus, Jayne Mansfield and John Kennedy he had woven elaborate [sexual] fantasies' (15). He is not the

only figure fascinated with the car-related deaths of celebrities. 'Ballard' visualises 'the injuries of film actresses and television personalities, whose bodies would flower into dozens of auxiliary orifices, points of sexual conjunction with their audiences formed by the swerving technology of the automobile' (180). A spectator at the fatal collision in which a once-famous television actress dies, 'Ballard' observes how 'the automobile crash had made possible the final and longed-for union of the actress and the members of her audience' (189-191). Yet, the sight of this female crash victim provides more than just 'union' (or perhaps we could apply Bataille's term 'continuity'). As in Bataille, opened flesh provides a glimpse of one's own death. Ballard writes, 'Her bloodied face and shattered nasal bridge ... [were like] *the initiation rite into one's own death*' (188, my emphasis). Bataille echoes, 'the victim dies and the spectators share in what his death reveals. This is ... the revelation of continuity through the death of a discontinuous being ... what the tense onlookers experience in the succeeding silence, is the continuity of all existence with which the victim is now one' (*Eroticism*, 22).

It seems that *Crash*'s depiction of the erotic appeal of violent death and the union between spectators and victims contains thematic similarities with Bataille's oeuvre. Yet, where in Ballard are the motifs of light, of the blinding sun of conventional knowledge and the revelation of 'truth' which, from his first novel to his last theoretical writings, accompany Bataille's oeuvre?

While Bataille's work provides a key to understanding the obscenity and themes of *Crash*, we must use another of Ballard's novels to help us draw out the all-important themes of light and 'truth'. Thus, a book which for one critic 'disambiguates' and 'throws a retrospective light'¹ on Ballard's previous writings and for another provides 'the origin of Ballard's vision of the modern world',² we will turn to Ballard's later work, *Empire of the Sun* (1984). In fact, an early reference in *Crash* offers a direct connection between the world of *Crash* and that of Ballard's later novel and helps 'unlock' Ballard's earlier obscene work as well as confirming the Bataillean themes in *Crash*, if not, indeed, their presence in Ballard's wider oeuvre.

Empire of the Sun is set between 1942 and 1945 during the Japanese invasion of China. It tells the experiences of a boy called Jim (like 'James Ballard' in *Crash*, a 'fictional'

¹ Robert Caserio, 'Mobility and Masochism: Christine Brooke-Rose and J. G. Ballard,' *Novel*, 21:2 (1988), 306.

² Foster, 'J.G. Ballard's Empire of the Senses', 527.

character named after the author) and traces Jim's adaptation to, and growing love for, a world of shifting power and war.¹ Jim's world, as much as 'Ballard's', is one in which 'civilised' technology and science are inexorably bound with death and destruction. The explicit link between their two worlds occurs when, while convalescing from his near-fatal accident, 'James Ballard' (in *Crash*) visits the wreck of his car. Seeing its mangled metal, he compares the car to a 'cockpit segment of a World War II Japanese Zero fighter aircraft' (68) he had seen in a museum. At the beginning of *Empire of the Sun*, 'Jim Ballard' encounters the shot-down remains of just such an aircraft (*Empire*, 30-31).

In *Crash* this scene links cars and aeroplanes: 'Ballard' sees his wrecked car and recalls a wrecked aircraft. This connection represents a correlation that develops throughout *Crash* between the cars clogging the motorways and aeroplanes crossing the sky. Like cars, 'Ballard' observes how 'Even the giant aircraft taking off from the airport were systems of excitement and eroticism, punishment and desire waiting to be inflicted on my body' (146-147). Elsewhere, *Crash* conflates the earth-bound automobile with winged angelic hosts (at the Earl's Court motor show, the cellulosed bodies of cars are described as 'the coronation armour of an archangelic host') (174). Additionally, towards the end of *Crash*, 'Ballard' and Vaughan embark on an acid trip that exaggerates many of the themes of the novel. Around them cars become winged machines, 'an armada of angelic creatures' (199), 'soaring along the motorway ... the transits of a technology with wings' (209).

The same conflation of aeroplanes and cars occurs in *Empire of the Sun*. 'Mustang fighters were the Cadillacs of air combat' notes Jim (*Empire*, 192). Elsewhere he describes American fighter planes as 'like racing cars' (*Empire*, 233). Furthermore, Jim's fascination with planes ('Aircraft had always interested Jim, and especially the Japanese bombers that had devastated the Nantao and Hongkew districts of Shanghai in 1937') (*Empire*, 25) echoes Vaughan and 'Ballard's' obsession with the style, speed, liberation, and destruction associated with cars.

Jim's interest in destructive technology affects him most after the outbreak of war. Interned in a P.O.W camp beside an airfield, Jim watches young kamikaze pilots climbing into Zero aircraft (this is the same model evoked by 'James Ballard' when he visits his wrecked car in *Crash*). Through the ritual ceremony undergone by each pilot, Jim watches these figures being transformed into humans whose fate is tied to the technology they ride. He imagines himself 'rising again as one of the childlike kamikaze pilots who cheered the Emperor before hurling their Zeros into the American carriers at Okinawa' (*Empire*, 201).

¹ Foster, 'J.G. Ballard's Empire of the Senses' suggests that 'Crash gives some idea of what Jim will become, the maker of television commercials obsessed with the relations among technology, identity and death', 530.

As it happens, Jim witnesses the shared destiny of plane and man, not in a Japanese Zero, but in an American fighter shot down over the camp.

It [the Mustang] exploded in a curtain wall of flaming gasoline through which Jim could see the burning figure of the American pilot still strapped to his seat. Riding the incandescent debris of his aircraft, he tore through the trees beyond the perimeter of the camp, a fragment of the sun whose light continued to flare across the surrounding fields. (*Empire*, 193).

This dazzling vision of death not only illuminates ‘the surrounding field’; its incandescence resonates through the rest of the novel thereby binding the motifs of fighter planes (and cars) and light (and the sun) with death. In this way, although the book’s title, *Empire of the Sun*, ostensibly refers to the Japanese ‘Empire of the Rising Sun’, as the novel progresses, ‘sun’ and ‘light’ are increasingly associated with America and her European allies. For Jim, the Mustang is ‘a fragment of the sun’ and other American fighter planes are ‘like pieces of the sun’ (*Empire*, 231). Through the technology of the aircraft, the motifs of light and sun, violence and death, science, technology and the Western powers become interlinked. This theme appears most explicitly in a chapter entitled ‘Empire of the Sun’. Here, Jim witnesses ‘a flash of light ... [like] a second sun ... the light was a premonition of his death, the sight of his small soul joining the larger soul of the dying world’ (*Empire*, 267). A few pages later we learn the true origin of this intense glow: ‘Uncle Sam threw a piece of the sun at Nagasaki and Hiroshima, killed a million people. One great big flash’ (*Empire*, 274). Thus, the Empire of the Sun is both the Imperial Japanese order and the sun of Euro-America with all its traditional cultural associations of vision, illumination, knowledge, science, and ‘civilised’ progress (see Chapter Four). Yet, through the potent emblems of the nuclear bomb and the fighter plane – both (literally) illuminating, products of ‘Western’ technology and representations of scientific power and progress – this sun of the West, brings death.

In *Histoire de l’œil* Bataille used (and challenged) Western perceptions of the sun, light, and eye as symbols of a Western concept of pure knowledge and ‘truth’. Bataille presents the sun – the illumination of conventional sight – as ‘blinding’ to ‘truth’. ‘Truth’ in Bataille’s sense, is intimately bound to darkness and death. Recall Bataille’s words, ‘I think that it is only in complete darkness that it is possible for us to find what we have always been searching for’.¹ Accordingly, it is by the incandescence of darkness (a *vision lunaire*),

¹ Bataille, ‘L’esprit moderne’, 273.

by elevating those obscene aspects of ourselves and our culture, that it is possible to perceive the death-bound and death-dependent nature – in other words the impure nature – of life. In an almost identical cluster of motifs, Ballard presents a challenge to the acceptable European and Anglo-American model of a benevolent technology and progress-driven culture. In *Empire of the Sun*, the fighter jet, the bomber, and the atom bomb emblemise the ‘illuminating’ potential of this sun – indeed, each carries within it a fragment of the sun. However, the light of this sun is not benign, but destructive. Moreover, this destructive potential is not directed solely at others. Like the Mustang pilot consumed by ‘violent light’ (*Empire*, 202), or the way ‘the sunlight charged the air above the canal ... and reminded him [Jim] of the halo formed by the exploding Mustang’ (*Empire*, 249), *Empire of the Sun* intertwines European and Anglo-American epistemology and ideology, not with the accepted notion of moral progress and peace, but with violent death and self-destruction.

Locating these themes in *Empire of the Sun*, allows us to see almost identical concerns and motifs – sun, light, death, and technology – in *Crash*. Whereas, in the later book, deadly fighter planes cast a ‘violent light’ and are ‘fragments of the sun’, in *Crash*, cars bear this symbolic and literal light. Cars are ‘light borne’ (202). ‘Ballard’ notes ‘the brightness of the traffic’ (198) and how passing cars carry ‘huge cargoes of cool light’ (197), each moving capsule ‘surrounded by an immense corona of light’ (199). Furthermore, ‘Ballard’ describes how ‘the shop fronts and passers-by were illuminated by the motion of the car, the intensity of the light they emitted regulated by the passage of the vehicle I was driving’ (211). The novel’s opening description of a car crash provides another image that conflates death, technology and light: ‘the crushed bodies of package tourists [killed by Vaughan’s final collision] *like a haemorrhage of the sun*’ (7, my emphasis). Later in the novel, Vaughan, the scientist fascinated by death, becomes ‘*the eye of this illumination of the landscape around us*’ (200, my emphasis) and the scars on his body are described as ‘A zodiac of unforgotten collisions [which] *illuminated* Vaughan’s groin’ (201, my emphasis).

As similar as these motifs and central themes appear, it is possible to locate a shift in emphasis between these two writers of obscenity and the operation of their obscenity. Bataille presents a vision that pits the pure sun, ‘gelded sight’ and limited conventional epistemology, against a supposedly ‘truer’, death-oriented knowledge. In Ballard’s *Crash* and *Empire of the Sun*, the sun and the conventional knowledge which it represents is not ‘blind’. Instead, this light, laden with associations of Euro-American civilisation, casts a ‘violent light’. Death and the products of ‘civilisation’ and technology – cars, jets, atom bombs – are not aligned with an ‘other’ darker illumination; they are embedded *within* light.

According to this reading of Ballard's *Crash*, death and self-destruction lie not in opposition but at the heart of 'Western' 'civilisation's' enlightening and 'civilising' sun.

Brottman and Sharrett have noted that 'in the traditional road-movie, the road functions as a metaphor for the path of history, the impetus and trajectory of human civilisation'.¹ The sweeping motorways in *Crash*, do not – as a traditional road-movie or road-narrative would – depict the impetus and trajectory of human civilisation in terms of progress, attainment (of goals or knowledge) and liberation. *Crash* shows the 'paths of history' and the modern anxiety for rapid progress (both literal and figurative) as a motorway clogged with traffic and leading to death. If civilisation has a trajectory in *Crash*, it is regressive. The car, symbolic artefact of the twentieth century, represents many of the ideal concepts of the modern State, in other words, modern 'civilisation': glamour, style, status, personal freedom, power, technology, and an ever-increasing rate of forward momentum. Yet, in *Crash* it is also a vessel of 'perversity', mutilation and destruction. In this, Ballard is unveiling (or emphasising) a grim underside inherent to a modern European and Anglo-American culture of 'progress'. Cars, like fighter jets and atom bombs, are human inventions. As such, Ballard's cars can be seen as projections of human desires.

Cars as the projection of 'civilised' man's desire is certainly the metaphor offered in Ballard's text; in others he adopts similar motifs such as the high-rise apartment block and other utopian communities. 'Will modern technology provide us with hitherto undreamed-of means for tapping our own psychopathologies?' wonders Ballard (6). The car encapsulates the glossy face of consumer culture – glamour, style, status etc. – and yet also the darker drives of Euro-American man and 'civilisation'. In this way, as motorway traffic becomes 'an invitation to explore the viaducts of our minds' (54), the external world and everything in it lead inexorably inwards: 'I found myself moving through a terrain whose contours led inside my skull towards an ambiguous realm' (126) – towards the 'ambiguous realm' of the morbid, the obscene. Within the 'civilized' minds of 'Ballard', the scientist Vaughan, and other characters, including the medical doctor Helen Remington, we find a powerful urge towards destruction.

Emblematic of this urge is the fact that their driving towards death is not unwilling. Ballard's mutilated bodies are not innocent victims. Some (Vaughan, and the stuntman Seagrave) are clearly fulfilling a sexual desire for death by car crash. The suggestion is that

¹ Brottman and Sharrett, 'The End of the Road', 204.

others are no less complicit in their collisions. With spectators gathering to watch crash-victims and the deathly illumination cast by scars and vessels of death with characters obsessed with the sexual aspects of violence, *Crash* reveals that despite its efforts to leave behind a 'barbaric' past, 'civilisation' has not overcome bloodlust and an urge to destroy. In fact, embodied in Vaughan, we find the suggestion that new forms of destruction and perversion are *created* by advanced 'civilisations' anxious to use 'perverse technology' (71) to explore new 'deviant possibilities' (99).

3. 'Dreams and Genocides'¹

Presenting *Crash* in this way, provides an alternative reading to interpretations that see it as an archetypally post-modern text. The controversial French philosopher, Jean Baudrillard is one such who has influenced much criticism of Ballard's novel. For Baudrillard, *Crash* 'is the first great novel of the universe of simulation'.² It contains 'no psychology, no ambivalence or desire, no libido, or death-drive ... no repressed unconscious'.³ It is 'non-symbolic' and above any moral judgements.⁴ It contains 'neither fiction nor reality – a kind of hyperreality has abolished both'.⁵

Although Baudrillard is celebrating *Crash* and his reading has elevated the novel to the status of a canonical, post-modern text Baudrillard purges *Crash* of its morbid sexuality and, consequently, the effects of its obscenity. Implicit in his reading of Ballard is the concept that obscenity is meaningless. However, as I have shown, *Crash* does contain death-drive, libido, symbolism, and cultural critique all of which are themes that converge in its violent and sexual passages. *Crash* portrays a strangely clinical and passionless world but to empty this world of its obscenity and the themes directly related to it risks leaving us with an empty shell.⁶ *Crash* does comment on its cultural context and I have shown how

¹ 181.

² Jean Baudrillard, 'Ballard's "Crash",' trans. A. Evans, *Science/Fiction Studies* 18 (1991), 319.

³ Baudrillard, 'Ballard's "Crash"', 314.

⁴ Baudrillard, 'Ballard's "Crash"', 319.

⁵ Baudrillard, 'Ballard's "Crash"', 319.

⁶ Baker, 'The Resurrection of Desire', 88 and 95 critiques Baudrillard's reading of *Crash*.

Ballard's novel connects to an older literary and artistic tradition. In this way, via Hans Bellmer to Georges Bataille, *Crash* can be seen as a 1970s articulation of a specific form of narrative which uses the body and sexual desire as a pessimistic form of cultural analysis. Thus, although certain motifs (such as the inscription of bodies and the depiction of a cultural death-drive) can be seen as having gained more emphasis in twentieth-century obscene literature, *Crash* is carrying on an ethos of questioning, critique, and doubt which has accompanied the development of 'civilisation' ever since eighteenth-century France. To see *Crash* as an entirely post-modern novel is to overlook these older roots and the significant role they play in underpinning Ballard's novel(s).

Ballard's stories habitually concern the discovery or creation of utopias and their subsequent destruction. This destruction usually occurs from the inside out as their human inhabitants surrender to instinctive urges and the utopia dissolves into sexually charged violence.

Although they do not focus on communities, such as the high rise apartment building in *High-Rise* (1975) or Pangbourne Village in *Running Wild* (1989) both of which are micro-communities used to comment on wider 'civilisation', *Crash* and *Empire of the Sun* are not exceptions to Ballard's 'fallen-utopia' formula. *Crash* and *Empire of the Sun* dispense with the 'microcosm' and attempt a critical comment on modern 'Western' culture carried out on a larger scale. *Crash* comments on consumer culture and the car-obsession that sculpts contemporary lives and the Western urban environment. *Empire of the Sun* addresses world-wide conflict. Yet, for all this talk of the morbid 'truths' of a cultural death-drive underlying Ballard's – as much as Bataille's – cultural analysis, once again we should be aware of a tension between these narratives and the temptation to read them as somehow universal in their comment on 'Western' culture and 'civilisation'.

Graphic images of sex, violence, and death can evoke powerful responses. Elements of the obscene appear to address fundamental universals of being human as well as the dynamics of human social organisation. Universality is certainly the authority narratives such as these could be said to strive for: grand themes and cultural analysis performed in an uncompromising manner.

Satire presents universal authority – and like Sade and Sacher-Masoch, Ballard's novel contains elements of the humorous exaggeration common to satire – but, in fact, the society out of which these narratives come, aspects of their obscenity, and the audience they address, are rooted in a very particular time and place. These novels are not comments on 'civilisation' so much as comments on particular periods in recent European and Anglo-

American culture. For this reason, claims that see these texts as either subverting or analysing 'civilised' values require further qualification. Even if the roots and intentions of Ballard's novels can be traced back to surrealism or eighteenth-century *mauvais livres*, these themes are tempered by 1970s British culture. Even though *Empire of the Sun* can be said to comment on the Second World War in China and can be seen to present a stinging critique of the values that accompany the West, it was written in England in the 1980s. As such, its observations regarding the war in China and America in the 1940s are filtered through, and comment on, Margaret Thatcher's Britain, booming capitalism, the Cold War and nuclear threat. Likewise, although *Crash* paints in lurid colours a vision of the perversity and death-driven urge of European and Anglo-American civilisation, it concerns quite a specific 1970s world that mixes consumerism, Watergate, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and Apollo missions to the moon. Although they may claim to be and/or can be read as such, none of these texts actually *are* truly or wholly 'universal'. We should not forget that, just like their depiction of the body, their *mise-en-scène*, and their style, the 'truths' that can be located within these narratives are produced from and determined by specific cultural and historical contexts. Thus, when at one point in *Crash*, 'Ballard' slips his hand between his wife's buttocks and observes how her body, like that of all the others living in and created by modern culture, is 'flesh that contained all the programmes of dreams and genocides' (181) we may be reminded of Bataille's observation that, 'Like you and I, those responsible for Auschwitz had a human nose, mouth, voice and reason, they were able to make love, have children; like the pyramids or the Acropolis, Auschwitz is a fact and sign of mankind'.¹

Crash's world is uncannily familiar and for this reason the story it tells may ring a more familiar note than obscene works from other cultures and times. James Dean, Albert Camus, Jayne Mansfield, and J.F.K. are real figures secreted into the pages of this novel. The cult of fascination and the mythos that surrounds their horrific car-crash deaths – and those of other personalities such as Marc Bolan, Grace Kelly, and Princess Diana – is not Ballard's invention. It is the creation and a fact of modern culture. Cars *are* consumer artefacts, symbols of freedom, style, status, and technological progress. They are also the 'pandemic cataclysm that kills hundreds of thousands of people each year and injures millions' (6). They are the products of the latest technologies and man's desires. Like other technologies and machines which modern man invented to satisfy his desires, he is dependent upon them. Man's fate, like the Mustang pilot strapped to his burning cockpit, is married to theirs'.

¹ Bataille, 'Notes: Sartre', 226.

With images such as this, and of the scientist, Vaughan, accelerating off a motorway overpass to his death, Ballard raises the question which seems recurrent in the tradition of obscene literature of how much we and our culture are death-driven.

Indeed, in its almost parodic literalisation of Freud's death-drive, it could be said that *Crash* is not as bleak as it may at first appear. There is a dark but playful humour in enacting Freud's death-drive on the motorways of London. There could also be a note of hope, for, as we have seen, neither Bataille nor Freud regarded death as absolute finitude. For these theorists, death was a process of rebirth. 'Life once proceeded out of inorganic matter ... [and] an instinct must have arisen which sought to do away with life once more and to re-establish the inorganic state from which life emerges,'¹ writes Freud. 'Death will proclaim my return to seething life' writes Bataille (*Eroticism*, 57).

Recalling these earlier theories reminds us that death in *Crash* and *Empire of the Sun*, is not purely destructive but imbued with life-giving potential. In *Empire of the Sun*, Jim imagines his death as a kamikaze pilot in which pieces of his body 'would spread across the paddy fields, feeding the prisoners behind the wire and the Chinese starving at the gate' (*Empire*, 202). Later he notes how 'The burning body of the American pilot had quickened the dead land' (*Empire*, 249). Indeed, in *Crash*, marks of mortality provide the novel's only fertile images. Injured bodies are '*ripening anthologies of perverse possibilities*' (176, my emphasis). Wounds are 'flowers' (146, 180). 'Ballard' imagines his spilled sperm transforming a car into a fertile world, 'a bower of exotic flowers, with creepers across the roof light, the floor and seat lush with moist grass' (121) and after his near-fatal car-crash, 'Ballard' describes his convalescence in terms of a second childhood (32-33). Gabrielle 'had been *reborn* within the breaking contours of her crushed sports car' (99, my emphasis) and Vaughan too 'could never really die in a car-crash, but would in some way be *re-born* [sic]' (210, my emphasis).²

Yet, perhaps it is wrong to ascribe 'hope' to Ballard's theme of rebirth. After all, *Crash* exhibits a scepticism regarding optimistic issues such as 'answers' (recall that the 'codes' of wounds and sexualised orifices remain un-deciphered). Rather than hope, it is possible to locate a sense of inevitability in Ballard's resurrections, a sense of an inescapable cycle beginning again. Thus, *Crash* ends as it begins and although Vaughan the scientist has 'died', he has been 're-born'. All that he stood for – the scientist obsessed with

¹ Freud, 'Anxiety and Instinctual Life', 140.

² Caserio 'Masochism and Mobility', 303, notes the similarities between Ballard's depiction of death and Freud's death-drive. However, Caserio sees *Crash* as fluctuating between an endorsement of Freudian theory, and its subversion. He uses the fact that death in Ballard leads to life to support his claims of its subversion of Freud's theory. This assertion overlooks the 'life' aspect inherent within Freud's own theory of the death-instinct.

progress and death – remains. It seems too that ‘Ballard’ will take Vaughan’s place as the ‘nightmare angel of the expressways’ (63); a secular messenger who begins once again, modern culture’s obsession with utopias and their destruction, with desire, technology and self-destruction, with ‘dreams and genocides’.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TRUTH, AIDS AND DEATH IN
DENNIS COOPER'S *FRISK*

DENNIS COOPER is a contemporary, gay, American writer. In addition to being the author of several collections of poetry from *Tiger Beat*, published in 1978 to *He Cried* in 1985, he has been much involved with California's art, theatre, and drama scene. To date, he is also the author of a collection of short stories, *Wrong* (published in 1992 but containing work from the 1980s), a collection of essays and cultural criticism, *All Ears* (1999), and six short novels: *Closer* (1989), *Frisk* (1991), *Try* (1994), *Guide* (1997), *Period* (2000), and *My Loose Thread* (2002). Cooper lives in Los Angeles and his work is obscene on the multiple levels at which obscenity operates. It uses obscene language and describes defilement, violation, coprophagia, sex, violence, and death within the context of (usually west coast) contemporary American society and, more specifically, homosexual culture. That said, as in the work of Jean Genet, William Burroughs and Samuel Delany (as opposed to John Rechy for example), sexual orientation itself is rarely the principal issue of Cooper's work.

Cooper has been equated with the Blank Generation (which includes writers such as Brett Easton Ellis, Jay McInnerney, and Gary Indiana whose work portrays a vapid, post-punk nihilism) and, given its frequent and graphic combination of sex and violence, Cooper's writing is inevitably compared to that of Sade and Bataille of the French obscene tradition. As Matthias Viegner notes, 'Cooper is on the order of the Marquis de Sade: one which disrupts the demands of the utilitarian, or an ordered and rationally productive society'.¹

Despite a handful of critical essays on his work, *Frisk* achieving notorious cult status, and Cooper's recognition as a writer of powerfully original contemporary literature, to date Cooper remains a little-known writer. Yet, there is much in his work that merits close attention. He relates often horrific stories in a style that is skilful, evocative, elegiac, and at the same time complex, obscene, and scattered with wry humour. His novels

¹ Matthias Viegner, 'Men Who Kill and the Boys Who Love Them,' *Critical Quarterly* 36:1 (1994), 113.

challenge what is acceptable in literature and society as well as attitudes towards the body, sex, death, fantasy, and their representation.

Cooper's work can be seen as a product of much 1970s and 1980s homosexual literature, the writers of which (such as John Rechy) defined themselves as outsiders capable of seeing the other side of society. Thematic parallels can be drawn between Cooper's work and a French tradition of violent homosexual literature (as written by Genet and others such as Tony Duvert).¹ Yet, in emphasising Cooper's links to an older obscene tradition it becomes clear that Cooper's origins reach back much further than the 1970s. Cooper acknowledges his influences as 'almost exclusively French'.² Paratextual references confirm this connection: Jean Genet provides the epigraph to *Frisk*; Arthur Rimbaud and Maurice Blanchot provide epigraphs to other Cooper novels. The obscene photographs which appear throughout *Frisk* recall a very similar collection of staged photographs of sexual torture from another classic of French, sexually graphic literature, Jean de Berg's *L'image*.³ Likewise, certain descriptions within *Frisk* recall passages from Bataille's *Histoire de l'oeil*: at one point a library's domed roof is described as 'off-white and cracked in spots like a huge egg or skull' (57) which echoes *Histoire de l'oeil*'s description of the 'cranial vault' of the sky like 'a broken egg, a broken eye, or my own dazzled skull' (*Eye*, 42). The critic, Elizabeth Young notes that, at another point, the narrator's description of someone's eyes as 'balls' (10) provides a further moment of comparison between these two obscene texts.⁴ Like Ballard, Cooper also makes occasional references to French artists, some of them from the surrealist group. When one character in *Frisk* notes that, 'The asshole had puffed up around Julian's knuckles. It made him think of that famous fur tea cup' (21), this 'famous fur tea cup' refers to the surrealist Meret Oppenheim's sculpture, *Cup, saucer and spoon in fur* (1936).

Cooper, it would seem, illustrates how two strands of twentieth-century 'French' literature – the violent homosexual and the obscene tradition – have been adopted by a west coast, North American writer. It is thus possible to trace how late twentieth-century American culture colours Cooper's treatment of familiar obscene themes.

¹ See Phillips, *Forbidden*, Chapter 8 for a discussion of Tony Duvert's novel *Récidive* (1967 and 1976).

² Kasia Boddy, 'Conversation with Dennis Cooper,' *Critical Quarterly* 37:3 (1995), 108. Boddy asks, 'Your work seems to be drawing on a French tradition rather than an American one.' 'Almost exclusively French,' answers Cooper.

³ Jean de Berg, *The Image*, trans. Peter Darvill-Evans (London: Nexus, 1992), 51-60.

⁴ Young, 'Death in Disneyland', 258.

Approaching Cooper from a literary history of obscenity shows that his work's fascination with the body – especially its fragility – is not unique. Nor are these themes unique among Cooper's contemporaries. Much contemporary art by, for example, Damien Hirst and Andreas Serrano, exhibits a fascination with the materiality of flesh that, for all its 'originality' appears to be the latest articulation of themes traceable back to Enlightenment Europe (and this is not to say that such themes cannot be traced back much further). If one wished to situate Cooper and his contemporaries in a post-modern context, it could be said that in representing death and the body-physical, they are literalising a theoretical concept at the heart of postmodernism. As one critic notes, 'The discourse of postmodernism is fatal and fatalistic therefore at every turn the word "death" opens up to engulf us: "death of the subject", "death of the author", "death of art", "death of reason" and "the end of history"'.¹

There 'deaths' are all abstract and theoretical. There may be death but there is no gore. Death is central but simultaneously, in a sense, denied. Yet, in the culture of late 1980s and early 1990s Euro-America a less abstract factor dominated cultural and artistic attitudes towards the body, death and sex. This factor – the significance of which has been routinely overlooked by previous critics of Cooper's work – is AIDS and the significant changes that HIV/AIDS wrought to European and Anglo-American perception, awareness of, and attitudes towards, sex and disease, the body and death. The way that this disease has changed how the body – especially the gay male body – is viewed, resonates throughout Cooper's work where the AIDS pandemic provides a perpetual, looming presence to his characters' actions. AIDS in this sense – 'ill-omened' – is obscene.

Aware of the literary legacy from which it emerges and to which it contributes, I use Cooper's work – especially, but not only his novel, *Frisk* – as a coda to this study. Although I focus on *Frisk* for its literary skill and because I regard it to be Cooper's most successful and interesting work to date, it would perhaps be over-generous to claim that Cooper's work belongs to the same literary league as Sade's or Bataille's. To be accurate, such comparisons require historical distance and historical distance is not yet available in relation to Cooper's books. As such, I wish to put aside the question of quality and focus on why Cooper's writing offers, in its own way, a valuable recent addition to the obscene literary tradition. I want to consider why Cooper replaces the heterosexual violence and female bodies of earlier obscene narratives with the gay body and homosexual violence, and what difference this shift makes. I want to consider *Frisk* not only as a work influenced by the effects of HIV/AIDS, but also how the novel's central 'body' – the gay male body –

¹ Dick Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things*, 210 quoted in Young, 'Death in Disneyland', 245.

provides an appropriate focus for Cooper's cynical, late twentieth-century articulation of obscene literature's themes.

Before continuing it is worth noting that the argument is sometimes made that depictions of homosexual violence by homosexual writers represent an internalisation of cultural guilt. Portrayals of gay desire as morally reprehensible and indulging in criminal activities certainly seem to articulate a negative self-image equal to any presented by homophobic and/or sexually 'puritan' cultures. In a similar way, *Frisk* shares its decaying urban setting with much post-war gay fiction that, despite Stonewall and Gay Pride, perpetuates a morbid awareness of homosexuality's cultural association with death, cultural degeneration, and sterility.¹

Others have seen violence between homosexuals as exploring what it means to be homosexual: constructed from fragments, frustrated, tearing apart bodies to try and find some kind of knowledge about oneself in cultures where open homosexuality is taboo.² Of course, as valid as interpretations such as these are, it would perhaps be misleading to associate Cooper's work so entirely with 'gay lit.' and the homosexual community. While using labels such as 'gay literature', 'gay cinema' and 'gay culture' have the positive effect of asserting a group identity, the same labels are also singularising – one could say 'limiting' or 'homogenising'.³ Homosexual literature can have significance far beyond that of the so-called 'marginal' homosexual community. Indeed, from what we have already observed in relation to the so-called 'marginal' (including obscene literature), creating 'marginal' identities, or stressing the 'marginality' of particular groups overlooks an established tradition in European and Anglo-American cultures of creating and then treating the nominally 'marginalised' as just the opposite. Within society the 'marginal' are often groups of fascination that become strangely central to determining what it means to be 'normal', 'moral', 'acceptable', and 'civilized'. Examples are not difficult to find: trips to insane asylums and prisons were popular in eighteenth-century Europe. The nineteenth century saw a plethora of studies on insanity, criminality, and sexual 'perversion'. Freud studied mental and sexual deviation in order to define normal processes of mental and sexual development. A similar urge could be said to underlie the critics of recent decades

¹ Dollimore, *Death*, 295-305.

² Phillips, *Forbidden*, 154, 156, 166-67.

³ David Woodhead, 'HIV, Space and the Constitution of Identities,' *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*. Eds. David Bell and Gill Valentine (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 237- 240.

who make theorising 'marginal' groups – such as the gay, coloured, female, and lesbian body – fashionable academic subjects. If we regard the bodies in Cooper as belonging to a 'marginal' group, we should also take into account that *Frisk* appeared in the early 1990s when the visibility of the gay, AIDS-ridden, body had never been greater. (As Leo Bersani notes, 'Nothing has made gay men more visible than AIDS').¹ What makes *Frisk* interesting (I believe) is the way that Cooper uses the gay body as representative of culture's self-image, not homosexual culture's self-image. Furthermore, in relation to Cooper's status regarding the homosexual community, recent studies of homosexual and AIDS literature and the growing pantheon of acceptable American 'gay lit.' – a list that includes writers such as John Rechy, Larry Kramer, and Tony Kushner – routinely exclude Cooper's work.² Indeed, distancing himself from the gay community, Cooper has stated that, 'To put it in a cliché, [my work's] a kind of thorn in its [the homosexual community's] side or something'.³ Perhaps this is due to the violence of Cooper's novels. Or perhaps it is because, in Cooper's novels, stories, and poetry, sexual acts – whether male-male or not – never appear in the terms preferred by a minority community seeking positive representation. In Cooper's work, sex is not celebratory, triumphant, liberating, revolutionary, pleasurable or self-affirming.

For these reasons I am less interested in considering Cooper's work as a 'gay' book, in relation to the 'gay' community, or to queer theory. I made a similar claim regarding the limiting effects of seeing Pauline Réage's *Histoire d'O* solely in terms of feminism. Like O, Cooper's gay bodies can be seen to address wider cultural issues than those delimited by the term 'homosexual' or 'marginal', after all, not only is the 'marginal' – including, as we have seen, the impure and the obscene – often central to culture's self-definition, but HIV/AIDS has repercussions that extend far beyond gay white men. Thus, in Cooper's work, the gay male body in the time of AIDS represents a critique, some might say an 'update' of the classical symbol of High Art and Culture.

While fluctuating in meaning and association at the whims of social and political agendas, for centuries the female form has retained a connection with mysterious truth (see Chapter Five). Likewise, traditionally in Euro-American cultures, the classical symbol of 'High' Art and Culture, stability, dominance, and the eternal, is the Caucasian male nude.

¹ Bersani, *Homos*, 19.

² Consider for example Ben Gove, *Cruising Culture: Promiscuity, Desire and American Gay Fiction*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), and Diana Davidson, 'Writing HIV/AIDS in the West after 1990: Tensions of an Activist Aesthetic', diss., University of York, 2002.

³ Kim Nicolini, 'Dennis Cooper's Monster in the Margins,' *Bad Subjects* 5 (1993), 3.

Consider in this respect the central cultural status of works as historically diverse as Michelangelo Buonarroti's *David* (1504) and Auguste Rodin's *The Thinker* (1905). In addition, even in a largely secular culture, despite its morbidity the nude and semi-nude Christ remains the embodiment *par excellence* of all that these cultures deem acceptable, 'civilized', moral, and 'right'.

Drawing parallels with the work of the gay artist and writer, David Wojnarowicz (born in 1954 and died of AIDS related illness in 1991), who portrayed the physical disintegration of bodies by AIDS as a disease caught from a sick society,¹ I want to consider how Cooper takes the body of civilized virtues and dissects it. Cooper uses obscene literature to articulate a late twentieth-century malaise and, in the age of AIDS, where, as Dollimore notes, 'homosexuality = pathology = death',² Cooper demystifies the revered embodiment of High Culture by showing the cadaver beneath its exterior beauty. From this disillusioned perspective, Cooper casts a cynical, retrospective comment on a Euro-American obsession with finding 'truth' within the body.

1. 'Some Kind Of Ultimate Truth'³

A dead boy on a bed. Wrists and ankles bound. A necktie of thick rope. A close-up image of the boy's anal orifice. The anus has been mutilated, enlarged and 'At its center's a pit, or a small tunnel entrance, too out-of-focus to actually explore with one's eyes, but too mysterious not to want to try' (3-4). Cooper's novel, *Frisk*, opens thus: a short passage headed with the infinity sign (∞). This passage describes the "snuff" photos above. Through the self-consuming loops of the infinite and the body's orifice, the reader is invited to explore that 'mysterious' wound.

Like Sade's invitation to his 'friend-reader, you must prepare your heart and your mind for the most impure tale' (*120 Days*, 253), Cooper's description plays on a fascination with the obscene and the motif, present since eighteenth-century *livres philosophiques*, explores and exploits the body and sex as sources of information and 'truth'. (As Foucault

¹ Davidson, 'Writing HIV/AIDS', 32.

² Dollimore, *Death*, xi.

³ 107.

writes, 'the West, has placed a never-ending demand for truth [on the body and sex] ... to extract the truth of sex, since this truth is beyond its [culture's] grasp; it is up to sex to tell us our truth, since sex is what holds it [truth] in darkness'.¹ As the vessel of 'truth', this boy's 'mysterious' wound invites the reader to explore the shadowy interior of this body. Who knows what kind of information – self-knowledge? enlightenment? 'truth'? something infinite? – lies within this beautiful male body.

Frisk goes on to provide a vision of America as a world of alienation, death, and transient relationships. Love is an out-dated concept (11). Teenage drug-addicts prostitute themselves. This is a world which is an urban wasteland full of, yet desensitised to, images of violence and death. Child and 'snuff' pornography, slasher films (*Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Friday the 13th Part VI* are named) (39, 56, 62) and TV images of murder and death ('News. Plane crash. Tons dead [...] News. An old picture of what's-her-name rimmed in a thin, black frame, which must mean she's finally dead') (84-85) glimmer in the background. Many aspects of this modern world are reminiscent of that depicted in Ballard's fiction. Likewise, *Frisk* presents an uncanny blurring of fantasy and reality, the spilling of the 'unreal' into the 'real' world (recall Freud's observation that 'An uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced').² Yet, unlike earlier writers of sexually extreme literature, Cooper departs from having principle protagonists who are rich and privileged. Most of the characters in Cooper's work (like the characters of other obscene literature from the States such as Samuel Delany's *Hogg*, 1975/1995) are socially 'marginalised' and underprivileged – homosexuals, drug addicts, rent boys, unemployed and abused teenagers.

Comparatively privileged compared to many of his characters, the principle narrator of *Frisk* is 'Dennis'. As in Ballard's *Crash*, this narrator's name confuses and spans the 'fictional' and the 'real'. Further destabilising this relationship, 'Dennis' describes himself as a 'predator aesthete' (39) who, 'like' the novel's author, Dennis Cooper, is an amateur writer of murder-mystery stories (I distinguish between the two as 'Dennis' – the character – and 'Cooper' – the author). Fragments of one novel find their way into the text alongside telegrams, letters, journal entries, and memoir-like reminiscences about growing up and experimenting with the Los Angeles punk and gay scenes. The starting point of the narrative is the snuff photos (described at the beginning of the novel) that Dennis sees when he is thirteen years old. These images, Dennis claims, 'went on to completely direct or destroy

¹ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 77.

² Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', 367.

my life' (30). *Frisk* continues by fragmentally tracking (and sidetracking and backtracking, shifting point of view and narrator) Dennis's development into adulthood, relating the various sexual encounters he has (many of them of a violent nature) and the relationships he drifts through. Despite what would normally be construed as the 'seriousness' of sexual or violent scenes, Dennis's encounters are related with a dry, self-deprecating humour: "So, uh, I don't really know. . . what you, like. . . expect. . . to, like, get out of that." He pointed at his cock and said "that" again, sort of ironically' (7). In these ways (its humour, and its fragmentary hopping through narrative), it could be said that stylistically *Frisk* lives up to its title: 'Frisk'. According to the *OED*, the verb *frisk* has three meanings: 1) 'A playful antic or movement', 2) 'To leap about in a playful manner'. The third definition – 'to search (someone) by feeling for something concealed on their person' – also emerges as a major factor in Dennis's treatment of the bodies he desires.

Dennis is not unique in Cooper's works. His life is incomplete; it lacks profundity and meaning. In an exhausted world of casual sexual encounters where 'there's no God' (69), sex promises to provide some kind of authentic 'truth' and information. Thus, in *Frisk*'s world, sex becomes literally Foucauldian (see Chapter Five and Chapter One, 'Obscenity and Society'). As Dennis notes, the naked body of a sexual partner is, 'all information to me' (33) and his desire is to dismantle bodies 'to see how you work' (70). Dennis's own fictional creation, Joe, observes that 'I tend to experience things, even weird things like violence, as forms of information about what or who I am physically' (50). Indeed, the motif of the body as information is not limited to 'real' bodies. According to Dennis, the photos he saw as a teenager made him feel 'so. . . enlightened? ... I saw God in those pictures' (70). The feeling of profound, 'incommunicable' knowledge (78) evoked by those images of sexual death causes Dennis to believe that, by recreating what he witnessed in those photos, he can attain the same intense enlightenment in life. As he says to one potential victim, 'when I imagine dissecting you ... I begin to feel that way again [i.e. 'enlightened']' (70).

Because of the original snuff photos, Dennis develops fantasies of attaining ultimate knowledge through killing those he desires. According to Dennis, killing the objects of his desire would allow him to get beneath the superficial information provided by their skin and find the concealed essence within (here is the third meaning of 'frisk'). Literalising Foucault's assertion that in modern Euro-American culture, body = subject = truth, Dennis believes that if he could open up a body he would 'understand' them and their hidden appeal. Recalling the acts of violence depicted in Réage's *Histoire d'O* and Ballard's *Crash*, (in both novels sex and violence is associated with information), Dennis says, 'I'm pretty

sure if I tore a guy open, I'd know him as well as anyone could, because I'd have what he consists of right there in my hands, mouth, wherever' (53).

To satisfy this desire, Dennis travels to New York. There, he solicits his porn star idol, Pierre Buisson. Prior to this meeting Pierre has only existed for Dennis in pornographic magazines, films, and videos. One of the ideal 'stars' in this world of death, as far as Dennis is concerned, Pierre is 'the most perfect human being' (44). Rather than sleeping with Pierre, Dennis intends to satisfy his 'long-standing urge to really open up someone I'm hot for' (54). He stresses that this is simply 'the practical thing to do' (63) and the 'opening up' to which he refers is intended literally. Dennis wants to get behind the image and the representation of Pierre's beauty to a more profound understanding of what lies within. "The profound stuff's in here" Dennis says, poking Pierre's stomach (67), and later, "I want to know *everything* about you. But to really do that, I'd have to kill you" (67, Cooper's emphasis). Ultimately however, Dennis is unable to perform his murder-fantasy. Instead, he confesses his morbid intentions to Pierre ("You fascinate me so much that in a perfect world I'd kill you to understand the appeal") (67). Because his is not a 'perfect world', Dennis settles for the physical information – 'a message from somewhere inside a great body' (53) – provided by samples of Pierre's faeces, urine, and saliva. "It's not, 'Ooh, shit, piss, how wicked,' or anything", insists Dennis, with characteristic, humour, "It's, like I said, information" (69).

Unsatisfied by his encounter with Pierre, and still obsessed with killing someone he desires, Dennis flies from the New World to the Old World – back, if you like, to the origins of the obscene literary tradition. There, he settles in a windmill near Amsterdam. In the Old World, Dennis's fantasies appear to come true. The penultimate chapter of *Frisk* assumes the form of a letter written by Dennis to an old boyfriend, Julian. The letter is replete with sexual violence, gang rape, and murder. Dennis tells how, with two German accomplices, he attempts to reach enlightenment by abducting and performing various sexual atrocities on male teenagers and younger boys. Still guided by the snuff images, each of his victims resemble the mysterious figure with the mutilated anus. In his letter, Dennis describes these acts in terms of the religious feelings they evoke: 'for me it's [murder and rape] religious or something' (94, 100). He concludes by asking Julian to join him in Amsterdam and 'participate in this discovery ... this major transcendence or answer I've found in killing cute guys ... I'm telling you ... this is some kind of ultimate truth' (107).

Frisk's focus on images of sex and violence, and the sacred nature which it ascribes to death, evokes the writing of Bataille. As if a devotee of 'Bataillean eroticism', Dennis sees 'God' in the photographs of the dead boy ('God' here meaning something 'profound', a

'truth' beyond the seen; not the Christian God), or, as another character says of a snuff film, 'what an unbelievable experience. After [watching] that, you'd never be the same person again, I'm positive' (83). Murder has sacred connotations of knowledge, liberation, and 'truth': 'I know that if I killed you,' he says to one potential victim, '... it would be unbelievably profound. I'd be. . . free? That sounds stupid, I guess. But I see those criminals on the news who've killed someone methodically and they're free. They know something amazing. You can just tell.' (74).

Tempted by this 'ultimate truth' – yet sceptical of Dennis's claims – Julian and his younger brother, Kevin, visit Dennis. At this point, *Frisk* becomes less 'about' sexual violence than the representation of sexual violence. It's self-referentiality turns Dennis's acts and all the insight he claims to have attained into an elaborate feint. When Julian and Kevin arrive they realize (and Dennis admits) that the murders detailed in the letter are purely fictional. Furthermore, in the process of the narrative, the formative snuff photos – those images in which Dennis 'saw God' – are also revealed to be fake.

In an attempt to free himself from the ghost of those photos, Dennis, Kevin, Julian, and a Dutch boy (Chretien) try to recreate the fateful pictures which Dennis saw as a child. *Frisk* concludes with another infinity sign heading a second short section describing some photos. These are the images created by Kevin and his camera, some ink, cotton wool, and papier-mâché stuck to Chretien's anus. In the opening photos, a mysterious orifice tantalized and drew Dennis and the reader/spectator into the body. In the reproductions, the once mysterious orifice is a dead-end – a detail which carries ironic repercussions for the 'infinite' chapter heading. All *this* 'anus' reveals is 'the fingerprints of the person or persons who made it' (128). Circling back, almost, to where it began, Dennis is left with a faked illusion where once he believed he saw 'God'.

It is possible to see this demystifying process negatively – perhaps as an easy excuse for the narrator or author not to assume any moral responsibility for the scenes the book portrays. It could also be seen as a feeble unmasking, a kind of cheating of the reader's expectations. Yet this process need not be interpreted negatively. Indeed, if seen as 'cheating' the reader's expectations, *Frisk*'s comment becomes one aimed at the reputation of, and Euro-America's fascination for, obscenity, the body, sex, and violence.

Frisk is very consciously also 'about' the writing process. Cooper does not simply dissect the mythos of the mysterious snuff photos or Dennis's violent acts. In the opening passage of the book, the mysterious hole in the boy's anus is more than the enticing entrance to a dead boy's body. The body's mutilation also marks the entrance to the body of the text

for, in *Frisk*, bodies and text are inexorably fused. On one level, this is an extension of the connection between bodies as objects to be inscribed and read (as we have seen represented in *Histoire d'O*, *Crash* and the theory of Foucault), to the degree that there is no longer any body, only inscription, only text. On another level, *Frisk* presents form skilfully reflecting content. As Cooper says, on writing *Frisk*, 'I wanted to write a book in which the body of the text would be dismembered, as though the writer had dismembered a novel the way a murderer might dismember a body'.¹ The fragmentation of the narrative, its tracking backwards and forwards in time, switching style and narrator, first and third person perspective, part fiction and apparently 'autobiography', certainly dismember – or dissect – the conventional narrative form, as much as they mirror the dissection of the 'bodies' in the story. They also foreground the novel's status as text, representation, and illusion, in a world of representations that has, since the eighteenth century, had the reputation of being a locus of 'truth'.

Yet, although different in emphasis – and we will see precisely where this emphasis lies shortly – *Frisk*'s self-referentiality is not a new addition to either the obscene literary tradition or to violent homosexual literature. The fact that *Frisk* turns this self-referentiality into a central plot device, however, allows us to examine this aspect of obscene literature in more detail than previous chapters have done.

At some point and in some way, all the obscene novels so far considered draw attention to their status as text/fiction. Obscene literature, it seems, is a self-aware style of writing. Sade's introduction to *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome*, for instance, called it 'the most impure tale that has ever been told since our world began, a book the likes of which are met with neither amongst the ancients nor amongst us moderns' (*120 Days*, 253). The novel which follows is made up of hundreds of stories within the larger whole. A similar 'story within a story' structure appears in *Venus im Pelz*. Part Two of *Histoire de l'oeil* claims to explain why and how the preceding 'partly imaginary tale' was written: 'I began writing with no precise goal, animated chiefly by a desire to forget, at least for the time being, the things I can be or do personally' (*Eye*, 70/73). *Histoire d'O* also contains two beginnings and two endings – again, highlighting the novel's awareness of itself as fiction – and, like *Histoire de l'oeil*, an ambiguous authorial 'I'. If *Crash* does not contain the more explicitly metafictional elements of the other texts, the fact that its narrator shares his name with its real-life author is equally effective in drawing attention to the text as fiction.

¹ Dennis Cooper interviewed by Benjamin Weissman, *Bomb*, Summer (1994), 20-22. Quoted in Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), 189.

Commenting on Sade and pornography, Gaëtan Brulotte has noted that, 'This literature cultivates a strong leaning for self-reflection, in whichever era it occurs. It lays bare the process of writing with the same indecency with which it reveals the most hidden secrets of love'.¹ Brulotte continues,

The narrator draws attention to the processes according to which stories are manufactured and to the material context of writing, [and] reveals the controlling forces that are usually unseen ... More than any other type of literature, these narratives like to do what they say. The embedding of stories within stories constantly takes us back to the sexual act itself.²

Brulotte's observations emphasise the *sexual* connotations of form and content, of stories penetrating stories and opening up the writing process as a female character may open her thighs. This is certainly an astute observation – if one sees these works as pornographic. If one sees them as revelatory texts, concerned with opening the facades and the bodies of civilisation to reveal underlying truths, the self-referential way in which form mirrors content remains a central theme – albeit with less overtly libidinous associations.

'In showing us how literary fiction creates its imaginary world,' writes Patricia Waugh, 'metafiction helps us to understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed, similarly written'.³ Waugh goes on to note that 'All metafictional novels have ... to engage with this question of the "truth"'.⁴ This engagement with truth becomes a reactionary response to the conventional, realist, notion of reality. To challenge conventional 'reality', self-referential fiction reveals the supposedly stable, universal 'truths' of culture to be, like a novel, a world based on 'artifice, [and] a web of independent semiotic systems'.⁵ If reality is portrayed as a construct, then, by extension, so are its supposed 'truths', including what is taken as reality.⁶ As Waugh notes, by using these techniques metafiction presents an 'unmasking of the hypocritical bourgeois belief in the material and moral progress of civilisation'.⁷

¹ Brulotte, 'Sade and Erotic Discourse', 61.

² Brulotte, 'Sade and Erotic Discourse', 61-62.

³ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984), 18.

⁴ Waugh, *Metafiction*, 90.

⁵ Waugh, *Metafiction*, 9.

⁶ Waugh, *Metafiction*, 108-109.

⁷ Waugh, *Metafiction*, 10.

Although Waugh's words are not directed at obscene literature, the perspective that we have used to approach these texts confirms that the elements of metafiction which they habitually employ fulfil the intentions which Waugh observes. Metafiction, it seems, provides another – stylistic – level at which these works operate a process of 'unveiling'. By turning all the events of the novel – even those which ostensibly serve to provide the 'ultimate truth' – into fiction, *Frisk* provides a sceptical (at times humorous) comment on culture's voyeuristic fascination with bodies, sex, and violence. In a sense then, what we have with Cooper is an 'unveiling' not only of the frail, constructed nature of culture's timeless 'truths', but also an 'unveiling' of obscene literature itself because, through metafiction, *Frisk* demystifies its own potential to offer any insight to anything 'unbelievably profound' or 'true'.

The theme of demystification recurs throughout Cooper's work – indeed, it is central to much of it: a demystification that involves peeling away the facade and showing the bare bones underlying the body of representation, of culture, and desire. One of Cooper's short stories, *Square One* (1987, reprinted in *Wrong*, [London: Serpent's Tail, 1992], all further references taken from this edition.), provides a concise example which not only anticipates *Frisk* but also picks up, and provides Cooper's own comment on, the themes of sight and 'truth'.

Square One is a meditation on pornographic films and the layers of memory and desire evoked by the 'giant bodies composed of light' writhing and groaning on the porn theatre screen (*Wrong*, 83). The story's anonymous narrator recalls his passion for one of those bodies of light, Jeff Hunter, a figure whose physical appearance 'fits,' in the narrator's terms, 'my master plan for the "ideal sex partner"' (*Wrong*, 83). Exactly why this beautiful, always available, yet never attainable figure exerts such power, puzzles the narrator. All he sees or knows about this ideal is a nude form in various sexual positions. As the narrator observes, 'It's as if Jeff is moaning, "This is as much as you'll grasp," and not, "Fuck me," continuously' (*Wrong*, 84). The narrator's thoughts about Jeff merge with his memories of George M., a 'Jeff [Hunter] look-alike' (*Wrong*, 85) with whom the narrator once had sexual relations. Like Dennis in *Frisk* who says to his porn star idol, 'I find what I know about you amazing, so amazing I can't get beyond my awe. So part of me wants to dismantle that awe or whatever, and see how you work' (70), *Square One*'s narrator wonders why he cannot grasp what lies beneath the surface of those ideal bodies. The 'surface' here refers to both the skin and the cinema screen. At one point the narrator gets, literally, behind this screen. He finds a 'filthy mattress', a dark hall and a brief sexual encounter with a man

whose name he cannot hear (*Wrong*, 89). In conclusion, the narrator notes that, 'The screen hangs between paying customers and our ideal lovers. If we [the spectators] charged, ripped it [the screen] down, we'd find a wall of unsupported brick' (*Wrong*, 88). As evocative as it may be, without Dennis's wit, *Square One* presents a rather bathetic pessimism: porn stars and all the knowledge, light, and beauty they embody, is an illusion. 'My deity's a mirage, like the image of heaven must be to men kneeling down at an altar' (*Wrong*, 92).

The knowledge that he can never get beyond the surface of the bodies that exert such power over him, haunts and frustrates the narrator of *Square One*. This is the realization that *Frisk*'s Dennis also comes to share. Initially however, like *Square One*'s narrator, Cooper's older male characters – the self-styled 'predator aesthetes' like Dennis – simply realize the inadequacy of the 'screen'. In their case, however, the screen is the body's beautiful surface. As Dennis says, 'I've had enough sex in my life with enough guys to recognize how little skin can explain about anyone ... skin's biggest reward, which is sperm, I guess, is only great because it's a message from somewhere inside a great body' (53). Later, when Dennis confronts his porn star idol, Pierre Buisson, he confesses his desire to tear down that screen and find the truth behind:

"Skin ... I get to use your skin, and the little areas of your skeleton I can feel underneath, and whatever I manage to squeeze or suck out ... Still, what does it tell me that a hundred other men haven't already learned. No, the profound stuff's in here." I poke his stomach ... "Well, if I think you're one of the most extraordinary boys I've ever seen, and I do, then logging your tastes, smells, sounds, textures isn't enough somehow, for me at least. I want to know *everything* about you. But to do that, I'd have to kill you, as bizarre as that sounds ... Really, you should just know that you fascinate me so much that in a perfect world I'd kill you to understand the appeal." (66-67, Cooper's emphasis).

In this way, Dennis's (and others') nonchalant attitude towards bodies, death, and sex – 'People are only their bodies' (69-70), 'Usually I don't notice my body. It's just there, working steadily. I wash it, feed it, jerk it off, wipe its ass, and that's all' (50) – cannot veil the fact that for Dennis, the body, death, and sex remain gateways to the 'ultimate truth'. This tension, between a metaphysical urge for truth and admitting the illusory nature of this 'truth' dominates *Frisk*. Dennis is the character caught between these opposites. Gradually he awakens to the futility of metaphysicality.

Rather than progressing, *Frisk* circles back to where it begins. But not quite *exactly* to where it begins. At the beginning of the novel the central snuff images were objects of awe; by the end they are absurd attempts to recapture or create something mystical. Like the

narrator of *Square One* who gets behind the 'bodies of light' in the cinema, Dennis's attempt to get beyond the surface of the body to find that mysterious 'truth' ends in disappointment and parody. Likewise, when faced with the reality – not the representation seen on TV screens and magazine pages – of Pierre, his porn star idol, Dennis feels let down. Pierre is 'slightly disappointing in person like everyone always is when you know them from a reproduction' (61). This and the simple notion of 'fairness' prevents Dennis from carrying out his fantasy: 'part of me wants to dismantle [Pierre's body] ... But I know that's selfish. Your life's as important as anyone's, including mine . . . so, I'm stuck' (70). Dennis is not the cold-blooded sex-killer we come to expect. As in earlier texts, *Frisk* is still a narrative of education and initiation but one that moves away from (rather than towards) the value of the body, violence, and death. Thus, Cooper leads Dennis to a systematic undermining of any notion of 'truth', to the admission that, despite his obsession with the mysterious entrance to the 'dead' boy's anus, 'an asshole was just an asshole, not a spaceship, temple, sun, etc. . . .' (120).

Published ten years after *Screen One*, we find the same themes reappearing in a murder scene from Cooper's novel *Guide* (1997) [London: Serpent's Tail] (all references taken from this edition). In this novel, rather than being rendered impotent with bathos, the seriousness of the story and the horror of the action is offset with dark humour. In this scene, a character (Chris), attempts to enact a sexual fantasy that combines the childhood world of fairytales with a desire for pain. Chris is one of the young, beautiful Cooper characters who wishes to become a totally passive object. He contacts a violent dwarf (a crucial aspect of Chris's fairytale fantasy) and they begin acting out the scene. Unfortunately the dwarf takes the scenario too far and dismembers Chris with a kitchen knife:

The dwarf stabbed Chris's thigh. He was trying to grasp death's complexity or something [...] The dwarf fucked Chris's ass with the knife. "What are you hiding in there?" he said. The point had just bumped into something [...] The dwarf turned on a faucet. He held the gore [removed from Chris's body] under the spray. The sink purpled. "What the . . . ?" It was just a big, petrified turd, glazed a yellowy white by a hundred men's undisturbed come [...] the dwarf studied Chris's op art-like, purplish red, pasta-esque insides. He was looking for . . . something, anything. He didn't know. Some clue, some sign. [...] So maybe it wasn't shit after all. Maybe it was some sort of magical, mystical object that God or whoever had hidden in Chris's clogged bowels, thinking no one would bother to search there. (*Guide*, 87-93).

The act of 'frisking' – both the playful antic and the searching for a concealed object – continues, but, of course, although the dwarf has his doubts, Cooper makes it clear that the hidden meaning, the 'magical, mystical object' wrenched from Chris's torn body is literally 'just a big, petrified turd'.

Thus, Dennis is not the only Cooper protagonist to have the metaphysical aura of the body shattered and to finally accept that 'human bodies are such garbage bags' (106). Cooper writes in *Closer* (1989 [London: Serpent's Tail] all references taken from this edition) that seemingly beautiful bodies are 'just skin wrapped around some grotesque-looking stuff' (*Closer*, 22). Elsewhere the idolised/idealised ass of the boy he desires is just an ass, not 'a pillow stuffed with a cathedral' (*Period*, 96)¹, and, as another character observes, 'an image he'd thought religious this morning is just a snap of some junkie on hands and knees, beckoning over one shoulder, eyes drugged to pitch-black, asshole fucked so many times it resembles an empty eye socket' (*Safe*, 153).²

With this image – anus as eye socket – we find another echo of Bataille. It evokes, *Histoire de l'oeil's* shifting associations between the vagina/anus, eye and sun. We may also be reminded of *Histoire de l'oeil's* final moment of 'desperate sadness' as an eye peers at the narrator from Simone's vagina. Yet Cooper's anus as an eye socket betrays a fundamental difference between these two writers of the obscene.

While death's mysterious profundity underpins Dennis's violent obsessions (recall in this respect how Dennis relates an imaginary conversation with one of his young Dutch 'victims' in which he 'told him he was the most extraordinary and beautiful boy I'd ever seen in my life and that killing him would be incredible and that he should understand how profound his death was and that I would remember his murder forever') (100-101), no opened bodies, no images of death, no violent or sexual experiences reveal profound mysteries to Dennis. Staring at one imaginary 'victim's' entrails he notes how 'ugly and earthy' they are and 'I could understand why they were meant to be hidden away' (105). Cooper undermines the religious aura of the body, sex, and death that Bataille so assiduously represented. The movement in Cooper's novels is from a religious awe, to pure materialism. Appropriately therefore, in Cooper's description of the opened body (above), the long-standing symbol of knowledge and truth – the eye – is absent. The 'eye socket' of the anus is 'empty'. There is no truth or knowledge within the body to meet the gaze of the

¹ Dennis Cooper, *Period* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2000). All references taken from this edition.

² 'Safe' reprinted in *Wrong* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1989).

reader/spectator. If his texts lift, in Bataille's words, 'the veil which hides that which we are not allowed to see',¹ Cooper's 'window onto life' shows a wall of 'unsupported brick'.

Although Cooper is relentless in his disenchantment of the body, of the power of sexually violent fiction, and in representing his characters' doomed efforts to reach enlightenment – whether through drugs, sex, or violence – to date, critics have been reluctant to admit Cooper's rejection of 'truth'. They have also been reluctant to admit his apparent rejection of representation as able to convey more than illusions. Perhaps this is because most critics bypass any detailed examination of the bodies and violent acts which Cooper depicts – a notable exception being Kevin McCarron's all too brief treatment of these themes in his essay, "'The Crack-House flicker": The Sacred and the Absurd in the Short Stories of Dennis Cooper, Dennis Johnson, and Thom Jones' (2001).² Or perhaps it is because for the past three centuries obscene literature has carried associations with mysteries revealed and secret 'truth's' and most critics have difficulty shaking off these associations.³

According to Elizabeth Young's essay 'Death in Disneyland', Cooper's representation of death is an attempt to escape the spiralling, superficial repetitions of post modernity and 'the language-games of theory'. For Young, Cooper's concerns are those of many post-modern writers who attempt to grasp 'sublimity' and 'to envisage some sort of purity or authenticity, uncontaminated by hyperreal society'.⁴ In fact, as we have seen, there is nothing 'pure' about the authenticity Cooper presents. Indeed, in interview, Cooper casts doubt on any notion of 'truth' in his work: 'There is never an actual truth [in my work]' says Cooper.⁵

In an insightful study, Earl Jackson suggests that *Square One* presents an analogy with Plato's cave. The cave, in Jackson's reading, is replaced by the dimly-lit porn theatre and Cooper's audience, drawn towards the ideal images on the screen, echo Plato's shackled prisoners.⁶ In this way, Jackson reads the narrator's tearing down of the screen and the

¹ Bataille, 'L'esprit moderne', 273.

² Kevin McCarron, "'The Crack-House flicker": The Sacred and the Absurd in the Short Stories of Dennis Cooper, Dennis Johnson, and Thom Jones,' *Yearbook of English Studies* 31 (2001), 50-61.

³ Recall for example, Brulotte's reference to the 'hidden secrets' revealed by pornography (quoted earlier also see Introduction).

⁴ Young, 'Death in Disneyland', 260-61.

⁵ Boddy, 'Conversation', 103.

⁶ Earl Jackson, *Strategies of Deviance: Studies in Gay Male Representation* (Indiana and Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 189-90, 193.

illusions it projects as representing the Platonic quest and Cooper's work as conveying a 'dark Platonism, a search for absolute beauty'.¹ Here too, we find an eagerness to attribute truth to Cooper: Platonism is, after all, an idealistic philosophy. Yet Cooper's disembowelling is arguably more anti-Platonic than darkly Platonic.

A third critic – Matthias Viegner – recognizes that Cooper 'demystifies interiority',² but goes on to suggest that this demystification articulates an ulterior truth. In Viegner's case, this 'truth' is the post-modern goal of attempting to 'unveil [in the physicality of the human body] a *real* which escapes simulacra'.³ In fact, as Kevin McCarron succinctly states, 'Cooper's work articulates the end of the humanist ideal, the post-enlightenment drive to place all meaning and all value in the human'.⁴ Cooper does not so much 'demystify' or 'unveil' interiority, as expel it. When Dennis imagines eviscerating bodies, he empties them of their organs just as Cooper reaches inside obscene fiction and the aura of mystery and profundity surrounding both texts and bodies to expel these alleged 'truths'. Sex in his novels contains neither intimacy, enlightenment, nor liberation and gets his characters no closer to those they desire. Death, like sex and the body, has become an exhausted concept, jaded, worn out, overused, overburdened with symbolism, significance, 'meaning', and illusions of 'truth'.

Philosophically speaking, of course, to state that there is no truth is, in itself, a statement of truth. In this sense, there is a 'truth' in Cooper's work, although not one of great metaphysical enlightenment. But *why*, writing at this time and in this culture, does Cooper portray the body in this way? We find this reason expressed in Cooper's story *Dear Secret Diary* (1989). Here, as one character complains, 'AIDS ruined death' (*Wrong*, 93).

¹ Jackson, *Strategies of Deviance*, 188.

² Viegner, 'Men Who Kill', 112.

³ Viegner, 'Men Who Kill', 110 (Viegner's emphasis).

⁴ McCarron, "'Crack-House Flicker'", 54.

2. 'AIDS Ruined Death'¹

AIDS, (to echo what Guy Hocquenghem, writing in pre-AIDS 1972, once said of syphilis), is not just a virus; it is an ideology.² 'The basis of syphilis is the phantasy fear of contamination, of a secret parallel advance, both by the virus and by the libido's unconscious forces; the homosexual transmits syphilis as he transmits homosexuality', wrote Hocquenghem.³ Susan Sontag restates these sentiments when she notes that a principle metaphor used for AIDS is that of 'pollution ... or infectious agent that comes from outside'.⁴ Ever since the mid-1980s, AIDS has influenced the way European and Anglo-American cultures view homosexuals and homosexual desire. However, considering the sentiments of Hocquenghem's pre-AIDS remark it is clear that AIDS did not precipitate a radical change in views so much as a shift in emphasis. In short, AIDS is only the latest literalisation of a much longer cultural association that links homosexuality with pathology, degeneration, disease, and death.⁵ As Sontag notes, AIDS is frequently envisaged as 'the "gay plague" [...] punishment for deviant behaviour'.⁶

If HIV/AIDS wrought no significant change in the way Anglo-American and European cultures viewed homosexuality *per se*, then it did bring about a significant change in the way these cultures treated sex and disease, the body and death – and not just the gay male body, or the drug addict's. AIDS was/is a modern disease. It is an obscene disease: obscene because ill-omened (death is imminent), obscene because generally linked to sexual acts and the 'impure' or 'primitive' organs, obscene because it is associated with (usually) sexual promiscuity and excess. Moreover, as Sontag observes, it is a disease in which 'life – blood, sexual fluids – is itself the bearer of contamination'.⁷ Lastly, AIDS, of course, does not only infect homosexuals. The medical recognition of the effects of HIV/AIDS reminded cultures that had been comparatively sexually permissive during the 1970s (and perhaps

¹ *Wrong*, 93.

² Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, trans. Daniella Dangoor, intro. Michael Moon, prefs. Jeffrey Weeks (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 70.

³ Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, 70.

⁴ Sontag, *Illness*, 103.

⁵ Dollimore, *Death*, xi.

⁶ Sontag, *Illness*, 148-9.

⁷ Sontag, *Illness*, 159.

over-optimistic at the efficacy of the pill and antibiotics), that sex remains a potentially fatal activity.¹ Calls for the control of sexual pleasure and behaviour followed this realisation. Probably not coincidentally, as John Phillips notes, ever since the appearance of AIDS politicians in Europe and America have adopted an increasingly right-wing rhetoric of championing traditional ‘family values’.² After a brief cultural respite, not just homosexuality, but sex was once again – as it had been in the nineteenth century during the scourge of syphilis – a threat to society. Indeed, the associations Sontag locates with the West’s attitude to AIDS – as ‘civilisation threatening’³ and the rhetoric that ‘the survival of the world itself is said to be at stake’⁴ – seems to be an almost verbatim recurrence of the degeneration theory that dominated the late nineteenth-century Western World (Chapter Three, ‘A Truly Modern Attitude’). The repercussions of AIDS were also felt in art and literature. Although Phillips notes that, probably due to AIDS, even late twentieth-century French erotica promotes sexual responsibility,⁵ whether one sees them as a rejection of a ‘new’ Puritanism, or as moral tales internalising the threat of death through sexual pleasure, 1991 saw several novels appear in America that blatantly shirked sexual responsibility and ‘family values’. *Frisk*, is one. Among the others, Brett Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* is perhaps the best known.

Portraying a young, wealthy Wall Street executive who sets about killing co-workers and women (among various other victims) in scenes of sexual violence and serial murder, *American Psycho* is a dark satire of status-driven, commodity-obsessed, 1980s America. Needless to say, given the political situation at the time, Ellis’s novel caused a storm of media opprobrium. *Frisk*, meanwhile, a novel at least as complex, literary, and obscene as Ellis’s, appeared almost without comment. Elizabeth Young has suggested that the reaction to *American Psycho* responded to its depiction of heterosexual violence – a male serial killer raping and mutilating women – while *Frisk*, with its sexual violence in a same-sex context conformed (or confirmed) accepted social/sexual stereotyping and did not overtly challenge accepted ‘normal’ social conduct, political correctness, or easily riled

¹ Gove, *Cruising Culture*, 88.

² Phillips, *Forbidden*, 10-12.

³ Sontag, *Illness*, 149.

⁴ Sontag, *Illness*, 171.

⁵ Phillips, *Forbidden*, 12.

feminists.¹ However, to see *Frisk* in this way is to limit the significance of Cooper's novel and to ignore precisely that challenge to 'accepted norms' that it presents. Another sexually violent 'gay' novel from the same year departs from the 'homosexuality = pathology = death' equation to portray the AIDS-ridden body in a different way.

David Wojnarowicz's novel *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* provides an interesting (and culturally close – Wojnarowicz was also American, and he acknowledges Cooper in his novel), comparison to *Frisk* in which the fragmented narrative and disintegrating bodies are not symbols of a guilt-ridden homosexuality so much as a decaying social structure.² In Wojnarowicz's fiction, HIV/AIDS is the internalisation of a diseased modern culture (AIDS after all is *the* modern disease). As *Close to the Knives*'s narrator says, 'WHEN I WAS TOLD THAT I'D CONTRACTED THIS VIRUS IT DIDN'T TAKE ME LONG TO REALIZE THAT I'D CONTRACTED A DISEASED SOCIETY AS WELL'.³ Thus, dying men reflect decaying cities and the decaying cities are part of what Wojnarowicz calls the,

huge fat clock of civilisation; the whole onward crush of the world as we know it ... a malfunctioning cannonball filled with bone and gristle and knives and bullets and animals rotting with skeletal remains and pistons and smokestacks pump-pumping cinders and lightning and shreds of flesh, spewing language and motions and shit and entrails in its wake. (*Knives*, 69)

Wojnarowicz's novel lacks the humour of Cooper's and although sometimes reminiscent of Sade's diatribes against the hypocrisy of eighteenth-century France, the vitriolic attacks that *Close to the Knives* directs against late twentieth-century American society, ('The rich have interchangeable heads and their interpretations of law and religion are just as manufactured, false, interchangeable and disposable as the fake moral screen') (*Knives*, 59) are rendered slightly impotent by this lack.

Perhaps surprisingly, these two novels – *Close to the Knives* and *Frisk* – are rarely compared.⁴ Cooper does not rant repetitively against late twentieth-century America and

¹ Elizabeth Young, 'The Beast in the Jungle, the Figure in the Carpet,' *Shopping in Space: Essays on America's Blank Generation Fiction* (New York: Serpent's Tail, 1992), 85-93 gives a summary of the reaction to *American Psycho* and Cooper's *Frisk*.

² Davidson, 'Writing HIV/AIDS', 8, 33, 44. Note that, in Britain, Oscar Moore's sexually explicit AIDS narrative, *A Matter of Life and Sex* (Harmondsworth: Penguin) – also published in 1991 – presents similar themes.

³ David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1991), 114.

⁴ To the best of my knowledge to date they have not, in fact, been critically compared.

Wojnarowicz does not portray the bloody opening of bodies, but much else unites these works. Both texts are the work of 'gay' writers, and both depict a less than bucolic kind of homosexual desire dominated by AIDS (even more so in *Close to the Knives* than Cooper's work) and death. A recurrent image in Wojnarowicz's art (Wojnarowicz was, just before his death, a successful artist) is an Icarus-like burning man. Present in, for example, the painting *Burning Man* (1984) and the sculpture, *Burning Child* (1985), this cautionary mythical tale of the son destroyed by wanting to go too far, too high, too fast, is also evoked by Cooper in the early pages of *Frisk*. Here, a character called Henry observes that 'His history had been reduced to a simplistic blur, like the trails in the air left by people on fire' (7). Although this is the only such explicit reference in the novel, the appearance of this mythical image in the work of both men could be said to contain elements of a cautionary critique, warning against a culture burning up with its own desire for rapid advancement. (Of course, another echo can be found: the almost identical motif appeared in Ballard's *Empire of the Sun* – Chapter Six, 'Violent Light').

Many other similarities connect these writers. Like Cooper, Wojnarowicz's focus, is less on the skin's beauty than the 'skeleton moving under [the] skin' (*Knives*, 8). Both works fragment the conventional narrative form and in both this fragmentation reflects a content in which male bodies become victims and harbingers of death and disintegration. For these reasons, I suggest that we can read *Close to the Knives* as a blatant expression of the cultural critique underlying *Frisk*, and *Frisk* as a brutal portrayal of the material horror less explicitly conveyed in Wojnarowicz's poetic prose. Thus, although *Frisk* does not make explicit attacks against American culture, given its social context, *Frisk*'s depictions of bodies as dirty – 'garbage bags' – owes much to the AIDS-influenced notion of (and fear of) bodies as contagious and contaminated. HIV/AIDS works from inside the body to the outside, breaking the body down in a manner uncommon among human disease. It could be said that this is reflected in Cooper's break-down of the formal narrative style. Thus, post-1985(ish), bodies beautiful on the outside, could be decaying within. And as much as the beautiful male body had been a revered image of Euro-American culture, if we look back to the cultural response to AIDS in the late 1980s, it is not just a 'fear' of contamination, but a cultural fascination with the decay of that (obscene) body that was part of the anxiety and interest surrounding the first years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Fascination with the body's decay was no doubt also a factor in earlier eras in which the sexually 'perverse' and 'impure' types – the homosexual and the prostitute, neither of whom respected culture's accepted attitude towards sex – suffered from syphilis. However, at the time that *Frisk* was written the fascination with the male body's

disintegration was certainly more noticeable in an age of mass-media and its attempts to satisfy cultural interest by flooding living rooms with images of dying gay men. To be generous, we can explain these images as sympathy for suffering or a concerned interest in a modern and deadly disease. Yet there is also an element of the morbid fascination with death and the obscene. As Bersani observes 'in addition to transforming gay men into fascinating taboos ... the heightened visibility conferred on gay men by AIDS is the visibility of imminent death'.¹ Herein lies obscenity as the ill-omened, as the fragility of bodies and the positioning of the body's gradual dehumanisation centre stage.

Bersani's 'imminent death' however, can be seen as more than just the 'imminent death' of the infected homosexual body. Referring back to Wojnarowicz's portrayal of AIDS as the product of a diseased society, to the curious centrality of the homosexual body to culture's self-definition and to my observation that the white male body is the body that represents culture, I suggest that we find in Wojnarowicz's art a fascination with, and indeed a representation of, the death of the cultural body. As Diana Davidson notes, AIDS turned 'the body of power ... [into] the infected and/or dying body'.² The same fascination colours *Frisk*.

In this way, *Frisk*'s obscenity, its violence and violated bodies can be seen as more than – or simply in a different way from – a representation of fragmented homosexual identity and the internalisation of homosexual guilt. On one important level these are the revered bodies of culture – male, Caucasian, beautiful – brutally dissected, just as Cooper creates the illusion of opening up and fragmenting the writing process. By dissecting the body and the obscene narrative, Cooper reveals a vacuity at the heart of both. The narrative is just words on a page; these bodies, were once – or, indeed are still – symbols of culture but they are just 'a bunch of blue tubes inside a skin wrapper, which is what everyone actually is' (*Closer*, 22).

It could also be said that by expressing more than simply cynicism regarding the body as a locus of profound knowledge, Cooper is extending the doubt articulated by J.G. Ballard's *Crash*. The fact that these texts are relatively contemporary additions to the obscene literary tradition may indicate that, underlying this shift in attitude towards the body is a gradual cultural disillusionment regarding the body of modern, post-industrial Euro-American civilisation. Just as 'life – blood, sexual fluids – is itself the bearer of contamination' so modern civilisation has produced an obscene modern disease.

¹ Bersani, *Homos*, 21.

² Davidson, 'Writing HIV/AIDS', 49.

Whether deeper cultural influences can be located or not, the fact that AIDS and the portrayals of dying male bodies which appeared in the mass-media at that time influenced the novella's depiction of the opened body, sex and death, is less difficult to deny (interviews and Cooper's collected journalism illustrate that AIDS is one of the writer's concerns).¹ It is also an aspect of Cooper's work which should not be overlooked. In Cooper's novels the spectacle of wasting men no longer provides the profound revelation which erotic or obscene literature traditionally presents (consider for example Bataille's portrayal of death merely fifty years earlier). Deteriorating, decaying from the inside out, attached to drips and respirators, these images of the Caucasian male as obscene – death-bound and impure – are far from the traditional, metaphysical, image of the body as a vessel of truth or the eternal symbol of Mary Douglas's bounded system. Death too is a less than mysterious event. If, according to one of Cooper's characters 'AIDS ruined death', we can add that, in one of the most recent additions to the obscene literary tradition, it also 'ruined' the mysteries of the body and sex. It also created an enduring image (for those who wish to see it), between man and his obscene nature and between a decaying symbol of civilisation and morality and the decay of the 'civilisation' that symbol represents.

¹ Dennis Cooper, 'AIDS: Words from the Front,' *All Ears: Cultural Criticism, Essays and Obituaries* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 1999), 1-11 provides one example.

Conclusion:
Towards An Obscene Aesthetics

IN 2000, TWENTIETH-CENTURY FOX released *Quills*, a feature film based on a play by Doug Wright. Wright's play was in turn based on the life and works of the writer of some of the most notoriously obscene books ever written, the Marquis de Sade.¹ *Quills* (not the first film based on Sade's life and work but the most recent and the most mainstream) was nominated for two Academy Awards.

For all its biographical and historical inaccuracies this Hollywood reinterpretation of Sade is perceptive in its portrayal of the process which Sade's work has undergone. Within the film, Sade's writing is depicted as strangely contagious. Once heard or read – and within the film whatever their sex, age or social class there are many who want to hear or read it – it exerts an insidious and infectious power to fascinate. By the end of the film Sade's tongue has been cut out (an interesting embellishment on historical truth) but the industry surrounding his notorious works has begun. In all these details the film mirrors and is part of culture's ambivalent attitude towards the obscene, in particular, to obscene books and, over the past three centuries, it is in relation to obscene books and their prohibition that attitudes towards, and definitions of, obscenity have been the most obvious and the most openly influential. (As Charles Rembar observes, 'It is in relation to books that obscenity has had its main meaning').² Carrying the disease-like connotations which are often ascribed to 'impure' material, within the film Sade's work is unremitting in its ability to 'deprave and corrupt'. Yet simultaneously within the film, as in society, there exists a contradictory fascination with Sade and his obscene books. In 2000, the Sade 'industry' showed no sign of a recession: there was this blockbuster film, the publication of several books and many academic articles concerning the writer and his work. A few years on and this thesis also exhibits a fascination with the obscene.

I began this thesis with a number of often unasked questions: everybody – their detractors as much as their defenders – talk about these books' obscenity, but what exactly *is* obscenity? What is obscene? Why does it evoke such potent responses? As the most obvious, perhaps the most central example of obscenity in Western culture over the past two

¹ *Quills*, dir. Philip Kaufman, videocassette (Twentieth Century Fox, 2000).

² Rembar, *Obscenity*, 493.

centuries, how does obscene literature operate? Why is it feared? Why does it evoke so much fascination? Could there be a purpose underlying the obscenity of obscene literature?

In the course of researching these questions I found no single, simple obscenity. Yet, I did find ways of talking about obscenity with greater accuracy and understanding than is commonly provided in work on obscene books. I found a range of obscenities and evidence that there will always be obscenity; in some ways society depends on obscenity. (As Wilde's Algernon Moncrieff so astutely and impudently observed, 'More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read'). Society will always create the obscene in one form or another: dirt, witchcraft, pornographers, paedophiles, the feminised other which does not fit neatly into accepted categories. . . Approaching these texts without adopting an ethical perspective or the more conventional approach of the psychoanalytic theory of sexual development, rather than case studies of sexual 'perversion' I came to explore an obscene aesthetic: complex and disturbing books which weave art out of layers of obscenity. I learned that although the law in all Western countries defines obscenity in terms of one type of material – the graphically sexual, violent, scatological – somewhat contradictorily, legal prohibition *increases* interest in obscene literature and gives it an aura of mystery. In addition, I learned that the legal obscene is not the only type of obscenity. Obscene literature contains many other forms and layers and literature can be obscene without recourse to conventional motifs of violated bodies, 'perverse' sex, or even obscene language. This, perhaps, is the first conclusion I can make: there are many aspects to the obscene and there is no single, monolithic 'obscenity' waiting to be defined. Although it is often disgusting – and this is the commonest, simplest definition of the obscene – the obscene is more than disgust. It is horrific and fascinating; impure, dirty, contaminating, yet attractive. Part of the attraction it has gained (and which it perpetuates) through prohibition is its reputation as a place of secret knowledge and a locus of the 'real' beyond or beneath the illusions and laws of society. Drawing on the associations with 'truth', which it has acquired through prohibition, the obscene, in this sense, is revelatory. Often shocking, the obscene is more than, and not the same as outrage, shock, and anger. The obscene is a human emotion and obscenity invariably contains a human element and the violation of that element. It is obscene language – carrying connotations of barbarity and the pre-social. Obscenity is excess; an over spilling of boundaries, disregard for social decorum, borders and categories. Related to excess, the obscene is ambiguous, it is the 'in-between', defying acceptable boundaries of consumption, language, and behaviour.

Ambiguity is a component of the obscene which mankind appears to find anathema to its world of categories, boundaries and neat definitions (no matter how misleading or

illusory such categories, boundaries and definitions may be). This leads to a second conclusion: the operation of obscenity aligns itself very closely with the operation of Freud's uncanny and Kristeva's abject.¹ Reading obscenity through these theories – and Bataille's theory of eroticism – it is possible to suggest a reason for obscenity's fearful power and attraction: the ubiquitous presence of death, regression, destruction underlies the obscene and this explains obscenity's ambivalent aura. It is a nauseating reminder of what is (as Freud and Bataille observed) commonly disavowed: 'material reality' (to return to Dollimore's phrase, quoted in the Introduction) our mortality, the fragility of our beliefs and ourselves. It appears in this sense that one of the so-called 'obsolete' definitions of obscenity as 'inauspicious, ill-omened, adverse' continues to operate within the obscene. The obscene is accompanied by the aura of our decay. Finally, even without attributing any monolithic authenticity to what they reveal, I believe that reading obscene literature in the way that I have done helps in understanding these books and opens our eyes to a complex dynamic at work in society and in ourselves. Crucially, in this way, the obscene is not only darkness but a space of revelation, unveiling, and – in a sense most explicitly and complexly described by Bataille – of 'light'.

Tracing an obscene aesthetic through two centuries of writing reveals that obscene books are underpinned by shared themes and motifs. Among the core ingredients of obscenity – obscene language, violated and defiled bodies, death – the unveiling of the female's 'secret' parts plays a privileged and recurrent role. Literalising the long-established concept of the 'naked truth' (or, if you like, a 'material reality'), in obscene literature this motif articulates a particular kind of 'secret', a 'reality' behind or beneath 'reality': the emphasis is on unveiling a low, animal, sexual, excreting, exciting, 'secret', a dangerous hole in the body, an obscene 'secret' upon which all our lives depend and which the decorum of social conventions veils, avoids and disavows. It is also a source of uncanny fear and fascination. Displaying these recurrent obscene motifs it appears that obscenity is a universal response/emotion. Yet, although they tap into what can be seen as a universal or innate domain of human fear and fascination, the aesthetic of obscene literature is also historically and culturally specific. It is attuned to and influenced by the values – ideology, historical events, philosophical and aesthetic currents – of the time and culture from which individual works emerge. In this way aspects of their obscenity, and how this obscenity operates, have not remained unchanged since Sade's day. Although arguably the first voice

¹ Psychoanalytic interpretations involving sexual development could follow this connection further in terms of reading themes of castration anxiety and fetishism: both are aspects of the uncanny and the abject, and, if one wished to explore it from this perspective, the obscene.

of a *really* obscene literature, themes and motifs within Sade's work were not unique in his own time. Nor does he dominate obscene literature to the extent that it sometimes seems. Later works are not pale imitations of Sade. Dennis Cooper's *Frisk* may seem to return us to the purely physical materialism of Sade simply transposed into the United States and a world of sterile concrete and homosexual desire. However, two hundred years and an ocean apart from when and where Sade penned *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome* we see that *Frisk* is not wholly Sadean in the obscenity it depicts. Sade's writing combines eighteenth-century French forms of satire, sexual imagery and Aretino-erotics to critique the *ancien régime*. Late twentieth-century concerns influence *Frisk*, particularly the way that AIDS has changed attitudes towards the body, sex, and death. Comparing these obscene texts to their socio-historical context proves that, emerging from different times and cultures, just as certain motifs (particularly the nature of the bodies portrayed – we have seen an increasingly Foucauldian portrayal of bodies as information) change and evolve, so the 'dark' side of 'civilisation', the regressive within the progressive revealed in these texts, does not remain constant.

By considering this aesthetics *as* obscene it has proved difficult to find within these books any glorification of sex or celebrations of violence and depravity, barbarity, and immorality. Instead of evil texts steeped in triumphant blood lust or sexual liberation we find narratives imbued with anger, disenchantment, sadness. With our eyes and minds open to this reading, words such as Bataille's 'Like you and I, those responsible for Auschwitz had a human nose, mouth, voice and reason, they were able to make love, have children; like the pyramids or the Acropolis, Auschwitz is a fact and sign of mankind'¹ become neither a valorisation of Fascism nor genocide. Instead they present a chilling challenge to the ideologically (in the Althusserian sense) acceptable notion of 'civilisation' as aligned with progress and good. In this way, these texts challenge the fundamental tenets of modern Western culture. They admit and portray primitive urges of 'perversity', violence and an urge for regression and destruction underlying 'civilised' reality. They portray the sight and the knowledge of modern European and Anglo-American culture as limited. And they pit this disturbing knowledge against the illusory 'truths' of a 'civilisation' – in Althusser's terms the State – that prefers to (or indeed must) see itself and/or present itself as founded on progress, equality, and morality. Its complicity with the opposite is disavowed. Just as bodies in obscene texts are habitually opened to reveal a material reality within, so these

¹ Bataille, 'Notes: Sartre', 226.

narratives dissect cultural beliefs to reveal an alternative, darker – obscene – ‘material reality’ (an obscene reality) of ourselves and ‘our’ world.

These sentiments are not unique to obscene literature. Similar criticisms of ‘civilised’ values have been expressed in Western culture in different ways. In terms of obscene literature, much remains to be said about obscenity and the psychology of obscenity in culture as well as in literature, film, and other media. Much remains to be said about other obscene books that have emerged from Britain, America, Germany, and other texts outside France’s established obscene tradition. Beyond the influence that ‘books one shouldn’t read’ have had in critical, philosophical, psychoanalytic, and artistic circles, I have said relatively little about how and why, in Algernon’s words, ‘modern culture depends on them’ and how ‘modern culture’ perpetuates a state of fear partly by displacing fears and a sense of threat onto ‘external’ groups. Much could be said about the film adaptations of the books in this study as well as their illustrations. Against the vast amount of obscene material produced by modern culture, *Reading Obscenity* has traced a very few parts of this fluctuating but continuous history from the late eighteenth century to the end of the twentieth. Already it could have ventured into the twenty-first. Today, works including Pan Pantziarka’s *House of Pain* (1995, reissued 2000), Stewart Home’s *69 Things to Do With a Dead Princess* (2002) and Dennis Cooper’s latest novels carry obscene literature into a new millennium. Sometimes name-checking their literary forbears, all continue a process of cultural analysis and criticism through obscenity. While it might be over-generous to place these later novels on a par with the work of Sade or Bataille (in fifty year’s time, Cooper, Home and company may be forgotten to culture, whereas Bataille, Sade, and Sacher-Masoch – or at least ‘masochism’ – will not), in its own way each of these later novels is a significant addition to the obscene aesthetic. Beneath their portrayals of sex and defilement, obscene language and violated bodies, the central themes of these works are death, decay, degeneration, a lingering on the often disavowed appeal of individual and cultural destruction. The fact that such literature continues to appear demonstrates that, despite its morbid predilections, obscene literature itself is very much alive. As is the fascination it exerts.

What *could* be said about the French and non-French texts that have fallen beyond the scope of this study is the way that these too portray the same concerns in similar ways to the books I have considered. Octave Mirbeau’s *Les jardin des supplices* for example, portrays the attraction of the primitive, depths of cruelty and moral depravity concealed by the facades of convention and civilised etiquette. In Jean Genet’s *Le miracle de la rose* (*Miracle of the Rose*, 1951), the narrator writes that,

The origin – the roots – of the great social movements cannot possibly lie in goodness, nor can they be accounted for by reasons which are openly avowable. Religions, the Frankish and French royalty, the freemasonries, the Holy Empire, the Church, national-socialism, under which people still die by the axe ... have branched out across the globe, and the branches could have only been nourished in the depths. A man must dream a long time in order to act with grandeur, and dreaming is nursed in darkness.¹

Reasoning with his young, anonymous, and mute accomplice, Samuel Delany's eponymous Hogg (*Hogg*, written 1973, published 1995) moralises about raping and killing for money: 'Even so, you ain't droppin' no bombs on five hundred people you ain't never seen. You ain't signin' no papers that's gonna put a thousand people who ain't never heard your name out of a house and a job'.² As portrayed in these texts, 'civilisation' veils a darker aspect which is directed by lies, immorality, barbarity, destruction, not progress.

Questions regarding what it is to be 'civilised' have not been restricted to an obscene aesthetics. Consider Isaac Newton's third law of physics, that 'every action has an equal and opposite reaction' and the frequently obscene cultural criticism and satire of the *mauvais livres* of eighteenth-century France. There are also parallels between the observations portrayed in infamous obscene narratives and a pessimistic strain of cultural criticism offered by influential figures of the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These writers also expressed reservations about the ideologies and trajectory of civilisation. Writing about Edgar Allen Poe in 1852, Charles Baudelaire refers to civilisation as a 'great barbarity illuminated by gas' and observes that 'civilised man invents the philosophy of progress in order to console himself from his abdication and downfall'.³ Wilhelm Stekel, a sexologist and influence on Freud, noted in 1924 that 'More hypocrisy than truth hides the relations of mankind to one another ... the primordial reactions are more and more forced into the background ... truth is in most cases forbidden by good manners or is even an offence'.⁴ Sigmund Freud refers to civilisation's 'benevolent illusion'⁵ of progress and

¹ Jean Genet, *Miracle of the Rose*, trans. Anthony Blond Ltd (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 34.

² Samuel Delany, *Hogg* (Normal, Illinois: FC2/Black Ice Books: 1996), 48.

³ Charles Baudelaire, 'Edgar Poe, sa vie et ses oeuvres', *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 297 and 325.

⁴ Wilhelm Stekel, *Sadism and Masochism: The Psychology of Hatred and Cruelty*, vol. 1., trans. Louise Brink (London: John Lane and The Bodley Head, 1935), 18.

⁵ Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', 314.

perfection and to 'lust for aggression and destruction'¹ as the potent forces driving mankind and culture. Freud even ventures that 'it is a debatable point whether a certain degree of cultural hypocrisy is not indispensable for the maintenance of civilisation'.² And Freud was not alone. He echoes Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche before him and their sentiments have been adopted and expanded by other critics and theorists. These include Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse. Consider for example this quote from Marcuse on modern civilisation,

Concentration camps, mass exterminations, world wars, and atom bombs are no "relapse into barbarism", but the unrepressed implementation of the achievements of modern science, technology, and domination. And the most effective subjugation and destruction of man takes place at the height of civilisation.³

In terms of parallels between the sentiments of an obscene aesthetic and other art-forms we could recall the visual arts and Sade's contemporary, Francisco de Goya and his etching *Il sueño de la razon produce monsturos* (*The Dream of Reason Produces Monsters*, 1794-1799). This image of a modern gentleman scholar asleep at his desk, a horde of winged monsters emerging from the gloom behind him could serve as an emblem of the sentiments expressed by some of the surrealists as much as obscene literature. Emerging from the shadows behind the sleeping scholar, like Goya's winged monsters, all these forms of representation articulate the return of (in psychoanalytic terms) a monstrous repressed. Yet, in my studies I have learned that the Age of Reason not only produced, but in a sense continues to propagate these 'monsters'. Firstly, it does so by keeping obscene literature forbidden, thus ensuring its enduring appeal (if not prohibited would obscene books be so popular? Would they have developed their association with 'truth'? If the sexual was not socially unacceptable would they have been written at all?). Secondly, as art historian, Fred Licht explains in relation to Goya, 'The purpose of the plates [Goya's *Caprices*] is ... in perfect harmony with the aims of the Enlightenment'.⁴ On one level this is evident in the themes of questioning and challenging accepted beliefs – and perhaps also an atmosphere of disillusioned malaise – embedded in the themes of obscene literature. On another level, we

¹ Freud, 'Why War?', 357.

² Sigmund Freud, 'Thoughts on War and Death', trans. James Strachey, *Civilization, Society and Religion*. Penguin Freud Library, Vol. 12. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 72.

³ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 54.

⁴ Licht, *Goya*, 92.

can find, as Peter Michelson suggests, a correspondence with modern culture's increased emphasis on, and the importance it gives to, materialism and the material body as opposed to the ideal, less physical bodies of less secular times.¹ Finally, in terms of obscene literature's relationship to modern, Western culture, it is impossible to forget the influence of technologies – the printing press, and, in other forms of obscenity, photography, cinema and the Internet – and the dynamics of supply and demand in a capitalist society: what is popular sells. . . and stories of sex, violated taboos, and death always sell.

Another conclusion I could make is that despite the undoubted power of obscene books it is dangerous not to see that they are limited. Often they wallow in pessimism. They offer no easy solutions to a seemingly inevitable cultural and individual decay. Furthermore, whatever the power of the death instinct and the inevitable destiny or 'truth' of all life as death, there is more to life than sex, death, and self-destruction. Often these works temper their pessimism with humour – even if of a bleak and satirical kind. Sometimes this humour takes the form of self-deprecation and this is a significant element in these narratives. For all their sombre themes, it seems important to note that at times several of these writers seem to step back and shrug – not exactly apologetically, but smile all the same – at the absurd contortions of bodies and obsessions which carry disturbing revelations. We must be wary of the 'universal' claims made by these texts regarding civilisation, life, and 'truth'. Obscenity strikes a universal chord within mankind. Although obscene books express disturbing observations about the drives of (Western) 'civilisation' and focus on 'timeless' motifs, like the body, sex, and death, it is problematic to talk about their observations as in any way universal to 'civilisation' or humanity. Despite the apparent universality of the roots of obscenity the comments and content of these books derive from a very particular kind of culture and address an audience of that time. 'Universals' such as the body, sex, and death are culturally and historically specific. The body in Sade's work is very different from the body in Cooper's (or, for that matter, Sacher-Masoch's, Bataille's, Réage's, and Ballard's). So too are other levels of obscenity: slang words change; obscene books are not as threatening as they once were; certain images which were socially offensive and deemed obscene sixty years ago are much more acceptable now. And of course, because there must always be obscenity, the reverse dynamic also exists: where once they were acceptable,

¹ Cf. Michelson, *Unspeakable*, viii: 'Obscene poetics are the coherent (as distinct from aberrant or ephemeral) product of the continuing dialogue between aesthetic idealism and materialism and that their emergence as a genre of legitimised literature and art is a reflection of the modern and especially contemporary assertiveness of the latter.' Also: obscene poetics is 'a *contemplation* of the unspeakable and counterpoints traditional aesthetic assumptions ... the obscene [redirects] ... attentions from the ideal to the material nature of human being and doing', xi. (Michelson's emphasis). Cf. also 65-67.

today the sight of public executions or the practice of paedophilia are no longer deemed 'civilised' and 'proper' in the West.

To sum up, produced in 'classics' editions by major publishers, available in High Street bookshops and the subject of hundreds of academic essays, obscene books are significant and influential contributions to our cultural legacy. It seems to me that the time for presenting them as academically neglected texts has passed. I would also argue that the time for addressing them as 'marginal' is over – if indeed there ever really was a time when the obscene was truly 'marginal' and not (as Bataille suggests) 'fundamental' to ourselves and society and the self-definition of each. I would also argue that it is time to explore how texts of a similar nature – by Ballard, Cooper, Delany, Home, and Pantziarka – adopt and adapt a historically French tradition of sexually violent obscene fiction outside France. The time for addressing what the obscene aesthetic is really about, however, has a relatively recent history. It involves moving away from legal definitions and recognising the fact that some of the most influential art in history can be and is obscene. There is an aesthetics of obscenity. 'Perversion', depravity, cruelty, death, horror and lust blossom throughout our artistic and cultural legacy. Alongside other artists and writers, Sade, Sacher-Masoch, Bataille, Réage, Ballard, and Cooper attempt to show that 'this *too* is society'. To truly understand the impact of these works and perhaps ourselves, our culture and its ideologies, further exploration, not disavowal, is needed of the powerful, complex core which lies at their heart: their obscenity.

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