S(T)IMULATING PLEASURE: THE FEMALE BODY IN SADE'S *LES INFORTUNES DE LA VERTU* AND *THÉRÈSE PHILOSOPHE*

Jeanne-Hélène Roy

Two hundred years after his time, the world still regards with both horror and awe the daunting cultural edifice that the Marquis de Sade has constructed. To be sure, the growing corpus of criticism on Sade extends far beyond the reductionist label of pornographer, for in the proliferation of his depictions of torture and sins of the flesh, we discern a performativity concerned more with liberty, the author's lifelong obsession, than with *jouissance*. In her study *The Sadeian Woman*, Angela Carter takes this notion one step further, writing, "I would like to think that he put pornography in the service of women, or, perhaps allowed it to be invaded by an ideology not inimical to women" (37). Critics do not limit this generous quasi-endorsement of pornography to Sade. In *The Invention of Pornography*, Lynn Hunt deems one of the Marquis' avowed favourite books *Thérèse philosophe* of 1748 (of anonymous authorship) a work which "valorize(s) female sexual activity and determination," maintaining that its protagonist Thérèse has "much more control over (her) destin(y) than was apparent in other representations of women during that time" (44). Similarly, Robert Darnton writes that Thérèse "retains her independence to the end. Even if she is the creation of a male fantasy, Thérèse speaks for the right of women to pursue their own pleasures and to dispose of their own bodies" (113-14). Superficially, these assertions could appear tenable, especially when we consider that in both works, the narrative function is assigned to a female. Judging from their treatment of the female body, however, the above claims appear at best questionable. To the end of validating my objections to them, I shall examine two aspects common to the inscription of the female body in *Sade's Les Infortunes de la vertu* of 1791 and *Thérèse philosophe*, namely representations of torture and virginity.

Before undertaking my investigation, I would like to consider several points of Luce Irigaray's discussions of the feminine subject insofar as they prove key in my reading. In her celebrated *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*, Irigaray challenges traditional representations of the female body as fragmented and mutilated, writing "Comment, combien de fois, va-t-il falloir être découpée en 'parties', 'martelée', 'refrappée',...pour devenir assez signifiante?" In her discussion of the binary logic underlying *différence sexuelle*, she recalls Lacan's notion of *la barre*, the imaginary barrier that stands to separate male from female, *Autre* from *Même*, *intelligible* from *sensible*, all the while reminding us that, as an

abstraction, *la barre* does little more than maintain the sham of the binary by actually homogenising it, by reducing the two terms to *Même* (97-98) ["Or, cette domination du logos philosophique vient, pour une bonne part, de son pouvoir de *réduire tout autre dans l'économie du Même*" (72, her emphasis)]. Furthermore, she notes that the Other is always subjected to its own inscription, albeit unbeknownst to itself, and in this sense is not unlike the concept of the empty receptacle, which receives the marks of and understands everything—except itself. Like the receptacle, the Other functions as the womb or locus of the mimetic; it can reproduce or literally mime anything and everything, yet is always without access to its own relationship with the unintelligible, with itself. The clear question that arises from Irigaray's comments is where does the domain of the *proprement féminin* reside? To this query, she repeatedly directs us to the scattered, discontinuous, characteristically fluid realm constituting the very essence of woman, to the literal and figurative blood and tears for which traditionally she is admonished, administered the label of "unstable" or "hysterical" and consequently dismissed. By beckoning us to read "autrement," to listen to the echoes of "sang" resounding in her highlighted evocation of woman's "*sons*" amid a discussion of their potential "*sens*" (110), Irigaray forces us to consider an order of expression that is always in excess, and thus altogether inconceivable to phallogocentric discourse as we know it.

Turning to the texts in question, we quickly perceive that one of the fundamental differences between *Les Infortunes* and *Thérèse philosophe* lies in that Sade's work abounds with torture-scenes, whereas in the latter, violence is virtually nonexistent. Let us first consider the instance in *Les Infortunes* where the *narratrice* Justine is tortured by Bressac. Dragging her into a forest, Bressac first chides her severely and then delivers his orders to his henchmen, explaining that *Justine* must fall "sous les mains de la *justice*," an ironic formulation given the juxtaposition of her name and the unjust treatment she receives throughout the text. Stripping her and gagging her with a handkerchief, Bressac's men tie her to a tree facing the trunk. Each time that Bressac strikes her, he stops and takes a moment to consider the fruits of his labour:

> ...le cruel voulut *observer* ma contenance; on eût dit qu'il *repaissait ses yeux* de mes larmes et des caractères de douleur ou d'effroi qui s'imprégnait sur ma physionomie...Mon

> bourreau s'arrêta une minute, il toucha brutalement de ses mains toutes les parties qu'il venait de meurtrir... (138, my emphasis)

Here we observe a clear pattern in place: first, Justine is punished, at which point Bressac touches one by one the areas he has struck, then speaks unintelligible words to his men and begins again.

Through witnessing this pattern, which is repeated to the point of tedium, we note several factors in play. First of all, the very language used to depict the process, not to mention the form that the ritual takes, strongly resemble those of an operation. Bressac first has his subjects prepared by his men, just as a doctor would have technicians prepare a patient. After carrying out his "surgery" of sorts, like a medicine man well versed in science, Bressac takes in the results of his work, as evinced by the terms "*observer*" and "*repaître ses yeux*," both belonging to the domain of the visual, although the latter takes on an added element of perverted pleasure, as it literally means "to feast one's eyes on," denoting a sense of delight whose experience is gastronomical in origin. Secondly, the bodies in question--both Justine's and that of Bressac--undergo a fragmentation, a process which not only reveals the function in the ritual of each isolated body part, but furthermore reduces them to those very roles: "les mains" of the torturer touch what are literally described as "the wounded parts" of Justine. Ironically, more is actually said about the body of the torturer than that of the victim. Yet, as the process of fragmentation evolves, eyes, hands, wounded parts, and tears are evoked such that they become intermingled, creating a whirlwind effect in which the identity of the bearer is lost. The result of this dissection of the body and subsequent scattering of its parts, then, is a non-differentiation in which the distinction between subject and object is blurred, such that what would customarily be conceived of as Self and Other becomes homogenised into One and the Same, as Irigaray would have it.

We also note that although before and after the scene of punishment, the *narratrice* evokes her effusion of blood and tears--the only language she is permitted to speak--it seems that throughout the torture, her body remains devoid of fluid. Indeed, as Bressac systematically deprives her one by one of her senses, she ultimately produces nothing at all, remaining both physically and verbally desiccated. Not surprisingly, the resurgence of her capacity to feel is accompanied by a spurting of blood

which seems to function in the stead of the spoken word. Certainly, it is tempting to read this surge of fluids as an apparent manifestation of the particularly feminine, flowing *écriture féminine* exalted by Irigaray, but here we must look beyond appearances. Whilst the *narratrice* does shed drops of blood and tears in this scene, the question of *écriture féminine* appears moot when we consider the extent to which female fluids are actually quite sparse in the text, and in effect are systematically lacking at moments when one would expect them to be literally gushing. Through this dearth of semiotic language, this lack of *sang* which appears to signal the corresponding lack of its near-homophone, that is, with the little remaining *sens* remaining in the protagonist, who cannot utter a *son*, we begin to realize that as readers, we are witnessing less the narrative of Justine than that of her torturer as delivered from her mouth. It goes without saying that Justine never knows what Bressac is feeling as he inflicts pain on her, let alone what she is feeling herself, and, because of this utter inability to coincide with herself, we see that the character of Justine is marked by a heightened sense of exteriority with regard to her own body. In light of this observation, it seems that the small amount of body fluid represented in the text never functions as a synecdoche of interiority, as we might expect, but rather as an indication of Justine's only possible mode of existence--outside of her own Self, as confirmed by her silence punctuated with occasional morsels that smack of Bressac's desire.

As I noted earlier, torture-scenes are practically absent in *Thérèse philosophe*, with the exception of Thérèse's description of her initiation into the world of debauchery through voyeurism. In this scene, Eradice, a girlfriend from the convent, seeks to show her the spiritual path to heaven proposed by Father Dirrag by having Thérèse spy on one of their "holy exercises" which, all in the name of God, include a panoply of erotic activities motivated by acts of violence inflicted on the girl. As the scene proceeds, we witness remarkable similarities between its development and that in *Les Infortunes*. In both works, there is a striking alternation between the Father's *discourse* and his *act*, which occur behind the back of the silenced woman (we recall that Justine is facing a tree, and here Eradice is on her knees revealing her buttocks). Thérèse recounts:

> Eradice ne disait mot. Le père parcourait, avec *des yeux* pleins de feu, les parties qui lui *servaient de perspective*; et

> comme il avait ses *regards fixés sur elle*, j'entr'ouïs qu'il disait à voix basse, d'un ton d'admiration: "Ah! *La belle gorge! Quels seins charmants!*" (35, my emphasis)

As in Sade's work, here the protagonist does not utter a word, and later in the scene, when she does, she does nothing more than mimic Dirrag's discourse. In addition, the girl's body, not unlike Justine's, subject to the ever-penetrating gaze of the Father, gives way to a fragmentation, which marks its reduction into pieces that serve the desires of the Father. Likewise, Dirrag is reduced either to his male member (or to metaphors representing it, like "*verge*", used both to designate his penis and the rod with which he inflicts punishment) or to his voice, both of which direct the discourse and the action in the scene, and consequently leave Eradice in a state where she "ne voit plus, n'entend plus, ne sent plus".

As compared to Justine, who already emits very little in the way of fluids, the girl in *Thérèse philosophe* functions as an extreme example; in this sole instance of torture, she does not bleed, not even once. Moreover, viewing the work as a whole, we see that there is not one manifestation of female fluid, whereas that originating in the male body spurts abundantly. Bearing this difference in mind, let us now turn to the two texts' treatment of virginity insofar as it relates to the possibility or impossibility of a female mode of expression.

While being held captive in Rodin the surgeon's castle, Justine, curious as to the origin of a series of plaintive moans she hears, wanders into the basement, where, behind "une porte *exactement* fermée" (146, my emphasis), she enounters a twelve-year-old girl whom he has kidnapped. Shortly thereafter, the surgeon and his colleague arrive and Justine overhears their discussion:

> Jamais l'anatomie ne sera parfaitement connue que l'examen des vaisseaux ne soit fait sur un enfant expiré d'une mort cruelle [...] Il en est de même de la membrane qui assure la virginité; il faut nécessairement un enfant pour cette opération. Qu'observe-t-on dans l'âge de puberté?--rien; les menstrues déchirent l'hymen et toutes les recherches sont *inexactes* (148, my emphasis).

Here, we once again encounter blood, but in a radically divergent

context. Whilst in the previous scene, the blood depicted was the result of torture inflicted on the female body, and thus from the outside, in this instance the blood in question, the result of menstruation, flows from within. According to Rodin, however, one *sine qua non* condition for his subject is that she have not yet begun her period, his logic being that blood originating from the inside of the body would destroy the girl's hymen and thus invalidate—or more specifically render "inexacte"—his research. Here we cannot help but remark the use of the word "inexacte," which sends a semantic flag to the moment when Justine waits in front of the door, which is "exactement fermée". As auditory voyeurs of a conversation between doctors about subjects and experiments, we are first and foremost struck, although perhaps not surprised, by the overwhelmingly rational resonances created by "exacte" and "inexacte," a lexicon denoting mathematical precision. From the seeming vantage point of behind the door, one would think that Justine would be privy to a wealth of information; however, her literal and figurative positions fail to coincide, for while she is able to eavesdrop on the surgeons' conversation, Justine—or at this point it might perhaps be more fitting to call her "Sophie" as she has chosen to call herself in the company of others, as the Greek denotation of "knowledge" resonates here with a certain irony—remains unaware as ever, which all the more reinforces the established juxtaposition between *exacte* and *inexacte*. In this instance, we can perhaps draw a parallel between the two girls, beyond the obvious similarity of their unfortunate situations. Clearly, Justine's not-so-blissful ignorance throughout the novel can be compared to the metaphorical inexperience of her younger counterpart, whose not being in the know is even more strongly emphasised, since she is denied access to the rudimentary manifestation of her identity as a woman—to the very blood that would symbolically carry her over the threshold from girlhood to womanhood.

At this point, we cannot help but ask ourselves why the Sadeian torturer so adamantly insists on his victims' virginity. In her essay "The Student Body," Jane Gallop offers an answer which aptly resumes our above observations: "Sadean pedagogy depends upon the pupil's virginity [...] If the pupil is virginal, never before penetrated, she is a blank, empty receptacle, and examination will be exact, revealing nothing but what the teacher puts there" (51). Here Gallop not only explicitly articulates that Sade draws a parallel between virginity and the *tabula rasa* state, but she also subtly brings to the corporal level the

notion of the female pupil's ignorance, rendered here as a "blank, empty receptacle". Indeed, the word "receptacle" triggers both the image of the womb itself and that of what lies behind the door where Justine is perched: a *cave*, an enclosed, uterine space, here the very locus of knowledge or lack thereof.

At this point in the narrative, both girls are, strictly speaking, virgins, although Justine does finally lose her virginity when she enters a convent. Significantly, it is precisely at the moment in which she verbalises the event of her *dépucelage* to the avid ears of her sister Juliette, that she cuts herself off, blushing in shame. Here, yet another possibility of a body fluid, albeit subcutaneous by nature and thus not readily apparent, is aborted, or at least contained; at the very moment that Justine's blood would demurely manifest itself, it refuses to flow beyond a blush and simultaneously, her monologue is truncated just when she is about to reveal the obscene details of her story. It comes as no surprise that in the scene when Justine is at last deflowered, there is very little blood, thus yet another instance of the absence of female body fluid at a moment when one would naturally expect it. When Antoine the monk terminates his lustful act, Justine's quasi-nonexistent blood is seemingly redirected to the tears she sheds as she beseeches her torturers to give her death; here, we can read her desire for death not only literally, as her unwavering adherence to virtue, but also literarily, as a desire to experience the knowledge of her own desire, as a call for "la petite mort," a domain to which she will be eternally denied access. In the end, Justine's death wish is granted *deus ex machina*, in the form of a thunderbolt from above, a bellowing *coup de foudre/foutre* delivered by the Father.

In *Thérèse philosophe*, virginity is similarly a predominant topos, and, as in Sade's text, the *narratrice* remains a virgin for the majority of the narrative, the signifiance of which is emphasised in the scene immediately following that discussed earlier. Having witnessed the pleasure experienced by Eradice and Dirrag, Thérèse feels compelled to imitate it, to become herself the object of Dirrag's "cérémonie". She then consults with a priest who dissuades her, explaining that penetration should be reserved for marriage. He does however permit her to masturbate, though with the stipulation that she refrain from inserting her fingers into her vagina. In this manner, Thérèse achieves orgasm time and time again throughout the narrative.

At the surface, we could read Thérèse's right to experience sexual

pleasure as a sign of her relative autonomy, especially when we take into consideration the *self*-induced nature of her rapture. Nevertheless, the larger picture shows us otherwise. In the first few pages of *Thérèse philosophe*, the protagonist teaches herself to masturbate, but when her mother catches her in the act, she binds her hands and ships her off to the convent, where onanism has supposedly been banished. Thus, when Thérèse takes the initiative in pleasuring herself, her attempts are met with resistance and prohibition; literally, she is physically denied access to her own body. Later, when she resumes her practices of self-gratification, it is only at the sanctioning of the Law of the Father, symbolically embodied in a clergyman.

Furthermore, the mere fact that Thérèse must wait so long to engage in intercourse suggests the extent to which she is refused control of her own body and life. When her desire for sex (a desire originating in reading and voyeurism, in the Other) is at last satisfied, it is only at the will of her "cher comte," the addressee of her discourse. The latter, well aware of Thérèse's autoerotic adventures, proffers her bawdy books to ponder, but in so doing, he lays a wager to her: if she can resist masturbating for fifteen days, he will give her his library and paintings. But if she cheats, she must relinquish to him her maidenhead, which, for fear of pregnancy and the concomitant dangers of childbirth, she now does not wish to renounce.

The wager gives way to a scene in which we are invited to participate in a sort of "meta-*jouissance*" deriving from the act of reading. While Thérèse gazes at erotic paintings, she first imitates in her mind's eye the postures she sees, falling "dans une espèce d'extase" (not unlike Bernini's Saint Theresa, her onomastic homonym) which then manifests itself physically:

> Je me coulais, me roulais sur mon lit, j'agitais mes reins et mon ventre dans une ondulation lascive [...] Je me représentais si vivement, si nettement, en imagination, le sceptre de chair divine auquel je m'offrais, que je croyais ressentir sa puissance m'approcher et m'investir, sa tête chaleureuse et douce forcer à l'orée de mon sexe inviolé, entre mes grandes lèvres entrouvertes (182).

Offering herself as a spectacle to the count who looks on, she similarly exhibits herself to the reader, who, reading of her adventures,

is thus positioned, so to speak, exactly as is he. Thérèse loses the bet and the couple agree on *coitus interruptus* as their mode of intercourse.

Clearly, then, Thérèse's desire operates solely as a function of the Count/*scripteur*'s, and never as a force in and of itself. Throughout the work, she speaks repeatedly of her capacity for mimicry, thus functioning as eternal Other both to the Other and, essentially, to herself. In this unending process of s(t)imulating pleasure through reproduction of the Same, Thérèse exists only to witness and parrot the desire of the Other, as the metaphorical makeshift member destined to be used by the Other, who, in turn, will receive her ersatz-pleasure, albeit twice mediated. Reduced to enacting the mimetic function, Thérèse serves as the locus/receptacle for the Other's voice, but fails to signify in her own right.

That Justine and Thérèse tell their own tales, then, is ultimately nothing more than a cheap narrative device employed by their male *scripteurs* to the end of creating a more propitious environment for male bonding–if not the realm of the female body, then that of its literary representation. The heroines' bodies in *Les Infortunes* and *Thérèse philosophe* are systematically depicted as dissected and devoid of the fluids that constitute their very femininity. But more significantly, these works remain bound by the essentialising either/or logic that leaves no space for the domain of the feminine. Irigaray puts it aptly: *Dieu ou la jouissance féminine* (107, bold mine). In the case of Justine, ever-fucked and fucked over by the Father, the choice has been made. As for Thérèse, her apparent options, masturbation or *coitus interruptus*, in the end yield no fruit, signifying nothing other than their own non-signification, their sterility.

Univertisy of Akron

WORKS CITED

Carter, Angela. *The Sadeian Woman*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1979.

Darnton, Robert. *Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1995.

Gallop, Jane. *Thinking Through the Body*. New York: Columbia UP, 1988.

Hunt, Lynn. *The Invention of Pornography*. New York: Zone Books, 1993.

Irigaray, Luce. *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1977.

Sade, D. A. F.de. *Les Infortunes de la vertu*. Paris: Gallimard, 1970.

—. *Thérèse philosophe*. Paris: Société Européenne d'Édition et de Diffusion, 1975.