

WOMAN HATING

Excerpt from Part Two

The Pornography

by Andrea Dworkin

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*Bookshop shelves are lined with pornography. It is a staple of the market place, and where it is illegal it flourishes and prices soar. From *The Beautiful Flagellants of New York* to *Twelve Inches around the World*, cheap-editioned, overpriced renditions of fucking, sucking, whipping, footlicking, gangbanging, etc., in all of their manifold varieties are available--whether in the supermarket or on the black market. Most literary pornography is easily describable: repetitious to the point of inducing catatonia, ill-conceived, simple-minded, brutal, and very ugly. Why, then, do we spend our money on it? Why, then, is it erotically stimulating for masses of men and women?*

Literary pornography is the cultural scenario of male/female. It is the collective scenario of master/slave. It contains cultural truth: men and women, grown now out of the fairy-tale landscape into the castles of erotic desire; woman, her carnality adult and explicit, her role as victim adult and explicit, her guilt adult and explicit, her punishment lived out on her flesh, her end annihilation--death or complete submission.

Pornography, like fairy tale, tells us who we are. It is the structure of male and female mind, the content of our shared erotic identity, the map of each inch and mile of our oppression and despair. Here we move beyond childhood terror. Here the fear is clammy and real, and rightly so. Here we are compelled to ask the real questions: why are we defined in these ways, and how can we bear it?

CHAPTER 3

Woman as Victim : *Story of O*

The *Story of O*, by Pauline Reage, incorporates, along with all literary pornography, principles and characters already isolated in my discussion of children's fairy tales. The female as a figure of innocence and evil enters the adult world--the brutal world of genitalia. The female manifests in her adult form--cunt. She emerges defined by the hole between her legs. In addition, *Story of O* is more than simple pornography. It claims to define epistemologically what a woman is, what she needs, her processes of thinking and feeling, her proper place. It links men and women in an erotic dance of some magnitude: the sado-masochistic complexion of O is not trivial--it is formulated as a cosmic principle which articulates, absolutely, the feminine.

Also, O is particularly compelling for me because I once believed it to be what its defenders claim--the mystical revelation of the true, eternal, and sacral destiny of women. The book was absorbed as a pulsating, erotic, secular Christianity (the joy in pure suffering, woman as Christ figure). I experienced O with the same infantile abandon as the NEWSWEEK reviewer who wrote: "What lifts this fascinating book above mere perversity is its movement toward the transcendence of the self through a gift of the self . . . to give the body, to allow it to be ravaged, exploited, and totally possessed can be an act of consequence, if it is done with love

for the sake of love." 1 Any clear-headed appraisal of O will show the situation, O's condition, her behavior, and most importantly her attitude toward her oppressor as a logical scenario incorporating Judeo-Christian values of service and self-sacrifice and universal notions of womanhood, a logical scenario demonstrating the psychology of submission and self-hatred found in all oppressed peoples. O is a book of astounding political significance.

2

This is, then, the story of O: O is taken by her lover Rene to Roissy and cloistered there; she is fucked, sucked, raped, whipped, humiliated, and tortured on a regular and continuing basis--she is programmed to be an erotic slave, Rene's personal whore; after being properly trained she is sent home with her lover; her lover gives her to Sir Stephen, his half-brother; she is fucked, sucked, raped, whipped, humiliated, and tortured on a regular and continuing basis; she is ordered to become the lover of Jacqueline and to recruit her for Roissy, which she does; she is sent to Anne-Marie to be branded with Sir Stephen's mark and to have rings with his insignia inserted in her cunt; she serves as an erotic model for Jacqueline's younger sister Natalie who is infatuated with her; she is taken to a party masked as an owl, led on a leash by Natalie, and there plundered, despoiled, raped, gangbanged; realizing that there is nothing else left for Sir Stephen to do with her or to her, fearing that he will abandon her, she asks his permission to kill herself and receives it. Q.E.D., pornography is never big on plot.

Of course, like most summaries, the above is somewhat sketchy. I have not mentioned the quantities of cock that O sucks, or the anal assaults that she sustains, or the various rapes and tortures perpetrated on her by minor characters in the book, or the varieties of whips used, or described her clothing or the different kinds of nipple rouge, or the many ways in which she is chained, or the shapes and colors of the welts on her body.

From the course of O's story emerges a clear mythological figure: she is woman, and to name her O, zero, emptiness, says it all. Her ideal state is one of complete passivity, nothingness, a submission so absolute that she transcends human form (in becoming an owl). Only the hole between her legs is left to define her, and the symbol of that hole must surely be O. Much, however, even in the rarefied environs of pornography, necessarily interferes with the attainment of utter passivity. Given a body which takes up space, has needs, makes demands, is connected, even symbolically, to a personal history which is a sequence of likes, dislikes, skills, opinions, one is formed, shaped--one exists at the very least as positive space. And since in addition as a woman one is born guilty and carnal, personifying the sins of Eve and Pandora, the wickedness of Jezebel and Lucretia Borgia, O's transcendence of the species is truly phenomenal.

The thesis of O is simple. Woman is cunt, lustful, wanton. She must be punished, tamed, debased. She gives the gift of herself, her body, her well-being, her life, to her lover. This is as it should be--natural and good. It ends necessarily in her annihilation, which is also natural and good, as well as beautiful, because she fulfills her destiny:

As long as I am beaten and ravished on your behalf, I am naught but the thought of you, the desire of you, the obsession of you. That, I believe, is what you wanted. Well, I love you, and that is what I want too. 2

Then let him take her, if only to wound her! O hated herself for her own desire, and loathed Sir Stephen for the self-control he was displaying. She wanted him to love her, there, the truth was out: she wanted him to be chafing under the urge to touch her lips and penetrate her body, to devastate her if need be. . . . 3

. . . Yet he was certain that she was guilty and, without really wanting to, Rene was punishing her for a sin he knew nothing about (since it remained completely internal), although Sir Stephen had immediately detected it: her wantonness. [4](#)

. . . no pleasure, no joy, no figment of her imagination could ever compete with the happiness she felt at the way he used her with such utter freedom, at the notion that he could do anything with her, that there was no limit, no restriction in the manner with which, on her body, he might search for pleasure. [5](#)

O is totally possessed. That means that she is an object, with no control over her own mobility, capable of no assertion of personality. Her body is *a* body, in the same way that a pencil is a pencil, a bucket is a bucket, or, as Gertrude Stein pointedly said, a rose is a rose. It also means that O's energy, or power, as a woman, as Woman, is absorbed. Possession here denotes a biological transference of power which brings with it a commensurate spiritual strength to the possessor. O does more than offer herself; she is herself the offering. To offer herself would be prosaic Christian self-sacrifice, but as the offering she is the vehicle of the miraculous--she incorporates the divine.

Here sacrifice has its ancient, primal meaning: that which was given at the beginning becomes the gift. The first fruits of the harvest were dedicated to and consumed by the vegetation spirit which provided them. The destruction of the victim in human or animal sacrifice or the consumption of the offering was the very definition of the sacrifice--death was necessary because the victim was or represented the life-giving substance, the vital energy source, which had to be liberated, which only death could liberate. An actual death, the sacrifice per se, not only liberated benevolent energy but also ensured a propagation and increase of life energy (concretely expressed as fertility) by a sort of magical ecology, a recycling of basic energy, or raw power. O's victimization is the confirmation of her power, a power which is transcendental and which has as its essence the sacred processes of life, death, and regeneration.

But the full significance of possession, both mystically and mythologically, is not yet clear. In mystic experience communion (wrongly called possession sometimes) has meant the dissolution of the ego, the entry into ecstasy, union with and illumination of the godhead. The experience of communion has been the province of the mystic, prophet, or visionary, those who were able to alchemize their energy into pure spirit and this spirit into a state of grace. Possession, rightly defined, is the perversion of the mystic experience; it is by its very nature demonic because its goal is power, its means are violence and oppression. It spills the blood of its victim and in doing so estranges itself from life-giving union. O's lover thinks that she gives herself freely but if she did not, he would take her anyway. Their relationship is the incarnation of demonic possession:

Thus he would possess her as a god possesses his creatures, whom he lays hold of in the guise of a monster or bird, of an invisible spirit or a state of ecstasy. He did not wish to leave her. The more he surrendered her, the more he would hold her dear. The fact that he gave her was to him a proof, and ought to be for her as well, that she belonged to him: one can only give what belongs to you. He gave her only to reclaim her immediately, to reclaim her enriched in his eyes, like some common object which had been used for some divine purpose and has thus been consecrated. For a long time he had wanted to prostitute her, and he was delighted to feel that the pleasure he was deriving was even greater than he had hoped, and that it bound him to her all the more so because, through it, she would be more humiliated and ravished. Since she loved him, she could not help loving whatever derived from him. [6](#)

A precise corollary of possession is prostitution. The prostitute, the woman as object, is defined by the usage to which the possessor puts her. Her subjugation is the signet of his power. Prostitution means for the woman the carnal annihilation of will and choice, but for the man it once again signifies an increase in power, pure and simple. To call the power of the possessor, which he demonstrates by playing superpimp, divine, or to confuse it with ecstasy or communion, is to grossly misunderstand. "All the mouths that had probed her mouth, all the hands that had seized her breasts and belly, all the members that had been thrust into her had so perfectly provided the living proof that she was worthy of being prostituted and had, so to speak, sanctified her." ⁷ Of course, it is not O who is sanctified, but Rene, or Sir Stephen, or the others, through her.

O's prostitution is a vicious caricature of old-world religious prostitution. The ancient sacral prostitution of the Hebrews, Greeks, Indians, et al., was the ritual expression of respect and veneration for the powers of fertility and generation. The priestesses/prostitutes of the temple were literal personifications of the life energy of the earth goddess, and transferred that energy to those who participated in her rites. The cosmic principles, articulated as divine male and divine female, were ritually united in the temple because clearly only through their continuing and repeated union could the fertility of the earth and the well-being of a people be ensured. Sacred prostitution was "nothing less than an act of communion with god (or godhead) and was as remote from sensuality as the Christian act of communion is remote from gluttony." ⁸ O and all of the women at Roissy are distinguished by their sterility and bear no resemblance whatsoever to any known goddess. No mention is ever made of conception or menstruation, and procreation is never a consequence of fucking. O's fertility has been rendered O. There is nothing sacred about O's prostitution.

O's degradation is occasioned by the male need for and fear of initiation into manhood. Initiation rites generally include a period of absolute solitude, isolation, followed by tests of physical courage, mental endurance, often through torture and physical mutilation, resulting in a permanent scar or tattoo which marks the successful initiate. The process of initiation is designed to reveal the values, rites, and rules of manhood and confers on the initiate the responsibilities and privileges of manhood. What occurs at Roissy is a clear perversion of real initiation. Rene and the others mutilate O's body, but they are themselves untouched. Her body substitutes for their bodies. O is marked with the scars which they should bear. She undergoes their ordeal for them, endures the solitude and isolation, the torture, the mutilation. In trying to become gods, they have bypassed the necessary rigors of becoming men. The fact that the tortures must be repeated endlessly, not only on O but on large numbers of women who are forced as well as persuaded, demonstrates that the men of Roissy never in fact become men, are never initiates, never achieve the security of realized manhood.

What would be the sign of the initiate, the final mark or scar, manifests in the case of O as an ultimate expression of sadism. The rings through O's cunt with Sir Stephen's name and heraldry, and the brand on her ass, are permanent wedding rings rightly placed. They mark her as an owned object and in no way symbolize the passage into maturity and freedom. The same might be said of the conventional wedding ring.

O, in her never-ending role as surrogate everything, also is the direct sexual link between Sir Stephen and Rene. That the two men love each other and fuck each other through O is made clear by the fact that Sir Stephen uses O anally most of the time. The consequences of misdirecting sexual energy are awesome indeed.

But what is most extraordinary about *Story of O* is the mind-boggling literary style of Pauline Reage, its author. O is wanton yet pure, Sir Stephen is cruel yet kind, Rene is brutal yet gentle, a wall is black yet white. Everything is what it is, what it isn't, and its direct opposite. That technique, which is so skillfully executed, might help to account for the compelling irrationality of *Story of O*. For those women who are convinced yet doubtful, attracted yet repelled, there is this schema for self-protection: *the double-double think that the author engages in is very easy to deal with if we just realize that we only have to double-double unthink it.*

To sum up, *Story of O* is a story of psychic cannibalism, demonic possession, a story which posits men and women as being at opposite poles of the universe--the survival of one dependent on the absolute destruction of the other. It asks, like many stories, who is the most powerful, and it answers: men are, literally over women's dead bodies.

1. *Newsweek*, March 21, 1966, p. 108, unsigned.
2. Pauline Reage, *Story of O* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. xxi.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 187.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
8. Robert S. de Ropp, *Sex Energy: The Sexual Force in Man and Animals* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1969), p. 134.

Introductory note to Part Two and "Woman as Victim: Story of O" chapter, pp. 53-63, from *Woman Hating*, 1974.

Woman Hating: A Radical Look at Sexuality is a 1974 book by the American radical feminist author and activist Andrea Dworkin. While Dworkin was living in Amsterdam in the Netherlands, she met Ricki Abrams, a prostitute and a fellow expatriate. Abrams introduced Dworkin to early radical feminist writing from the United States, and Dworkin was especially inspired by Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, and Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Powerful*. She and Abrams began *Specifically Woman Hating* is about women and men, the roles they play, the violence between them. We begin with fairy tales, the first scenarios of women and men which mold our psyches, taught to us before we can know differently. We go on to pornography, where we find the same scenarios, explicitly sexual and now more recognizable, ourselves, carnal women and heroic men. Women hate other women. Almost immediately, she realized that she made a faux-pas and changed the subject. Initially I felt resentful about what she had said. "Typical", I thought, "here's another example of women hating women." But then it got me thinking "was there any truth in what she said?" While we would hate to admit it, there could be a grain of truth in what she said. I remember the countless times when I have heard a woman make a less than flattering comment about another woman's appearance.