

University for the Creative Arts
Research Project Portfolios

Reading (Story of) O and Ode (owed) to O

By Emmanuelle Waeckerlé



Project Details

| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Name of Researcher: | Emmanuelle Waeckerlé |
| Name of Output: | <i>Reading (Story of) O and Ode (owed) to O</i> |
| UCARO link/s: | https://research.uca.ac.uk/view/projects/O.html |
| Output Type: | T – Other; multi-component output comprising experimental book, performance and audio artwork |
| Year and mode of dissemination: | 2015, <i>Reading (Story of) O</i> , Uniformbooks. ISBN 9781910010075 2017, <i>Ode (owed) to O</i> , a double CD released by Edition Wandelweiser Records, related text scores and their performance by various ensembles |
| Contributors: | Written and composed by Waeckerlé, performed by Andre O. Moeller, Antoine Beuger, Alissa Cheung, Josten Myburgh, Sandra Schimag, Samuel Vriezen, Emmanuelle Waeckerlé, aperiodic ensemble, APTL ensemble. |
| Key Words: | Experimental music, experimental writing, poetry, text score, spoken word |
| Funding: | Uniformbooks funded the publication; editing, design, production, distribution. Wandelweiser funded the CD; recording, mastering, design, distributing. |

Synopsis

‘Reading (*Story of*) *O* and *Ode (owed) to O*’ is a multi-component research output comprising a book of experimental writing and an audio artwork released on CD. The audio artwork has been further disseminated in the form of text scores and performances.

In the book, *Reading (Story of) O*, Waeckerlé’s research aims to make sense of erotic literature, as a woman and an artist, by bringing together the fascinating publishing history of *Story of O*, the erotic French novel first published (pseudonymously) in 1954, with a graphic reworking of the text in both English and French and instructions for durational

public readings. *Ode (owed) to O* continues this research through an audio work and related text scores. The various reading strategies applied to the original text and its meta history transform a piece of erotic literature into a series of conceptual writing works, text scores and then into experimental music.

This portfolio includes evidence of the research aims, context and processes which led to new insights. It also includes images of the materials, readings and performances. It is accompanied by a PDF of the book and files of the audio work.

Context

Waeckerlé's practice emerges between text and performance, between the page and the body, through Fluxus-like poetic text scores, artist publications and their activations through installations and performances. Her work proposes alternative ways of engaging with our interior or exterior landscape, and each other. 'Reading (*Story of*) O and Ode (*owed*) to O' marks the first time that she has based a project on an existing piece of literature, prompted by the fascinating history of this work that began as a series of private love letters.

Story of O (1954), was written by French author Anne Desclos using the pen name Pauline Réage. The work originated when Declos wrote a series of daring love letters to her lover Jean Paulhan, famous literary critic, publisher, and director of the literary magazine *Nouvelle Revue Française*, a little-known fact that was only revealed 40 years later, decades after the various critical essays on the work by Susan Sontag and others.

Reading (Story of) O makes public Waeckerlé's personal readings of *Story of O* and the story of its writing, while creating a path for others to find their own way through this challenging text. The CD *Ode (owed) to O* makes public personal and collective readings and performings of the new reworked texts, by Waeckerlé and other researchers, including musicians and readers.

The project is located amongst precursors which also rework notorious works in the context of experimental writing. These include John Cage's 'Empty Words', a text and performance drawn from the journals of Henry David Thoreau, and

Cornelius Cardew's 'The Great Learning', experimental compositions based upon the writing of the same name by Confucius. Waeckerlé's research may also be situated amongst more recent 'word events' such as those by Ryoko Akama and Manfred Werder which have been theorised by John Lely and James Saunders (2012), and the experimental writings of Caroline Bergvall and Lisa Robertson.

'Reading (*Story of*) O and Ode (*owed*) to O' thus touches upon various research themes. It explores the notion of the (artist's) book as a time-based media, often representing the beginning or the end of something else, as defined by Ulises Carrión (1980). The scores and their performances expand on Simon Morris's (2016) concept of reading as an artistic practice as well as Kenneth Goldsmith's (2011) seminal concept of 'uncreative writing' strategies of reworking existing texts. The research also engages with the subversive practice of *écriture féminine* as explored by Hélène Cixous (1976), as Waeckerlé considers erotic literature as a patriarchal language.

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Reading (Story of) O

Emmanuelle Waeckerlé

Reading (Story Of) O (2015), cover

him, by opening her as one opens a horse's mouth to prove that it is young enough, that Sir Stephen found her beautiful enough or, strictly speaking, suitable enough for him, and vouchsafed to accept her. However offensive and insulting his conduct may have been, O's love for René remained unchanged. She considered herself fortunate to count enough in his eyes for him to derive pleasure from offending her, as believers give thanks to God for humbling them.

But, in Sir Stephen, she thought she detected a will of ice and iron, which would not be swayed by desire, a will in whose judgment, no matter how moving and submissive she might be, she counted for absolutely nothing, at least till now. Otherwise why should she have been so frightened? The whip of the valets' belt at Roissy, the chains borne almost constantly had seemed to her less terrifying than the equanimity of Sir Stephen's gaze as it fastened on the breasts he refrained from touching. She realised to what extent their very fullness, smooth and distended on her tiny shoulders and slender torso, rendered them fragile. She could not keep them from trembling, she would have had to stop breathing. To hope that this fragility would disarm Sir Stephen was futile, and she was fully aware that it was quite the contrary: her proffered gentleness cried for wounds as much as caresses, fingernails as much as lips. She had a momentary illusion: Sir Stephen's right hand, which was holding his cigarette, grazed their tips with the end of his middle finger and, obediently, they stiffened further. That this, for Sir Stephen, was a game, or the guise of a game, nothing more, or a check, the way one checks to ascertain whether a machine is functioning properly, O had no doubt.

Without moving from the arm of his chair, Sir Stephen then told her to take off her skirt. O's moist hands made the hooks slippery, and it took her

fait. Elle voyait encore un autre signe de ce que l'on ne pouvait guère appeler que de la déférence envers Sir Stephen dans le fait que René, qui aimait si profondément la voir sous les corps ou les coups d'autres que lui, qui regardait avec une si constante tendresse, une si inlassable reconnaissance sa bouche s'ouvrir pour gémir ou crier, ses yeux se fermer sur les larmes, l'avait quittée après s'être assuré, en la lui exposant, en l'entrouvrant comme on entrouvre la bouche d'un cheval pour montrer qu'il est assez jeune, que Sir Stephen la trouvait assez belle ou à la rigueur assez commode pour lui, et voulait bien l'accepter. Cette conduite, outrageante peut-être, ne changeait rien à l'amour d'O pour René. Elle se trouvait heureuse de compter assez pour lui pour qu'il prît plaisir à l'outrager, comme les croyants remercient Dieu de les abaisser. Mais, en Sir Stephen, elle devinait une volonté ferme et

glacée, que le désir ne ferait pas fléchir, et devant laquelle jusqu'ici elle ne comptait, si émouvante et si soumise qu'elle fût, pour absolument rien. Autrement pourquoi aurait-elle éprouvé tant de peur? Le fouet à la ceinture des valets à Roissy, les chaînes presque constamment portées lui avaient semblé moins effrayantes que la tranquillité du regard que Sir Stephen attachait sur ses seins qu'il ne touchait pas. Elle savait combien sur ses épaules menues et la minceur de son buste leur lourdeur même, lisse et gonflée, les faisait fragiles. Elle ne pouvait arrêter leur tremblement, il aurait fallu cesser de respirer. Espérer que cette fragilité désarmerait Sir Stephen était futile, et elle savait bien que c'était tout le contraire: sa douceur offerte appelait les blessures autant que les caresses, les ongles autant que les lèvres. Elle eut un instant d'illusion: la main droite de Sir Stephen, qui tenait sa cigarette,

two tries before she succeeded in undoing the black faille petticoat under her skirt.

When she was completely rolled down flat above her knees, accentuating the delicate lines of her legs and the whiteness of her thighs, Sir Stephen, who had also gotten to his feet, seized her loins with one hand and pushed her toward the sofa. He had her kneel down, her back against the sofa, and to make her press more tightly against it with her shoulders than with her waist, he made her spread her thighs slightly. Her hands were lying on her ankles, thus forcing her belly ajar, and above her still proffered breasts, her throat arched back.

She did not dare look Sir Stephen in the face, but she saw his hands undoing his belt. When he had straddled O, who was still kneeling, and had seized her by the nape of the neck, he drove into her mouth. It was not the caress of her lips the length of him was looking for, but the back of her throat. For a long time he probed, and O felt the suffocating gag of flesh swell and harden, its slow repeated hammering finally bringing her to tears. In order to invade her better, Sir Stephen ended by kneeling on the sofa, one knee on each side of her face, and there were moments when his buttocks rested on O's breast, and in her heart she felt her womb, useless and scorned, burning her. Although he delighted and reveled in her for a long time, Sir Stephen did not bring his pleasure to a climax, but withdrew from her in silence and rose again to his feet, without closing his dressing gown.

"You are easy, O," he said to her. "You love René, but you're easy. Does René realise that you covet and long for all the men who desire you, that by sending you to Roissy or surrendering you to others he is providing you with a string of alibis to cover your easy virtue?"

"I love René," O replied.

effleura, du bout du médius, leur pointe, qui obéit, et se raidit davantage. Que ce fût pour Sir Stephen une manière de jeu, sans plus, ou de vérification, comme on vérifie l'excellence et la bonne marche d'un mécanisme, O n'en douta pas. Sans quitter le bras de son fauteuil, Sir Stephen lui dit alors d'ôter sa jupe. Sous les mains moites d'O, les agrafes glissaient mal, et elle dut s'y reprendre à deux fois pour défaire, sous sa jupe, son jupon de faille noire. Lorsqu'elle fut tout à fait nue, ses hautes sandales vernies et ses bas de nylon noir roulés à plat au-dessus de ses genoux, soulignant la finesse de ses jambes et la blancheur de ses cuisses, Sir Stephen, qui s'était levé aussi, la prit d'une main au ventre et la poussa vers le sofa. Il la fit mettre à genoux, le dos contre le sofa, et pour qu'elle s'y appuyât plus près des épaules que de la taille, il lui fit écarter un peu les cuisses. Ses mains reposaient contre ses chevilles, ainsi

son ventre était-il entrebâillé, et au-dessus de ses seins toujours offerts, sa gorge renversée. Elle n'osait regarder au visage Sir Stephen, mais voyait ses mains dénouer la ceinture de sa robe. Quand il eut enjambé O toujours à genoux et qu'il l'eut saisie par la nuque, il s'enfonça dans sa bouche. Ce n'était pas la caresse de ses lèvres le long de lui qu'il cherchait, mais le fond de sa gorge. Il la fouilla longtemps, et O sentait gonfler et durcir en elle le bâillon de chair qui l'étouffait, et dont le choc lent et répété lui arrachait les larmes. Pour mieux l'envahir, Sir Stephen avait fini par se mettre à genoux sur le sofa de part et d'autre de son visage, et ses reins reposaient par instants sur la poitrine d'O, qui sentait son ventre, inutile et dédaigné, la brûler. Si longuement que Sir Stephen se complût en elle, il n'acheva pas son plaisir, mais se retira d'elle en silence, et se remit debout sans refermer sa robe. « Vous êtes facile, O, lui



Ode (owed to) O (2017), CD inside cover

Research Aims and Questions

Research aims:

To both question and perpetuate the literary journey of an infamous literary work, from love letters to erotic literature to conceptual writing and concrete poetry (Reading (Story of) O), to verbal score and experimental music (Ode (owed) to O); an act of Deleuzian deterritorialisation of language to another form

To revisit and reconnect the original story and its little-known publishing history (critically, conceptually, poetically) while giving opportunity to others to do so too

To question the use of erotic language by women, who in doing so risk perpetuating female objectification and sexual violence, be it in and as fiction

To propose writing strategies to somehow redeem O from her inevitable end, to free O from language altogether

To find creative ways to deal with such toxic writing, individually and collectively

To revisit and pay homage to the life and work of a great feminist, writer and lover, Ann Desclos (Pauline Réage)

Research questions:

How and why would a woman write such story or go through such a journey of self-destruction as that chosen by O in the name of love?

Could the researcher undertake a similar journey and if so for whom?

Can pornographic or erotic language be read differently and become poetry or music in the process?

Research Methods and Process

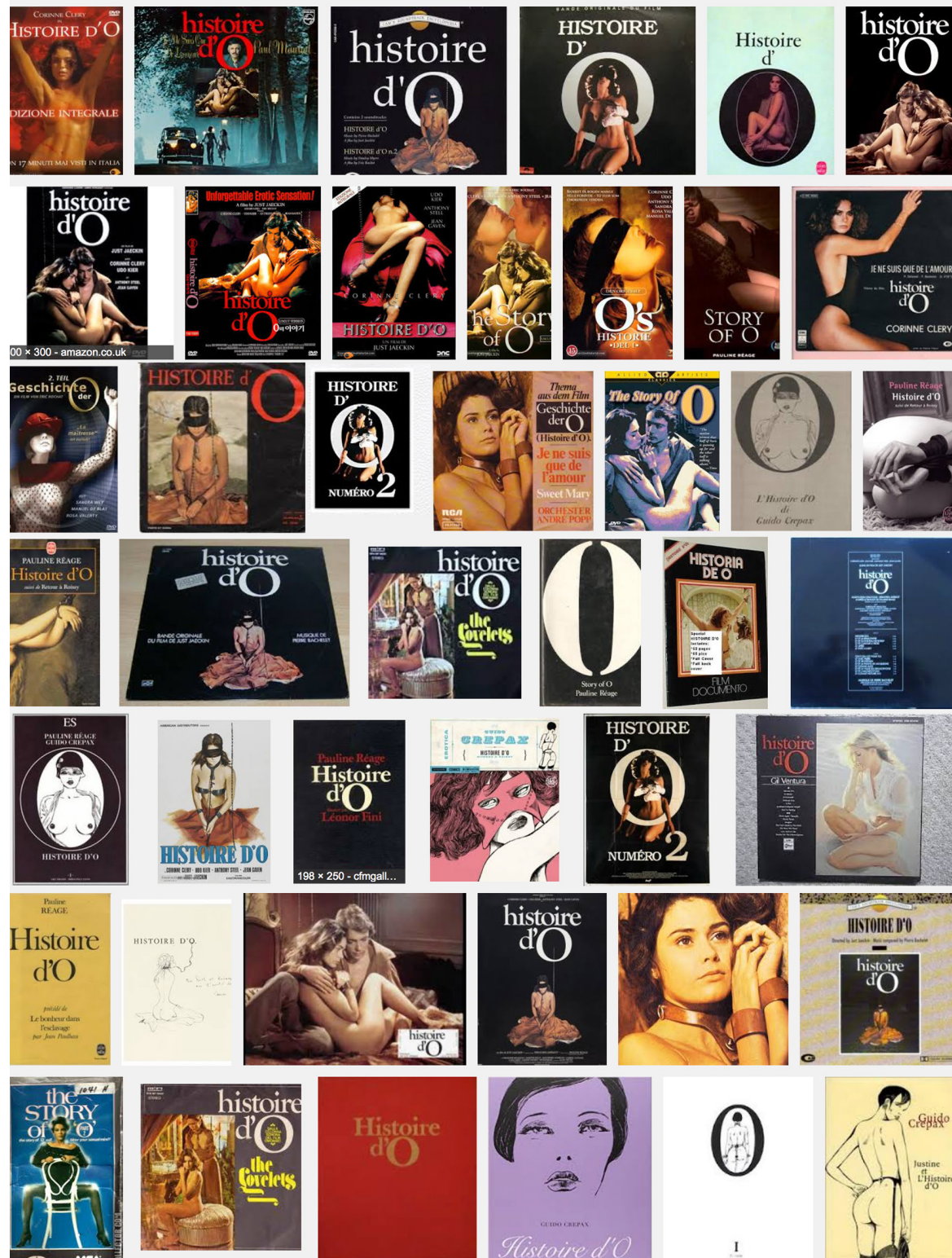
Waeckerlé used a variety of research methods to create 'Reading (Story of) O and Ode (owed) to O', including a literature review, archival research, deconstruction, recontextualization, reading workshops, public readings and re-performance.

Reading (Story of) O (2015) reprints in parallel both English and French versions of the text in a graphic reworking of the original story. This recontextualises the famous work of erotic literature by reconnecting it with its peculiar and little-known history, re-situating it as a series of love letters and radically transforming the established history and meaning of the work.

This was achieved through a process of deconstructing, rewriting and comparing the parallel histories of A (the author), O (the character), and E (the reader). The research process took 5 years: to secure the publishing rights for both the French and English text; to compile and analyse

an extensive bibliography of sources; to find detailed evidence of how and why the author did not reveal herself and the personal love story behind the work; to make sense of it and share it in such a way that others could find their own answers, avoiding the perpetuation of female objectification and sexual violence inherent in such literature.

Reading (Story of O) provides a score for private or public collective readings which was then developed to become *Ode (owed) to O* in 2017. This was achieved through performing the score from *Reading (Story of O)* as well as three new text scores, 'O(nly)', '(story of)' and 'O(hhh)'. These scores poetically strip O of the toxic language that enslaves her, performed by voice and instruments and recorded as a double CD of experimental music. The research thus provides other ways to deal with such writing publicly and collectively, giving it another kind of intimate attention.



Various book covers of
The Story of O (1954)

Her lover one day takes O for a walk in a section of the city where they never go—the Montsouris Park. After they have taken a stroll in the park, and have sat together side by side on the edge of a lawn, they notice, at one corner of the park, at an intersection where there are never any taxis, a car which, because of its meter, resembles a taxi.

"Get in," he says.

She gets in. It is autumn, and coming up to dusk. She is dressed as she always is: high heels, a suit with a pleated skirt, a silk blouse, and no hat. But long gloves which come up over the sleeves of her jacket, and in her leather handbag she has her identification papers, her compact, and her lipstick.

The taxi moves off slowly, the man still not having said a word to the driver. But he pulls down the shades of the windows on both sides of the car, and the shade on the back window. She has taken off her gloves, thinking he wants to kiss her or that he wants her to caress him. But instead he says:

"Your bag's in your way; let me have it."

She gives it to him. He puts it out of her reach and adds:

"You also have on too many clothes. Unfasten your stockings and roll them down to above your knees. Here are some garters."

By now the taxi has picked up speed, and she has some trouble managing it; she's also afraid the driver may turn around. Finally, though, the stockings are rolled down, and she's embarrassed to feel her legs naked and free beneath her silk slip. Besides, the loose garter-belt suspenders are slipping back and forth.

"Unfasten your garter belt," he says, "and take off your panties."

That's easy enough, all she has to do is slip her hands behind her back and raise herself slightly. He takes the garter belt and panties from her, opens her bag and puts them in, then says:

"You shouldn't sit on your slip and skirt. Pull them up behind you and sit directly on the seat."

The seat is made of some sort of imitation leather, which is slippery and cold: it's quite an extraordinary sensation to feel it sticking to your thighs. Then he says:

"Now put your gloves back on."

The taxi is still moving along at a good clip, and she doesn't dare ask why René just sits there without moving or saying another word, nor can she guess what all this means to him—having her there motionless, silent, so stripped and exposed, so thoroughly gloved, in a black car going God knows where. He hasn't told her what to do or what not to do, but she's afraid either to cross her legs or press them together. She sits with gloved hands braced on either side of her seat.

"Here we are," he says suddenly. Here we are: the taxi stops on a lovely avenue, beneath a tree - they are plane trees—in front of some sort of small private home which can be seen nestled between the courtyard and the garden, the type of small private dwelling one finds along the Faubourg Saint-Germain.

Research Insights and Contribution

Waeckerlé is the first researcher to have attempted a critical reading of this infamous work in the light of its fascinating and little-known publishing history. This leads to a reappraisal of the work, not just as erotic literature but as part of a lover's discourse and *écriture féminine*.

The imaginative scope and conceptual rigour with which an infamous and significant piece of erotic literature has become a series of scores of experimental music brings new insight to current research on experimental writing and reading practices, and in experimental music. The work provides ways to deal with such writing publicly and collectively. The conceptual writing and reading strategies employed by Waeckerlé in both the book, the text scores and the CD have managed to bridge the gap between

language and music and between the artist, the writer and the composer.

The conceptual writing and reading strategies also bring new insight to current research and the practice of *écriture féminine* through an appropriation, critique and transformation of erotic language and the way it is normally consumed, by proposing another form of 'erotic practice of language' (Barthes, 1973) and being together that does not rely upon or involve sexual violence and female objectification.

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Reading (Story Of) O collective
reading at Klangraum, Dusseldorf,
2015

Research Dissemination and Recognition

Dissemination:

PUBLICATIONS

Reading (Story of) O was published by Uniformbooks, a UK publisher for the visual and literary arts, chosen for the quality of their book design and their interest in artist publishing, concrete poetry and typography. A publisher with this background was essential to support the intricacy of this project. The book is distributed by Central Books and available in specialised and gallery bookshops in the UK and Europe.

The book has also been disseminated through:

An extract in *Uniformmagazine*, Vol 1 Autumn (2014), ISSN 2056-6301.

An extract in *New Concrete: An Anthology of Contemporary Concrete Poetry* (Hayward Publishing, 2015).

An exhibition and collective reading in *Klangraum*, Dusseldorf, July 2015.

Waeckerlé's paper 'Reading (Story of O): Does a story ever end?' for *The End of the Book* conference, Bristol University, 18th November 2016.

The *Reading (Story of O)*, 'O(nly)' and 'O(hh)' scores are now part of a number of public artist books collection such as V&A, UWE and CDLA (France).

AUDIO WORK

Ode (owed to) O has been released by EWR (Edition Wandelweiser Records), one of the most established and recognised labels of experimental music connected to an eponymous international network of highly influential composers and musicians. It is distributed by Wandelweiser, Squidco (US), Soundhom (Europe), as are the scores since December 2019: https://www.wandelweiser.de/_emmanuelle-waeckerle/catalogue.html

Research Dissemination and Recognition

Dissemination:

AUDIO WORK (cont.)

The work was also performed at:

Klangraum 2017 in Düsseldorf. It was performed by John Eyles, Ryan Dohoney, Alex Mah, Andre O. Moeller (voices), Assaf Gidron (cello) and Antoine Beuger (flute).

Café Oto in London on 22 February 2018 as performed by Antoine Beuger, John Eyles, Sarah Hughes, Petri Huurinainen, Charlotte Keefe, Will Montgomery, Artur Vidal and Emmanuelle Waeckerlé.

Chicago's Frequency Festival by a.pe.ri.od.ic ensemble, on 22 April 2018.

A Place to Listen, James Bay church, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada by A Place to Listen Ensemble in 2019.

The *Music and/as Process Conference 2018*, Edinburgh Napier University, alongside Waeckerlé's conference paper 'Spoken/Written Language in the construction of new music/performance/creative work'.

Follow-on-activities:

PRESS AND AWARDS

Reading (Story of) O has been reviewed by Leigh Wilson in March 2016 in Contemporary Small Press online magazine: <https://thecontemporarysmallpress.com/2016/03/09/womens-lit-from-the-small-press-2/>

The book was part of Derek Beaulieu's list of '10 Most Engaging Books of 2015', alongside works by John Cage, Kenneth Goldsmith and Craig Dworking: <https://derekbeaulieu.wordpress.com/2015/12/11/most-engaging-books-of-2015/>

It also won one of the prizes for 'Must Have Book' at Arts Libris international book fair in Barcelona in April 2016, selected by the curator of the Mexico Museum of Modern Art.

Research Dissemination and Recognition

Follow-on-activities:

INVITATIONS

Waeckerlé has been invited to perform future versions of the work in London and America, and to send the scores to be performed by existing experimental music ensembles.

Waeckerlé has been invited to be one of the 3 recurring composers of the annual Wandelweiser International Composers Meet Composers mentoring residency (Austria).

Based on the success and impact of this CD (Waeckerlé's first on the international music scene) Wandelweiser has proposed a second release, of her current work-in-progress, 'a direction out there, readwalking (with) Thoreau'. This is a new textual and music work based on Henri David Thoreau's transcendental lecture-turned-essay 'walking' (1851). In Waeckerlé's intervention it has become conceptual poetry with an accompanying score for reading, walking, performing.

This work and other text scores have been the focus of an MA thesis in music composition (Bath Spa University, Alex Mah), a submitted PhD thesis (Canterbury Christ Church University, Sophie Stone) and another PhD in progress (University of Western Australia, Jameson Feakes). Waeckerlé has been invited to give papers and run workshops at NorthWestern University, Bath Spa University's Open Score Research Lab and Napier University, Edinburgh.

She is solicited for private mentoring by composers interested in the use of language and a multidisciplinary approach to experimental music and vocal work (Bin Li, New York; Max Bober, Poland; Lottie Sad, UK) and is commissioned for text scores (Thea Mesirow and Aaron Foster Breylan, US).



Ode (Owed to) O,
recording session



Ode (owed to) O in performance at Klangraum, Dusseldorf, 2017



Ode (owed to) O in performance in Chicago, 2018



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Research Portfolios

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Graphic Design:

Studio Mothership

rough a peephole came... that when the
o women returned, one was carrying a dressmaker's tape measure and
other a basket. With them came a man dressed in a long purple robe
es of which were gathered at the wrists and full at the shoulders.
alked the robe flared open, from the waist down. One could see t
th his robe he had on some sort of tights which covered his leg
but left the sex exposed. It was the sex that O saw first, when
step, then the whip, made of leather thongs, which he had
Then she saw that the man was masked by a black hood—
d even his eyes behind a network of black gauze—and, fir
so wearing fine black kid gloves.

ne familiar *tu* form of address, he told her not to move
n to hurry. The woman with the tape then took the m

Emmanuelle Waeckerlé

Reading (Story of) O

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First published 2015
ISBN 978-1-910010-07-5

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Produced with financial support from



Uniformbooks

7 Hillhead Terrace, Axminster, Devon EX13 5JL
www.uniformbooks.co.uk

Trade distribution in the UK by Central Books
www.centralbooks.com

Printed and bound by T J International, Padstow, Cornwall

Preface

This project took a few years of meandering, sporadic experiments and preliminary research before finding its elusive purpose and form and would not exist without the insight and support of many who have helped me along the way, willingly or unwillingly.

I would like to thank, in chronological order, my parents for giving me a biblical name (that became the title of a famous film inspired by *Histoire d'O*) and for introducing me (inadvertently) to the book as a teenager. Paul Harkin for a thought provoking and retroactive birthday present, George Perec for his wonderful book *La Disparition* that inspired some of my initial semantic strategies, Thomas Evans and David Connearn for great conversation and constructive feedback (as always) and for giving me the courage and the confidence to get to the bottom, so to speak, of this difficult work. David Rule and Sandra Schimag for guiding my first attempts at reading (*Story of*) *O* in public. Antoine Beuger for his clarity of mind and spirit, generous attention, fantastic insights on love, language, reading, and for introducing me to Alain Badiou. Anup Mathew Thomas for taking the only photograph of VINST's back¹ that became retroactively and uncannily fitting for the cover of this book. Peter Jaeger for mentioning the work of Lisa Robertson at exactly the right time. Michael Hampton for lending his eyes and sharp mind to the final stages of my writing. Colin Sackett for trusting me to find a way through, a golden thread, and for his wonderful touch with typography and page design. And UCA research fund for helping to make this publication possible.

¹ VINST (2002–09) is a part-human part-digital vocal instrument. It consists of the artist's body image displaying points of sonic sensitivity. Audiences were invited to engage in non-verbal dialogue with this vocal and virtual self. The sounds are pre- or non-linguistic, and are based on how the body reacts to touch and how it produces sound.
www.ewaeckerle.com/projectbox/VINST
www.ewaeckerle.com/projectbox/portraits-of-vinst/

(Reading) O

Sitting in our own little world our eyes wander between what we see what we know and what we seek, heart and mind hovering in-between. Some words speak to us more than others. We pick one, caress it with our breath, just enough to make it ours. We search for another and another, *our self-consciousness temporarily abolished by the vertigo of another's language.*

...and, laying her down upon a table, possessed her, now the one, now the other. THE END. A, the author, suggests another ending in italic; *seeing herself about to be left O preferred to die, to which he gave his consent.* Twenty years after writing the last words of *Histoire d'O*, A wrote a sequel, *Retour à Roissy*, and a preface *une fille amoureuse*. A did this while watching over and sitting next to her dying lover in hospital. Forty years later E read *Story of O* again and again, seeking a path through it as if through her own story, seeking a path from A to O to E to you. Pulled by compulsion and desire, she wrote (Story of) A, (Story of) E, and (Story of) O. Does a story ever end?

On the first page of (*Story of*) *O* you will see black letters and grey ones. You will imagine the words they form addressed to you. Or perhaps you remember writing them. But to whom? You may have already read *Histoire d'O* (in French or in translation) and have a certain intuition of what lies ahead. You may know that what you hold in your hands was originally written in pencil over three months, late at night as a long love letter to an absent lover. *Il y a toujours en nous quelqu'un que nous-mêmes nous enchainons, que nous enfermons que nous faisons taire.*¹

Perhaps you are at home alone or there are a few of you, 2, 3, 4, 5 or more, sitting comfortably not too close, at arms length, with a clear view of each other. Alone yet together, you are reading aloud to yourself, your mouth moving, seeking O, caressing each and every word containing her, just enough to make it yours, your voice barely audible to those nearby. You may want to listen for a while to the murmur of other words echoing yours, perhaps repeating some, echoes of your own. Every now and then a word you encounter speaks to you more than others, so that pulled by compulsion or desire, you (raise your voice and) release it for all to hear, before resuming your whispering pursuit of O. This does not happen often, two or three times per page perhaps depending on your temperament or mood. You may want to use page numbers to guide you, each single digit representing the maximum number of loud utterance of words containing traces of O; 3 on page 3, 2 or 5 on page 25, 7 or 9 on page 79 etc.. Others may be present watching, listening. *Il faut un complice pour ce genre d'écriture, comme il faut un complice pour ce genre d'action.*²

This time you are alone with an audience, sitting or standing, looking for O in (*Story of*) *O*. Your eyes and your mouth are roaming and searching

for the exact sound of O in every word, hesitating, discarding: O repeatedly disowned, abandoned, by her lovers, by A and her lover, by E, by you. Your voice only picks words containing perfect Os, releasing her page after page, as if she were being pronounced for the last time. All ears are suspended between echoes and premises of O, unbound for a moment, the inevitable fate of A, of E, of O, of you. Knowing that love is not the first desire that fixes it, or the hazardous gestures bringing (or not) two minds and two bodies together, but the waiting and doing in between that first spark (un regard / un geste / une lettre)³ and a full stop.

O go stroll
notice no

1 There is always inside of us somebody whom we keep in chains, locked up, whom we silence.

2 One needs an accomplice for such writing, as one needs an accomplice for such actions.

3 (a glance / a gesture / a letter)

(Story of) A: *amour*

Every night for three months, parents and son sound asleep nearby, A wrote in her notebook, *lying on her side with her feet tucked up under her, a soft black pencil in her right hand... the girl was writing the way you speak in the dark when you've held back the words of love too long and they flow out at last. For the first time in her life, she was writing without hesitation without stopping rewriting or discarding; she was writing the way one breathes or dreams... she was still writing when the street cleaners came by at the first touch of dawn; Scheherazade of the 20th century.*

He was the love of her life in body and mind, she 46, he married and in his 60s. Their affair lasted over three decades. They were working together for a high-profile publishing house, meeting secretly in her old car, at the zoo, in parks, in hotels, rarely able to spend a night together. He was a prominent editor, writer and critic, she a respected author, translator (of Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot and Yukio Mishima among others) and the only female member of a reading committee which decided the fate of many writers. They shared a passion for erotica, though he believed it wasn't something women could write. *Une fille amoureuse dit un jour à l'homme qu'elle aimait; moi aussi je pourrais écrire de ces histoires qui vous plaisent...*¹ They had been together for a long time and she feared being discarded for a younger model. His appetite for the opposite sex was notorious, yet she didn't mind as long as his interest in her remained. *I find that, when one loves someone, what is unbearable, is that he leaves you, that he quits; the fact that he may have an interest in someone else, is not that serious providing that he stays, that he does not leave you, providing that he comes back, that he still loves you, that he does not abandon you...* So every night for three months, lying on her bed, parents and son sound asleep nearby, A wrote to him.

Every morning she delivered the next episode of her love letter, a potent fiction capable of satisfying her insatiable lover, perhaps impressing or even shocking him. There was no draft, she kept no copies. Her heady words spoke in the same breath of love, submission, selflessness, pain, violence, through the sort of repetitive sex acts you find in hard core pornography. In writing those words that are rarely spoken she could express her deepest feelings with dignity, her appetite for extreme sensations safely. Only because of her love for him could she do so.

He was captivated, so much so that he used his influence to get the story published, his only demand was for her to change one word: 'sacrificial'. How could she refuse this double consecration of their love and her talent? She chose a pseudonym to protect their connection, position and entourage, he wrote the postface, printed at the end of the book to better conceal perhaps his response to her (story of) love. *Histoire d'O is surely the most fiercely intense love-letter a man could receive... It is as if you were twined-nature or as if the person whom the letter is intended were at every moment so near, so present that you borrowed his tastes, assumed his voice. But what kind*

(Story of) E: envie

of woman and who are you?... A dreamer and no more? Or is this a lady of wide experience who has dwelt a time in this strange world. How did you invent it?...

They became accomplices bound by a big secret. *Histoire d'O*, the fruit of their affair became a controversial bestseller. *Considering that this book means to retrace the adventures of a young woman who, to please her lover, subjects herself to any erotic phantasm and any torture. Considering that this book, violently and consciously immoral, where debauchery scenes with two or more characters alternate with scenes of sexual cruelty, contains an appalling and condemnable germ, and thus is an outrage to good customs. We are of the view that there is a case for trial.*

Despite a prosecution case, intense speculation and several people recognising her writing style, A remained anonymous for over four decades, until just four years before her death in 1998. *Few could believe that such extreme imagination could have come from such a small unassuming woman, almost 'nun-like' in her appearance according to some. As her parents and lover were long dead, there was no need to continue protecting them from scandal, yet she saw no reason to come out with the truth. Who I am finally, if not the long silent part of someone, the secret and nocturnal part which has never betrayed itself in public by any thought word or deed, but communicates through subterranean depths of the imaginary with dreams as old as the world itself?*

She knew that love is not found in the first desire, or the hazardous gestures bringing together two minds and two bodies, but in the waiting and doing in between that first spark (un regard / un geste / une lettre)² and a full stop. And beyond...

¹ *A girl in love, once told the man she loved; I could also write the kind of stories you like...*

² (a glance / a gesture / a letter)

For the past four years E read *Story of O*, looking for traces of A's love in O's actions, of O's love in A's life and in her life. What she found were a few coincidences and memories.

A and E are alive because once there was love. O exists because A was in love once and alone. So was E when she started to write '(Story of) A'.

A and E need love to bear life. Unlike A, E never married. There were opportunities but she always felt she had too much on her mind to become a wife. E is now middle-aged, like A when she wrote O, a fact she finds hard to believe, perhaps because she has no children; there were opportunities but she never felt grown-up enough. Besides, her childhood had not been a happy one and she was too afraid of replicating it.

A and E are bilingual, they write and play with words for a living. A once boasted she read all of Proust every year for five consecutive years, E once read *A la recherche du temps perdu* in one go for five hours every day, one volume after the other. It took three months, the same time it took A to write the love letters that became *Histoire d'O*.

A was introduced to erotic literature as a teenager by her father. Evidently, he had a great collection. E first came across *Histoire d'O* at the age of thirteen, when every night, lying on her bed, parents and siblings sound asleep nearby she enjoyed writing in her diary, imaginary tales of forbidden love involving herself. E knew nothing of erotic literature or sex, she was concerned by love though. Her stories were so realistic that her father, coming across her diary, read it, confiscated it and punished her severely. E remembers him slapping her twice, confining her to her room for the rest of the day and ordering her to sweep the farm courtyard or one of the barns, she cannot recall which exactly.

E had accidentally discovered physical pleasure around the age of ten. She was fooling around in a water reservoir on the farm where she grew up in Morocco, straddled across the inner tube of an old tractor's tyre used as a water toy. She remembers the first time very clearly, an overwhelming and uncontrollable rush of warm energy invading her body from inside. The violent sensation scared her at first, yet she soon learnt how to recreate it at will in the pool, and in private. She had no idea her bodily experiments constituted sexual activity. She didn't have a name for them, never looked for one, being more concerned with the mysteries of French kissing: looking for clues in every film or book, to find out what happens once two mouths are joined: were they closed or open and if so what was to be done with the tongue?

A few years later, in 1975, E came across *Histoire d'O* (when it was made into a film by the director of *Emmanuelle* the movie). On the occasion of its release major extracts of the book were published in the literary supplement of the Saturday edition of *L'Express*, a conservative weekly news magazine that her parents had read all their life. There was a national scandal, Catholics and the MLF (Mouvement de Liberation de la Femme)

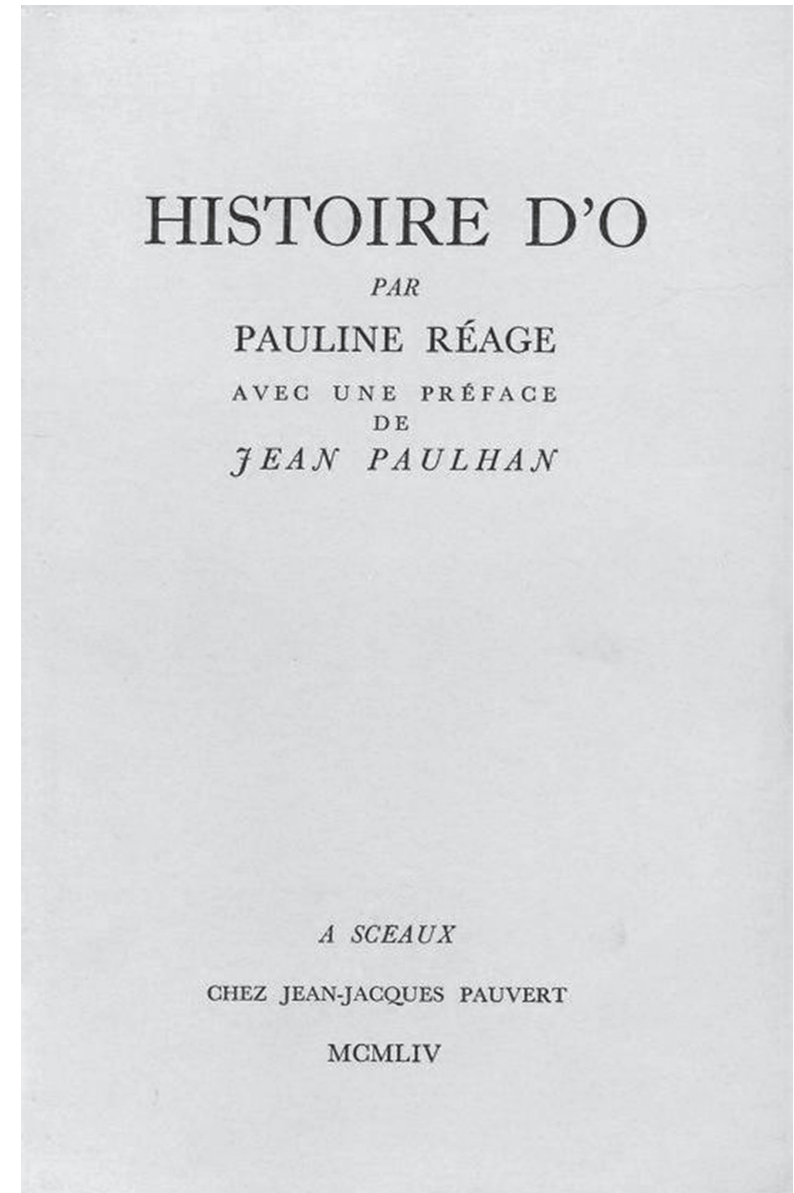
demonstrated hand-in-hand in front of cinemas. At the time E was on a rare family holiday in Cap d'Agde in the south of France. She was intrigued by the few film stills she had managed to sneak a glance at before her parents hid the supplement under their bed, so that when it was time to go to the beach she faked a headache, borrowed it from its hiding place and locked herself in the bathroom of their holiday apartment. *Histoire d'O*, referred to by the editor of *L'Express* as erotic literature, and by others as scandalous filth, had a profound and equally confusing effect on E when she found out, to her great surprise, that reading it triggered very familiar sensations. She knew instantly what needed to be done, having had a lot of practice since the first time in the pool, her favourite technique of the moment being with a shower hose after her daily bath. This was totally exciting and confusing. E could now combine her love of reading with some wonderful sensations. Yet, how could her pleasure be triggered by the violence inflicted upon O? And how could such pain and humiliation be given and received in the name of love? Big questions for a thirteen-year-old. E could ask no one. Furthermore despite being well accustomed to the art of self-satisfaction, the mysteries of French kissing remained unresolved.

Forty years later E stumbled upon Susan Sontag's *The Pornographic Imagination* in an old copy of Georges Bataille *Story of the Eye*, that a significant lover gave her for her thirty-fifth birthday. This led E to discover some fascinating facts online about *Histoire d'O*. It was initially written as a series of love letters, the anonymous writer keeping her identity and that of her lover secret until long after his death. E is reminded of her first encounter with it and decides to read it again this time in English beginning with the lover's introduction, recognising his feelings safely concealed within his public consecration of the work... *inconceivable decency... that great wind of fanaticism... that pure and violent spirit... This is one of those books that marks the reader—which do not leave him entirely, or at all, such as he was before. I listen to her and clearly recognize that she is not lying. I strive to follow her.* E reads *Story of O* again and again seeking a path through it as if through her own story. She finds it as arousing and difficult to comprehend as the first time. She may have mastered the art of kissing but never has she told the ones she loved, *I could also write the kind of stories you like...*

Forty years later, A and her lover are dead. E is middle-aged. Her parents are dead. There is no scandal, nobody to protect apart from herself so she writes '(Story of) A' and '(Story of) E' in her notebooks, seeking a path from A to E to O, hesitating, comparing, discarding, rewriting. E is no longer sure whom she is writing to or why. She knows that love is not the first desire that fixes it, or the hazardous gestures trying to bring two minds and two bodies together, but the waiting and doing in between that first spark (un regard / un geste / une lettre)¹ and a full stop. And maybe beyond...

1 (a glance / a gesture / a letter)

(Story of) O / *Histoire d'O*



Translated from the French by Sabine d'Estrée

The Lovers of Roissy / *Les amants de Roissy*

Her lover one day takes O for a walk in a section of the city where they never go—the Montsouris Park, the Monceau Park. After they have taken a stroll in the park and have sat together side by side on the edge of a lawn, they notice, at one corner of the park, at an intersection where there are never any taxis, a car which, because of its meter, resembles a taxi.

“Get in,” he says.

She gets in. It is autumn, and coming up to dusk. She is dressed as she always is: high heels, a suit with a pleated skirt, a silk blouse, and no hat. But long gloves which come up over the sleeves of her jacket, and in her leather handbag she has her identification papers, her compact, and her lipstick.

The taxi moves off slowly, the man still not having said a word to the driver. But he pulls down the shades of the windows on both sides of the car, and the shade on the back window. She has taken off her gloves, thinking he wants to kiss her or that he wants her to caress him. But instead he says:

“Your bag’s in your way; let me have it.”

She gives it to him. He puts it out of her reach and adds:

“You also have on too many clothes. Unfasten your stockings and roll them down to above your knees. Here are some garters.”

By now the taxi has picked up speed, and she has some trouble managing it; she’s also afraid the driver may turn around. Finally, though, the stockings are rolled down, and she’s embarrassed to feel her legs naked and free beneath her silk slip.

Besides, the loose garter-belt suspenders are slipping back and forth.

“Unfasten your garter belt,” he says, “and take off your panties.”

That’s easy enough, all she has to do is slip her hands behind her back and raise herself slightly. He takes the garter belt and panties from her, opens her bag and puts them in, then says:

Son amant emmène un jour O se promener dans un quartier où ils ne vont jamais, le parc Montsouris, le parc Monceau. À l’angle du parc, au coin d’une rue où il n’y a jamais de station de taxis, après qu’ils se sont promenés dans le parc, et assis côte à côte au bord d’une pelouse, ils aperçoivent une voiture, avec un compteur, qui ressemble à un taxi. « Monte », dit-il. Elle monte. Ce n’est pas loin du soir, et c’est l’automne. Elle est vêtue comme elle l’est toujours: des souliers avec de hauts talons, un tailleur à jupe plissée, une blouse de soie, et pas de chapeau. Mais de grands gants qui montent sur les manches de son tailleur, et elle porte dans son sac de cuir ses papiers, sa poudre et son rouge. Le taxi part doucement, sans que l’homme ait dit un mot au chauffeur. Mais il ferme, à droite et à gauche, les volets à glissière sur les vitres et à l’arrière; elle a retiré ses gants, pensant qu’il veut l’embrasser, ou qu’elle le caresse. Mais

il dit: « Tu es embarrassée, donne ton sac. » Elle le donne, il le pose hors de portée d’elle, et ajoute: « Tu es aussi trop habillée. Défaites tes jarretelles, roule tes bas au-dessus de tes genoux: voici des jarrettières. » Elle a un peu de peine, le taxi roule plus vite, et elle a peur que le chauffeur ne se retourne. Enfin, les bas sont roulés, et elle est gênée de sentir ses jambes nues et libres sous la soie de sa combinaison. Aussi, les jarretelles défaites glissent. « Défait ta ceinture, dit-il, et ôte ton slip. » Cela, c’est facile, il suffit de passer les mains derrière les reins et de se soulever un peu. Il lui prend des mains la ceinture et le slip, ouvre le sac et les y enferme, puis dit: « Il ne faut pas t’asseoir sur ta combinaison et ta jupe, il faut les relever et t’asseoir directement sur la banquette. » La banquette est en molleskine, glissante et froide, c’est saisissant de la sentir coller aux cuisses. Puis il lui dit: « Remets tes gants maintenant. » Le taxi roule toujours, et elle

“You shouldn’t sit on your slip and skirt. Pull them up behind you and sit directly on the seat.”

The seat is made of some sort of imitation leather which is slippery and cold: it’s quite an extraordinary sensation to feel it sticking to your thighs. Then he says:

“Now put your gloves back on.”

The taxi is still moving along at a good clip, and she doesn’t dare ask why René just sits there without moving or saying another word, nor can she guess what all this means to him—having her there motionless, silent, so stripped and exposed, so thoroughly gloved, in a black car going God knows where. He hasn’t told her what to do or what not to do, but she’s afraid either to cross her legs or press them together. She sits with gloved hands braced on either side of her seat.

“Here we are,” he says suddenly. Here we are: the taxi stops on a lovely avenue, beneath a tree—they are plane trees—in front of some sort of small private home which can be seen nestled between the courtyard and the garden, the type of small private dwelling one finds along the Faubourg Saint-Germain. The street lamps are some distance away, and it is still fairly dark inside the car. Outside it is raining.

“Don’t move,” René says. “Sit perfectly still.”

His hand reaches for the collar of her blouse, unties the bow, then unbuttons the blouse. She leans forward slightly, thinking he wants to fondle her breasts. No. He is merely groping for the shoulder straps of her brassiere, which he snips with a small penknife. Then he takes it off. Now, beneath her blouse, which he has buttoned back up, her breasts are naked and free, as is the rest of her body, from waist to knee.

“Listen,” he says. “Now you’re ready. This is where I leave you. You’re to get out and go ring the doorbell. Follow whoever opens the door for you,

and do whatever you’re told. If you hesitate about going in, they’ll come and take you in. If you don’t obey immediately, they’ll force you to. Your bag? No, you have no further need for your bag. You’re merely the girl I’m furnishing. Yes, of course I’ll be there. Now run along.”

Another version of the same beginning was simpler and more direct: the young woman, dressed in the same way, was driven by her lover and an unknown friend. The stranger was driving, the lover was seated next to the young woman, and it was the unknown friend who explained to the young woman that her lover had been entrusted with the task of getting her ready, that he was going to tie her hands behind her back, unfasten her stockings and roll them down, remove her garter belt, her panties, and her brassiere, and blindfold her. That she would then be turned over to the château, where in due course she would be instructed as to what she should do. And, in fact, as soon as she had been thus undressed and bound, they helped her to alight from the car after a trip that lasted half an hour, guided her up a few steps and, with her blindfold still on, through one or two doors. Then, when her blindfold was removed, she found herself standing alone in a dark room, where they left her for half an hour, or an hour, or two hours, I can’t be sure, but it seemed forever. Then, when at last the door was opened and the light turned on, you could see that she had been waiting in a very conventional, comfortable, yet distinctive room: there was a thick rug on the floor, but not a stick of furniture, and all four walls were lined with closets. The door had been opened by two women, two young and beautiful women dressed in the garb of pretty eighteenth-century chambermaids: full skirts made out of some light material, which were long enough to conceal their feet; tight bodices, laced or hooked in front, which sharply accentuated the bust line; lace frills around the neck; half-length sleeves. They were wearing eye

n’ose pas demander pourquoi René ne bouge pas, et ne dit plus rien, ni quelle signification cela peut avoir pour lui, qu’elle soit immobile et muette, si dénudée et si offerte, si bien gantée, dans une voiture noire qui va elle ne sait pas où. Il ne lui a rien ordonné, ni défendu, mais elle n’ose ni croiser les jambes ni serrer les genoux. Elle a ses deux mains gantées appuyées de chaque côté d’elle, sur la banquette.

« Voilà », dit-il tout à coup. Voilà: le taxi s’arrête dans une belle avenue, sous un arbre—ce sont des platanes—devant une sorte de petit hôtel qu’on devine entre cour et jardin, comme les petits hôtels du faubourg Saint-Germain. Les réverbères sont un peu loin, il fait sombre encore dans la voiture, et dehors, il pleut. « Ne bouge pas, dit René. Ne bouge pas du tout. » Il allonge la main vers le col de sa blouse, défait le nœud, puis les boutons. Elle penche un peu le buste, et croit

qu’il veut lui caresser les seins. Non. Il tâtonne seulement pour saisir et trancher avec un petit canif les bretelles du soutiengorge, qu’il enlève. Elle a maintenant, sous la blouse qu’il a refermée, les seins libres et nus comme elle a nus et libres les reins et le ventre, de la taille aux genoux.

« Écoute, dit-il. Maintenant, tu es prête. Je te laisse. Tu vas descendre et sonner à la porte. Tu suivras qui t’ouvrira, tu feras ce qu’on t’ordonnera. Si tu n’entras pas tout de suite, on viendrait te chercher, si tu n’obéissais pas tout de suite, on te ferait obéir. Ton sac? Non, tu n’as plus besoin de ton sac. Tu es seulement la fille que je fournis. Si, si, je serai là. Va. »

Une autre version du même début était plus brutale et plus simple: la jeune femme pareillement vêtue était emmenée en voiture par son amant, et un ami inconnu. L’inconnu était au volant, l’amant assis à côté de la

jeune femme, et c’était l’ami, l’inconnu, qui parlait pour expliquer à la jeune femme que son amant était chargé de la préparer, qu’il allait lui lier les mains dans le dos, par-dessus ses gants, lui défaire et lui rouler ses bas, lui enlever sa ceinture, son slip et son soutiengorge, et lui bander les yeux. Qu’ensuite elle serait remise au château, où on l’instruirait à mesure de ce qu’elle aurait à faire. En effet, une fois ainsi dévêtue et liée, au bout d’une demi-heure de route, on l’aidait à sortir de voiture, on lui faisait monter quelques marches, puis franchir une ou deux portes toujours à l’aveugle, elle se retrouvait seule, son bandeau enlevé, debout dans une pièce noire où on la laissait une demi-heure, ou une heure, ou deux, je ne sais pas, mais c’était un siècle. Puis, quand enfin la porte s’ouvrait, et que s’allumait la lumière, on voyait qu’elle avait attendu dans une pièce très banale et confortable et pourtant singulière: avec un

épais tapis par terre, mais sans un meuble, tout entourée de placards. Deux femmes jeunes et jolies, vêtues comme de jolies servantes du dix-huitième siècle: avec de longues jupes légères et bouffantes qui cachaient les pieds, des corselets serrés qui faisaient jaillir la poitrine et étaient lacés ou agrafés par-devant, et des dentelles autour de la gorge, et des manches à demi longues. Les yeux et la bouche fardés. Elles avaient un collier serré autour du cou, des bracelets serrés autour des poignets.

Alors je sais qu’elles ont défait les mains d’où qui étaient toujours liées derrière le dos, et lui ont dit qu’il fallait qu’elle se déshabillât, et qu’on allait la baigner, et la farder. On l’a donc mise nue, et on a rangé ses vêtements dans un des placards. On ne l’a pas laissée se baigner seule, et on l’a coiffée, comme chez le coiffeur, en la faisant asseoir dans un de ces grands fauteuils qui basculent quand on vous