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“The Person Who Tortures Is Me” : Response to Sylvère Lotringer.

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Let me start by expressing my admiration for the writing of Sylvère Lotringer’s paper. It is novelistic, its trajectory takes us from the social, public image of Marguerite Duras as “sacred monster” into Joseph Conrad’s “heart of darkness:” the description in which her textual stand-in, a member of a Resistance cell, witnesses and participates in a scene of torture. That is to say, Thérèse-Marguerite performs like one of the occupying Nazis whom the Resistance fought. “The Person Who Tortures is Me:” I turn into the hateful Other. Or was I always that?

The comforting myth a history of political theory gives us is that we have abandoned violence in exchange for the protection society guarantees against all violence, thereby claiming for itself the exclusive right to legitimate violence. Violence thus disappears from the agenda, except, of course, for foreign wars outside and criminals within. But we, as subjects, are cleared of the problem of violence, thanks to the pact we made with the state, thanks to the social contract and the sacrifice of our own proclivities. We’ve turned the problem of violence over to the state; it’s no longer our concern.

Duras’ narrative sets that exchange in question. There was a time when the readiest explanation for the Fascist horrors was the *Rausch*, a possession by primitive, barbarian fury which overwhelmed both the rational strain of post-enlightenment culture, and the fundamental human ability to identify, or as we say, to empathize. The *Rausch* was a foreign element, a barbarian left-over in our psyche, reawakened by unacceptable speech acts and political propaganda. As an explanation of Fascist violence, it left the modern subject untouched. Duras points to more ordinary pleasures. Participatory violence against a helpless victim serves to knit the perpetrators into a collective

of pleasure and shame. This could turn into Georges Bataille's collective sacralization of violence, "but Thérèse isn't part of the group. For her this is a mental drama—what's happening in her mind." Observing the brutality of the body's repeated absorption of multiple blows, she does not share in Bataille's quasi-theological obsession with "convulsive communication" as access to some "impersonal reality." She observes, she witnesses—as does any writer—voyeuristically, ghoulishly deploying an exploitative gaze, waiting for the victim to "ejaculate" his truth so as to give his torturers a sadistic orgasm.

The art of writing is implicated, the aesthetic practice which is the sacred center of our own professional universe: what we "get off" on. Sylvère Lotringer notes that "something happened, something intense, disturbing, not quite accountable in rational terms, an event of sorts." Some "events" become more than episodes in a narrative, historical or fictional. They become the irruption of something unmeasured, which changes the consciousness we have of ourselves, of our historicity, of our being. Moses' encounter with the burning bush: Christ on the Cross: the "event" of "revolution," whether the American, the French, or the Russian; the Middle Passage and slavery; the Holocaust; Hiroshima; all "events" that changed human history, and the consciousness with which we conceive it ever after. Duras, writing on the heels of the war and its Liberation, inscribes the "event" that identifies her with the Nazi horror. That identification offers itself to all survivors, to all who witness the Event through the mediations of history, of fictions, written and visual, to all those who come after: to us.

We hope that identification with the hateful other is false. We do not want to imagine ourselves capable of inflicting torture, of turning into *tortionnaires*. We reject that identification, and rightly so, but with a revulsion that is suspicious. The depth of the repugnance we feel marks its potential for being true. The intensity of negation marks the force of the negated. Whether we actually would be capable of torture, of what Elaine Scarry has called "the unmaking of a world" is—at some level—not the issue. As it is not the issue, for me, whether Marguerite's identification with Thérèse is

historically true or not.¹ The strength of our negation signals the sense that in spite of culture, education and ethics, the Nazi horror marked a human potential that is ineradicable. A potential that is shameful.

It is not necessary to actually *be* guilty, and to consciously acknowledge it, in order to feel shame. I certainly don't know anyone without a personal reason for shame, but the enormity of shame which inhabits our civilization suggests another dimension. The ambiguity of subjectivity has been noted by all authors, certainly from Althusser on (you knew Althusser would show up somehow or other). Giorgio Agamben, comments that the continent called “Auschwitz” considers shame to be “the hidden structure of all subjectivity.”² Shame is being faced with what cannot be assumed, what cannot be taken on. This unassumability of what is most intimate, insistent in the ego's irreducible presence to itself, is the repugnance of shame. Witness to its own *débâcle*, its own loss, the subject's shame is this double movement: subjectivation and desubjectivation at the same time.³

Duras, as Sylvère Lotringer reads her, performs the writer's highest function. In my Middle Ages (you knew that too would come in at some point!) the writer's highest function was the composition of texts as “mirrors of princes”—princes being the only full subjects at the time. Today, in our democratic state of theory, we are all subjects: the writer's mirror mirrors us all. Duras projects herself, in the fullness of her shame, as our mirror of a subjectivity which, as a survivor, cannot but be shameful. The last words of Sylvère Lotringer's paper are the quotation: “Thérèse starts to cry.” For herself. For us. But why?

* * *

We export the *notion* of violence, either into foreign wars or an ideologeme of criminality which still defines it as foreign to the subject. We lull ourselves into believing in the exile of violence, and are surprised each time it returns to the foreground of experience and the news: police assassinations and rapes of African-Americans and Hispanics; the devastations caused by

our own supposedly peaceful foreign policies; or on the home front, the pain we ourselves cause, as frequently out of cowardice, we think, as aggressivity. We are horrified, and our horror disculpabilizes our negative identification with the perpetrators.

No one thought as long, as hard, as frequently, about human aggressivity as did Sigmund Freud. Addressing Christian ethics, the mandate to love one's neighbor as oneself, he considers it both "the strongest defense there is against human aggressiveness and... a superlative example of the unpsychological attitude of the cultural super-ego. The command is impossible to fulfill; such an enormous inflation of love can only lower its value and not remedy the evil."⁴ The very mention of the super-ego takes us to the heart of the paradox. The super-ego, in Freud, is the vehicle of cultural values such as those of peace, of brotherly love, of neighborly love. It is also a ferociously aggressive task-master which violences the pitiable ego, which can never live up to the super-ego's demands. The psychic agency of peace *through self-control* does its job by perpetuating violence against the subject.

Freud's own discourse repeats the paradox, more than once. In 1933, he deploys military metaphors of war to represent humanity's desperate need to temper aggression with love: "Restriction of the individual's aggressiveness is the first and perhaps the severest sacrifice *which* society requires of him." The institution of the super-ego which takes over the dangerous aggressive impulses, introduces a *garrison*, as it were, "into regions that are *inclined to rebellion*..."⁵ The image recurs three years later: "Civilization...obtains the mastery over the dangerous love of aggression in individuals by enfeebling and *disarming* it and setting up an institution within their minds to keep watch over it, like a garrison in a *conquered City*."⁶ Its authority is internalized in the super-ego as conscience and a sense of guilt: "The aggressiveness of conscience carries on the aggressiveness of authority."⁷

Does the same paradox attach to the process of sublimation, the transformation of unacceptable drives into socially acceptable forms, such as art and representation? On the

basis of Freud's own texts, it often appears that fighting fire with fire, fighting violence with violence, is the only mode available against our inexhaustible aggressivity: representation itself, and repression, as a necessary violence. If that's not the only mode, it is an inevitable one. The other mode Freud looks to with some hope is not geared towards the exclusion of violence ("there is no use in trying to get rid of man's aggressive inclinations") or its transformations.⁸ Instead, Freud looks to the diversion of aggressive impulses to substitute objects, in part through education,⁹ and above all, by the complex process in which eroticism is extended beyond a single object choice to "bind mankind into a closely knit mass"—through the process of identification—the potential Rousseau called *pitié*. But this is not a simple optimism, since mankind "can achieve this aim only by means of its vigilance in fomenting an ever-increasing sense of guilt."¹⁰ We're back with the super-ego and its guilt: "the price of progress in civilization is paid in forfeiting happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt."¹¹

In an earlier text, dating from the First World War, Freud had voiced what Max Weber would call, a few years later, "the disenchantment of the world,"¹² when he uses the heart-wrenching phrase, "this once lovely and congenial world."¹³ Was this world ever "lovely and congenial?" Was it ever innocent of violence? Or did it, in its very best of moments, live and survive only thanks to the fusion of love and aggression which Freud thinks is the best we can hope for, the ethical hybridity of a polluted mixture of emotions which condemns us to guilt and shame? Luckily the aggressive instincts are never alone but always alloyed with the erotic ones. These latter have much to mitigate and much to avert under the conditions of the civilization which mankind has created.¹⁴

An intelligent polity is one which recognizes the problem of violence and attempts to cope with it. The Peace Movement of the tenth and eleventh centuries attempted to limit the aggressive depredations of the mounted warriors called "knights." Medieval monarchy began the long process of recentralization and territorial control in the 12th century, incorporating these elements of violence as officers both of peace and of the army.

We inherit the political problematics of violence from the Middle Ages, repressing what the earlier period was fully conscious of: the ineradicable potential for aggression against others, especially when Othered. We also inherit a secular ideology, which grew out of a historical context defined as the necessities of political recentralization and the requirements, not to eradicate violence, but to subordinate the violences of knighthood. That was the love-poetry of the troubadours and the trouvères, whose representations of warrior-knights perpetually on their knees in submission to women as absolutely dominant was utterly unrealistic, utterly non-representative, and hence inherently violent to some sense of social truth, and which yet gave them the symbolic practice of a submitted violence.

Which leads me to two conclusions:

1. Welcome to the twenty-first century as continuation of what Braudel might have called the “long Middle Ages,” and
2. Let's hear it, for the pollutions of love!

Peter Haidu, UCLA.



NOTES

¹ Elaine Scarry. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

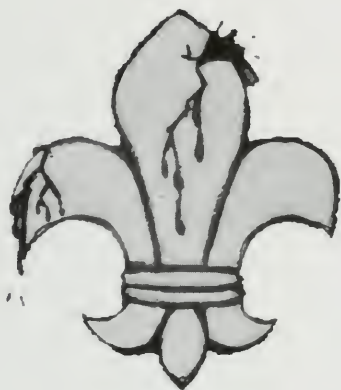
² Giorgio Agamben. *Ce qui reste d'Auschwitz: l'archive 1985.et le témoin*. Tr. Pierre Alferi. Paris: Payot et Rivages, 1999 (169).

³ *Ibid.*, 136.

- ⁴ Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Tr. Joan Riviere. Chicago: University of Chicago (repr. from Hogarth Press), (138)
- ⁵ Freud, Sigmund. “Anxiety and Instinctual Life,” *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. New York: Norton, 1966 (574).
- ⁶ *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 105.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 113.
- ⁸ Freud, “Why War?” *Character and Culture*. Ed. Philip Rieff. New York: Collier, 1963 (143).
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 144.
- ¹⁰ *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 121.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 123.
- ¹² Max Weber. “Science as a Vocation.” *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Ed. H.H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills. NY: Oxford, 1946/58 (155).
- ¹³ Freud, “Reflections Upon War and Death.” *Character and Culture* (121).
- ¹⁴ Freud, “Anxiety and Instinctual Life.” *New Introductory Lectures* (576).

Murder, Massacre, Mayhem:

The Poetics of Violence in French Literature and Society



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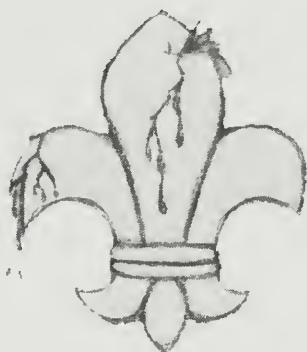
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*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais,
Le Quart Livre

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