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Histoire(s) de Catherine M.: Echoes of “O” and the Difference of “I” in La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.

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“Plus je détaille mon corps et mes actes, plus je me détache de moi-même.” -Catherine Millet, *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.*

Abstract

This article compares Catherine Millet’s *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* (2001) to another work of erotic “fiction:” Pauline Réage’s *Histoire d’O* (1954). The scandal surrounding the publication of both works focused on the taboo subject of sexuality, and more significantly, on the role of the female author in writing such a graphic work. While Réage’s fictional account of one woman’s sexual experiences is told through a third-person narrator, Millet describes her own experiences in the first-person. However, the continual multiplication of this first-person narrator complicates a reading of her work that would presuppose that one is reading an autobiographical account. Instead, this contemporary work of “erotobiography” foregrounds woman’s quest for identity tied to sexuality.

Catherine Millet’s autobiography, *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.*, caused a stir when it was first published in 2001. Indeed, this particular text stands in stark contrast to Millet’s other writings—her critical analyses of modern art—and remains difficult to situate in any single literary domain, begging the question of the author’s intention and identity in her role as narrator of her sexual life history. Should one consider this novel a work of erotic fiction or an autobiography? This article explores the melding of autobiography and the erotic performance of narration which transforms the narrator, Catherine M., into a sexual persona of her life story—a project which I term “erotobiography.” The author’s recollections of her sexual experiences disrupt the generic conventions of autobiography, and, in so doing, allow her to stage her identity in such a way as to reveal a carefully crafted role within the narrative that extends beyond the fictional work.

The controversy encompassing Millet’s text is reminiscent of the scandal that surrounded another work of erotic fiction—indeed a landmark text in the history of erotic literature—which tied questions of authorship to the erotic, even “pornographic,” nature of female-authored fiction: Pauline Réage’s *Histoire d’O*, first published in 1954. By considering the striking parallels between the female authors/protagonists and the textual production of both texts, one will note the important difference in Millet’s work, which marks a turning point in the authorship and narration of female-authored erotic fiction in contemporary women’s writing in France. *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* not only serves as a literary echo of Réage’s fiction but also, as Millet’s own identity is so explicitly displayed and called into question, illustrates one of the dominant projects of contemporary female authorship in which the domain of fiction has been appropriated in the quest for self-knowledge. In Millet’s work, female identity now extends beyond the boundaries of the pseudo-fictional narrative and remains anchored to the question of, and quest for, woman’s identity in relation to her sexual subjectivity.

Like Millet's text, the scandal following the publication of *Histoire d'O* had less to do with the graphic subject matter, including explicit descriptions of elaborate sadomasochistic orgies, than with the mystery surrounding the author's gender and identity. The public disbelieved that a novel exploring masochistic desire and female sexuality could have been written by a woman and assumed it was written by Jean Paulhan, the author's lover, whose preface "*Le bonheur dans l'esclavage*" begins and frames the erotic tale. It is no coincidence that the narrator of Millet's text, Catherine M., makes a tongue-in-cheek reference to this earlier work, describing the similarities she shares with this notorious heroine of erotic fiction, O. In both narratives the women lead a double life in contemporary Parisian society as their personal and private sexual lives remain divided from their professional, artistic careers: O as a fashion photographer and Catherine M. as an art critic and editor of Art Press. This juxtaposition—between public and private—raises the question of the place, space and the relationship of fantasy to the domain of "scripted" reality within the parameters of fiction.

In a larger context, Millet's text exemplifies a marked tendency in contemporary women's writing in France in which the boundaries between autobiography and fiction have become increasingly blurred. The often-cited literary corpus of Christine Angot, whose novels continually describe the incestuous relationship between the first-person narrator and her father, is one example of the graphic nature of these contemporary texts narrated from the perspective of a first-person female voice. The ambiguous generic nature of Millet's work in particular, hinging as it does on an already complicated narrative voice, has greater implications in the scope of female-authored texts which foreground and problematize the author's subjective identity in relation to her sexual autonomy. This example of life-writing creates a narrative tension and plurality regarding woman as author and woman as fictional persona.

In their introduction to *Women's Writing in Contemporary France*, Gill Rye and Michael Worton discuss the generic and narrative difference in contemporary female-authored texts in which women's focus on their bodies in their writings represents a "staging of difference." They contend that the authorial control achieved through narrating woman's sexual body and experiences allows these authors the opportunity to regain control of their bodies, which are socially constructed, while transgressing social taboos in their respective search for "agency and autonomy." They write:

[In] the work of today's women writers, the personalizing of the body is no privatization or appropriation or manipulation of power through secrecy and overcoded referentiality. It is a staging of difference [...] As women take possession of their bodies and of what may or may not be done with them, they may choose to engage in sexual practices that not only express their liberation from oppressive norms but also challenge social conventions and defy established taboos. This enterprise is, it must be noted, not solely one of sexual

exploration or of the quest for (new) pleasure; rather it is a search for agency and autonomy (13-14).

The “staging of difference” in Millet’s text hinges precisely on the unstable first-person narrator—the deceptive “I” of autobiographical or autofictional literary accounts—and transforms the act of writing about sexuality and the body into a quest for origins. The writer becomes a persona outside of the fictional work: a subject and object of debate.

The oscillation between subject and object at the level of authorship is reflected in Millet’s text as Catherine M. continually asserts her autonomous and solitary existence which appears in contradiction to the plurality of her sexual escapades and the numerous social networks to which she belongs. By considering the author as both metatextual authority and intertextual character, the reader must therefore engage with a narrative voice that (pre)inscribes itself in the text as a dual identity—a fragmented subject whose reconstituted and often unreliable memories of “real” events necessarily problematize the voice of the narrator, the first-person “I” of writing. Who is the “real” Catherine Millet, and why does she wish to trace her life—from childhood memories through the present day—framed by her sexual experiences?

The genre of autobiography, as it foregrounds and complicates authorial identity engages the reader in a specific manner. In his seminal work, *Le pacte autobiographique*, Philippe Lejeune describes reading strategies particular to the genre of autobiography which guide one’s process of engagement with the text in terms of a “pact” between the author and the reader: “ Ce qui définit l’autobiographie pour celui qui la lit, c’est avant tout un contrat d’identité qui est scellé par le nom propre [de l’auteur] (33).” The reader enters into a reciprocal contract, which hinges solely on the proper name of the author. The author promises a certain amount of truth in narrating this life story and, in turn, solicits the reader’s belief of the events narrated in the text. While the autobiographical pact demands an amount of belief, the pact between the author and reader of a fictional work hinges instead on imagination. The reader agrees to envision the scenes, details and actions the author creates.

Lejeune also explains the function of metatextual elements which allow the reader to differentiate between an autobiographical work and a fictional work, key words which will shape the reading experience and code the work as autobiography: titles (i.e. *Souvenirs de . . .*, *Mémoires de . . .*, *Histoire de . . .*), words below the title (such as “*histoire*”) and/or the author’s prefatory comments about the text which follows. Millet’s text contains all three elements as evidenced in the title, *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.*, the author’s prefatory statement included in the 2002 edition, and the word “*récit*” which is placed immediately below the title. Based on Lejeune’s theory, then, one should consider Millet’s text as purely autobiographical. Lejeune writes: “[L]’autobiographie est le genre littéraire qui, par son contenu même, marque le mieux la confusion de l’auteur et de la personne [...] Le sujet profond de l’autobiographie c’est le nom propre (33).” Indeed, the self-referential scope of Millet’s text remains centered at the levels of authorship and narration on her name(s): Catherine Millet and Catherine M. However, let us reconsider the nature of the text as suggested in the ambiguous

word below the title: “récit.” How, then, do we negotiate the paradox between the title of the text which purports to be one’s life history and this type of fictional account?

Serge Doubrovsky coined the term “autofiction” in 1977 to refer to the psychoanalytic experience in the creative process of writing in which autobiographical and fictional elements are blended. The construction of “I” in a work of autofiction, he suggests, mirrors the reconstruction of the subject, the articulated “I” in analysis. This term is often applied to those literary works in which the first-person narrator/writer recounts one’s life story through the prism of fiction. The contradictions of autofictional texts encompass every aspect of literary engagement: at the level of writing, reading and literary analysis. It is within these textual contradictions, particularly in Millet’s text, that one might re-examine the nature of fictional autobiographies tied as they are to sexual scripts of female subjectivity. Indeed, Millet’s identity is itself fragmented, caught between her role as author of “reality” and character of “fiction” and reenacts the very contradictions inherent in the generic conventions of autofiction. Previous theories of autobiography and autofiction, as put forth by Lejeune and Doubrovsky respectively, are thus insufficient to explain the strategies of, and consequences, examining Millet’s text in which the act of writing about oneself depends largely on woman’s crafted identity in relation to her sexual experiences and fantasies which remain indissociable from the “reality” of the narrative events.

Let us return to the curious code word beneath the title of Millet’s text: récit. The dichotomous meaning of this term—having both factual and fictional connotations—offers a clue to the duality that will be played out in the text as it refers both to the process of factual narration—as in a story, document or report—as well as to memory, which is often an unstable account of the past. Woman’s identity in this work of pseudo-fiction is similarly doubled—split between the author’s distanced reflections about the process of writing this text written after the fact in the preface to the later edition and the reconstructed memories of Catherine M. within the space of the narrative. However, Millet’s text also works to reconstruct a liberated female identity devoid of shame, indeed a woman who is above the social dictates concerning “proper” feminine conduct particularly regarding female promiscuity. In this respect, *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* may be considered a potentially subversive text in its inability to adhere to a single literary genre while also doubling the identity of a single woman, Catherine Millet, whose narrative tone, or authorial voice, does not correspond to that which she narrates. Given the graphic description of sexual bodies, positions and scenarios, the reader might expect a certain affective response on the narrator’s part. Instead, the apathetic nature of the female narrator in relation to the graphic language and sexual frankness creates a further distance between the reader and the narrator. In other words, Millet’s sardonic narrative tone renders the innate confessional nature of autobiography a farce. While writing her sexual memoirs—memories about her actual past—Millet simultaneously plays with the idea of anonymous authorship by staging her role as author of her life story, thinly masking her true identity in the title of what announces itself to be her sexual history, the life story of “Catherine M.”

Millet's text makes explicit reference to an earlier work in the matrilineage of erotic fiction, *Histoire d'O*, a novel written by Dominique Aury under the pseudonym "Pauline Réage." Aury admitted only recently, in a rare interview with *New Yorker* magazine journalist John de Saint-Jorre that while she did in fact write *Histoire d'O*, her lover, Jean Paulhan, nonetheless played a key role in the writing process as the novel was written as a private letter to him. Saint-Jorre writes:

She was in her mid-forties at the time [during which *Histoire d'O* was written], and Paulhan was almost seventy. It was both a private document of their passion and une entreprise de séduction, designed to ensnare—her word—a highly sophisticated man. 'What could I do?,' she said to me as we sat talking one recent afternoon. 'I couldn't paint, I couldn't write poetry. What could I do to make him sit up?' (43).

In fact, Aury expressed her initial reticence in publishing this story, but did so at his request; therefore, what was meant to be a private gift to titillate, and in Aury's own terms, "ensnare" her lover in a game of seduction, was put on display at his urging. The very production of this novel, then, mirrors the events of the fictional narrative: a woman whose masochistic desire to please her lover—and gain his recognition and love—demands a certain self-renunciation. Likewise, Millet's husband, Jacques Henric's authorial contribution and participation to his wife's text takes form in a photographic addendum to *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.*, a collaboration to which I will return. Thus both women—wearing a mask of sorts in narrating a "life" story—have written sexually explicit tales of female sexuality for the benefit of their male love interests. However, Millet's text differs from Réage's work in several notable ways which suggest a turning point in the role of the first-person narrator in contemporary female-authored texts. Unlike Aury's desire to ensnare, seduce, and provoke her lover—thus eliciting some type of reaction to her erotic tale—Millet's erotobiography distances the reader and, in the hermeneutic space of the text, remains self-encompassing and self-reflexive, paradoxically highlighting her solitude in the public and publicized sexual acts necessary for her personal and private subjective development.

The title of Réage's work would also appear at first consideration to fall into the category of autobiography according to Lejeune's taxonomy—or, at the very least, of biography as the narrative voice is conveyed in third-person and purports to tell the (life) story of "O," the female protagonist. The question of woman's identity is therefore foregrounded in this earlier text—an interesting contradiction as this tale is by and large considered by critics and scholars as a work of pornography, a genre in which traditionally reality and subjectivity are superseded by fantasy. It would seem, therefore, almost paradoxical to conflate one's sexual fantasies with a search to define one's identity; yet, through O's masquerade of femininity, the question of her identity including her role as participant in the masochistic sexual orgies at Roissy is necessarily anchored in displays of sexual desire via a third-person narrator.

While an individual's "truthful" name functions linguistically to validate reality or, alternately, to inscribe reality into one's given identity, a pseudonym instead suggests a conscious choice to mask one's identity in order to remain anonymous and private while making a public statement. The deceptive nature of this nominal masking as a misnomer to true identity may be considered a form of authorial control. A pseudonym is a created or forged identity, a *nom de plume*, or a stage name where one's intention is inscribed in the fictional work in the process of nominal construction. There are, then, two pseudonyms in *Histoire d'O*: Pauline Réage as the author and O as the main character. Both monikers work to deceive the reader, keeping us in the dark about woman's true identity all the while purporting to enlighten us by sharing a fictional tale about one woman's sexual proclivities. In his article, "A Story of a Story of Story of O," Marius Scholtz describes the pseudonymous strategies at work in Réage's novel:

The pseudonym is therefore deceptive in two ways. Firstly, it guarantees anonymity, it conceals identity in order to escape social castigations. Secondly, the real name would be a pseudonym behind which the 'O' of identity is hidden since it cannot designate that identity (53).

By concealing identity in order to "escape social castigations," the process of naming and constructing an identity functions in the same way as a masquerade: outward appearance or behavior, while being aligned with social norms and expectations, also conceals contrary desires, which threaten established order. Masking is also an important element in the elaborately staged orgies. Both the metaphorical and literal masquerade of the female subject who paradoxically controls the narrative trajectory indicate an instability in O's identity—one that oscillates between masochist and sadist behavior, and socially designated "masculine" and "feminine" roles.

Psychoanalyst Joan Rivière notes that many women who seek to attain social power or status traditionally conferred on men, paradoxically don a "mask" of femininity as a way of over-signifying their socially designated "role" as "passive" partners. They do so in order to escape being chastised by men while at the same time allaying the latter's fears. Rivière's theory of the feminine masquerade, in which what is elaborately displayed and even overstated actually hides a hidden wish, evidences a play on concealment and exhibition which has particular relevance to both Réage's and Millet's text, a difference that marks Millet's writing endeavor as more transgressive than that of her literary predecessor. O's female masquerade is apparent in her increasingly hyper-feminine and, in terms of the narrative, more submissive choice of clothing. Her apparent masochistic desires, therefore, are another mask to hide her latent desire to dominate.

Like Catherine M., O participates in a system of sexual exchange. While "O" may be considered a submissive participant in the sadomasochistic rituals at Roissy, the narrative is nonetheless anchored to her perspective, thereby supporting Kaja Silverman's idea that *Histoire d'O* is a story of the construction of female subjectivity. Silverman asserts that O's existence in a coded semiotic system of symbols and signs

frames her body to be read by the male participants at Roissy: “[Female] subjectivity begins with the body, a body which is quite literally written” (327).

O’s body is continually marked and marred through the narrative, coded so that others may read her. One may consider, as Silverman does, the scars left from whips and lashes as that which “[constitute] her body as ‘readable’ through a system of writing” (337). These corporeal markings assign certain significance to O’s body and consequently allow her to be read and interpreted by those who know to interpret these marks as quotations on and around her body. Silverman’s astute remarks are well-taken; however, as a counterpoint, one might also interpret these corporeal markings as a narrative strategy to reflect O’s control of “her” narrative: O’s transformation from being physically dominated, or “written,” with literal inscriptions on the surface of her body to dominator, or “author,” of the narrative, forcing the reader to consider O’s active participation in these fictional events. O’s body, in addition to being a link in the system of sexual exchange—as she is passed from her lover René to his half-brother Sir Stephen, with whom she also falls in love—which occurs during these sadomasochistic rites, is, effectively, the foundation on which that system is grounded. Like the pseudonym under which it is written, *Histoire d’O* is the story of O, from O’s perspective and masked voice. In this earlier text, the quest for female subjectivity appears to coincide with woman’s quest to attain a certain amount of recognition, or power, in the very process of effacing herself. Through the scripting of her masochistic love story, Réage describes a theatrical performance of woman’s sexual role in the orgies and takes ownership of both the story and character she created in order to please and titillate, but also shock and ensnare, her lover Paulhan.

Millet’s authorial and narrative strategies both complement and differ from those of Aury/“Réage.” I propose that we “read” Catherine M. as a constructed character in a project that extends beyond the limits of Millet’s récit and spills over into another text, *Légendes de Catherine M.*, written by Millet’s husband Jacques Henric and published four months after Millet’s novel. The publicity this couple stirred around the revelations of one woman’s sexual past—in words and images—created a “legend” by the name of Catherine M. In that sense, both titles, *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* and *Légendes de Catherine M.*, foreground the lived experiences of a single, “legendary” woman. However, Henric doubly clarifies the definition of “légende” in an epigraph to his text as that which demands to be read—“ce qui doit être lu,”—and that which invests an image with a particular meaning—“tout texte qui accompagne une image et lui donne un sens”—thus shifting the scope of life-writing to an exercise in reading. Throughout *Légendes de Catherine M.*, Henric reflects on the tension and co-existence of words and images, a tension that is carried out in his text as he comments on his erotic photographs of Catherine M. “Qui signe ici ces photos, qui n’ont peut-être pas à être signées? Catherine? Moi? Nous deux, puisque j’ai cru bon de les entourer du cordon protecteur de l’écrit. [...] L’image laissée à elle-même est une vulgaire et dangereuse aguicheuse” (149). Thus Henric implicitly recognizes the limitations of the “image” as a dangerously false signature. Only writing can properly frame the image in order to reinvest it with some form of authenticity.

For her part, the “true” Millet writes her sexual history as an erotic performance of sexual identity which is (pre)supposed to be visualized in Henric’s text. However, in synch with Henric, Millet relies on the prism of fiction to re-create her “veritable” identity while emphasizing that the supposedly undeniable “proof” of the visual accorded in the photographic image fails to portray an objective image of herself. In *Légendes de Catherine M.*, Henric refers to the power of the photographic image in relation to the written word while also explaining his fascination with his wife as his legendary literary and visual muse. While Henric’s text relies on the written word to complete and, in his words “suture” the lack inherent in the photographic image, Millet’s memoirs assimilate the legend in her erotobiographical script:

Depuis trente ans, je photographie ce corps [...]. Une femme libre sans culpabilité est un joli cadeau pour un romancier. [...] Trente ans qu’elle est l’actrice centrale de ma vie, de mes livres. Tous les corps et toutes les existences de femmes qui habitent mes romans et mes essais ont été façonnés à partir d’elle (12).

Henric analyzes the dialectic relationship between the photographic image and the written word while also explaining his fascination with this “liberated” woman in a manner which evidences a level of proprietorship he extends to writing about and photographing “Catherine M.,” recuperating her body as the anchor to and for his writings. I agree with Alain Roger who considers Henric’s “pathetic” mania of constantly photographing his wife as a way of replacing and erasing her past sexual history:

Par la photographie, la multiplication des ‘prises,’ il compense et conjure celles des partenaires [...] [et] telle est sans doute la raison la plus profonde de cette manie épiphanique: exalter son épouse, mais aussi, et d’abord, se la réapproprier, envers et contre tous (924.)

Yet as we have seen, Henric is not duped by the power of photography, which allows a modicum of reappropriation of the photographed model. This recuperation is not only partial at the level of representation only but is also in need of supplementary comments at the level of writing.

There remains a tension, then, between Millet and Henric in narrating the liberation and liberating experience through sexual freedom of one woman’s sexual confessions and display of her body. For Henric, Catherine M. is the origin of his artistic creations as the body and “existence” of every woman throughout his writings has been fashioned after her likeness. Catherine M., then is “l’origine du monde”—the voice and genitals behind this contemporary display and recreation of Gustave Courbet’s painting of the same name and, consequently, a ground zero for Henric’s own fictions. Millet’s sexual “history” necessarily introduces the question of origin, specifically in relation to Henric’s novel. Catherine M., the legend, is “split” between two authors: Millet who recounts one woman’s sexual adventures and Jacques Henric who attempts to “capture” Catherine

M. in photography. Both texts disclose the identity of this persona with recourse to two distinct media: in words and images respectively. However, Millet's erotic performance achieved through the process of writing foregrounds her complex sexual identity and the complicated status of her subjectivity, which hinges on the instability of the first-person narrator. As the epigraph with which this article begins illustrates, the fictional authorial persona suggests that through the act of writing about her body and sexual experiences the author gains a detached view of her own subjectivity, or, alternatively, writes in order to understand something about herself that remains hidden—much like the negative of a photographic image—the reverse view of the photographs included in Henric's text. The difference between Millet's verbal description of her body and the objective "truth" evidenced in the photographs of Henric's text plays a central role in woman's search for and articulation of autonomous identity that is verbally staged in counterpoint to Henric's text. For instance, Millet reveals particular details about her physical appearance—that, like her sexual partners, she admires her posterior while not thinking highly of her small breasts or "average" face—in a manner of fragmentary self-fetishization which suggests a textual reappropriation of her body in order to re-subjectify what remains otherwise objectified in Henric's photos. Her nudity, which is ever-present in Henric's photos, serves another purpose in Millet's text: Catherine M.'s nudity both reveals and hides. Indeed, Catherine M. recognizes the contradiction in her preference to being naked where she feels protected than to being dressed when she is vulnerable to those around her.

Millet's response to readers first appeared in the literary review *L'infini* and was included in the 2002 edition of *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* as a sort of post-facto preface entitled "Pourquoi et Comment." The title of this authorial afterthought, or a retrospective appraisal of her writing devoid of any marks of interrogation, constitutes Millet's response to critics. However, in the very act of justifying her reasons for writing this sexual memoir, Millet (the author) seems to be at odds with the otherwise apathetic Catherine M. who, in speaking about others' criticisms of her project, declares herself "libre:" "*La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* se veut avant tout un témoignage, c'est-à-dire, à proprement parler, un texte destiné à établir une vérité, la vérité d'un être singulier bien sûr" (ix). One will note a particular distance in Millet's reference to this legendary character as "un être singulier," both a "unique" and also "single" person—creating a sexual persona. However, her desire to reveal such intimate moments, and the insistence on the verity of the account, may paradoxically serve to deny the sexual narrative. In this prefatory statement Millet links the written documentation of the récit with a "relation spéculaire à soi." The word "spéculaire," referencing a mirror image, has particular relevance to the introspective and performative writing of the text in which woman's sexual life and body is examined. As Luce Irigaray reminds us, the etymology of this term, deriving from the Latin *speculum*, is also the term for the mirror used to penetrate and examine the female genitals in a gynecological exam. Millet's writing about her own "origine du monde" is a rather clinical examination of her sex devoid of titillation. If, then, writing this autobiography should reflect a mirror image of the author, her own erotic performance as the sexual persona Catherine M. functions instead as a failed mirror, creating a fragmented identity that becomes evident when Millet states: "Maintenant je regarde l'auteur de Catherine M. comme celui-ci a pu regarder son sujet,

et je ne m'identifie plus complètement ni avec l'un ni avec l'autre" (ii). Millet's reflection in this "post" preface evokes a schizophrenic distance between herself (as author) and herself as her own subject and object of study; however neither role provides a sufficient conduit for her own identity. While Millet describes a complex subjectivity, she also refers to herself using the demonstrative pronoun "celui-ci" referring back to the masculine-gendered noun "auteur." If Millet can no longer identify with the author or the object of study (herself), then the duality between author and narrator now becomes a triad author/narrator/character.

Millet's masculine identification is further reflected in her choice of language as she describes sexual acts and body parts in a more obscene and pejorative fashion that is typically spoken by men about women: "[J'ai compris] d'emblée que je n'appartenais pas à la classe des séductrices, et que par conséquent ma place dans le monde était moins parmi les autres femmes, face aux hommes, qu'aux côtés des hommes" (16). If, as I mentioned, the text itself is one-half of a larger project partnered alongside that of Henric's image-text, Millet nonetheless appropriates her exploits at the level of writing, and challenges the reader's prurient interest in reading a book that at face value lends itself to be "read" as pornography. Elisabeth Ladenson, for example, describes the complex nature of Millet's literary style wherein her "relentless descriptions of orgies . . . [convey] an impression of solipsism, as though Millet were writing for her own pleasure and against that of the reader" (87). Ladenson sees in Millet's style of writing—the solipsism—a direct challenge to the reader "to appropriate her pleasure in the service of his own" (87). The solipsistic manner in which Millet describes her numerous exploits is in many ways a paradox: for the most part, her male partners remain anonymous, reduced to their sexual parts, while her solitude and solitary pleasure in multiple orgies is foregrounded but always in relation to her own reflections on writing.

The structure of the text reflects this tension between singular and plural. Millet searches for continuity in her sexual pleasure, a sexual stability that is independent of, indeed impeded by, the permanent presence of a single man. There is continual reference to the plurality of bodies that is juxtaposed with the singularity of her own experiences, her aforementioned "single" and "unique" existence. She insists on the thematic structure of the work lending a sense of continuity rather than a chronology while categorizing her sexual past in order to establish a coherence which is mirrored in the continuum of sexual networks necessary to satisfy her preference for "numbers." In the first chapter, entitled "*Le nombre*," Millet reveals that as a girl, she would lull herself to sleep by counting the number of husbands she might one day have and if she would be married to them simultaneously or successively. Similarly, her numerous male partners will be both successive and simultaneous and are, as she describes, un réseau. The idea of community, or network, is continually referenced in this work in relation to the orgies (in which she claims to engage in relations with upwards of one-half of the 150 participants on a given night), a circle (bodily positions during these exchanges), a chain (succession) and family (including her "family" of intellectuals and artists with whom she works). Millet prefers the plurality of bodies and partners to singularity in her sexual experiences, a penchant that stems from her adolescent sexual fantasies and preoccupation with "numbers" before she lost her virginity. In this manner,

her fantasies precede and shape these sexual networks in which she becomes one body in a system of exchange. How does Millet articulate her freedom in her own story if she is also an object of exchange? I believe the answer lies, once more, in the persona Catherine M., a role that she both accepts from others' perceptions of her uninhibited and transgressive persona and appropriates through the "I" of narration.

The distance between Catherine Millet and Catherine M. is particularly evident when the author writes:

Je pense faire preuve de la même disponibilité, et l'exténuation tient moins au vampirisme des autres qui me viderait de ma substance qu'au contraire à l'effort de me reconstruire chaque fois, avec honnêteté, sous leurs yeux. Comme si je devais assumer une démultiplication de Catherine M., et aussi bien de Catherine Millet, sans pourtant jamais me trahir (xii).

In this passage, Millet evokes "Catherine M." and "Catherine Millet" as distinctly separate entities in a doubling of woman's identity that begs the question: to whom (or what) does this "me" refer? Catherine Millet, the author, exposes herself through scripting a character, and the act of confessing her sexual past is thus multiplied or ventriloquized by this persona, a composite voice that is framed by multiple layers which reference her social role outside of the fictional work: her career as an art critic, her marriage to Jacques Henric, and her role as model of erotic photography in Henric's sequel. Each layer is uncovered in an authorial strip tease revealing a photographic negative of her true identity that can only be articulated through sexual fantasies.

La vie sexuelle de Catherine M. raises issues of woman's identity as author of her life story. Like the duality of the very origins of this work—Millet's récit complemented by Henric's photography—Millet's bifurcated identity between herself and Catherine M. is reflected in the tension between the plurality of sexual partners versus her solitary masturbation and creative solipsism. As an art critic, Millet is trained to regard art with a certain objective distance, an exteriorization that demands critical introspection. Millet's sexual exposition (of Catherine M.) and her expository literary style appear to expose every aspect and orifice of one woman's body—putting herself on display but ultimately gaining a greater understanding of her identity.

Millet's fictional autobiography is above all tied to articulations of woman's desires, fantasies and sexual *histoires*—a term evoking both stories and also memories—and raises the question of origins concerning the author and the verity of woman's sexual experiences. The autobiographical nature of the work—that is, the author's true identity beyond the parameters of the fiction—is recuperated within this text as a scripted role, highlighting an eroticized and performative life-writing in which woman's fantasy becomes an autobiography cum autofantasy, which for the purposes of analyzing this type of writing, I have termed "erotobiographical."

This particular novel—or erotobiographical script—suggests a carefully planned study of one’s sexual self in the domain of fiction. The careful self-surveillance in relation to writing offers a self-reflexive study on the limits of what can be said concerning sex while also foregrounding the act of looking at one’s sexual body. Millet possesses a marked awareness of being the recipient of the reader’s gaze and, by extension, public scrutiny over the sexual themes of her writing. Catherine Millet presents herself as a fictional character—as Catherine M.—however, the paradoxical function of naming (which is directly tied to the author and yet also serves as a “mask”) has less to do with any attempt to escape social castigations with regards to writing erotic fiction (that has been said of the pseudonymous authorship of *Histoire d’O*) than with a study of the self, a documentation of one woman’s fantasies that are concurrent to—rather than separated by—reality: “Des similitudes structurelles sont grandes entre les situations vécues et celles qui sont imaginées [...] [et. . .] le détail de ce que j’ai vécu n’ait que très peu nourri mes rêveries” (37).

The ironic title—*La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.*—complicates the reader’s source of pleasure and suggests further consideration of the reader’s autobiographical “pact” with the author who knowingly deceives us while masking the fictional work as pornographic literature; however, in describing sexual experiences and fantasies Millet foregrounds her own problematized identity. Millet’s novel revisits and renews the debate concerning women’s sexual frankness in writing erotic fiction. In appealing to the process of writing, she transforms her individual performance anxiety into a performative identity—a sexual persona—which is particular to her complicated, subjective experience:

N’éprouver aucune sensation, ne pas m’en soucier [...] Ne pas partager les goûts de l’autre [...] Indifférente, parce que si bien repliée mentalement au fond de moi que je commande mon corps comme un marionnettiste sa marionette (168).

Paradoxically, Millet describes her anti-social nature in human relations devoid of sexual contact. She is shy and does not engage often in conversation; however, only through the sex act does she, paradoxically, attain a sense of self outside of the “gaze” of others:

Craintive dans les relations sociales, j’avais fait de l’acte sexuel un refuge où je m’engouffrais volontiers afin d’esquiver les regards qui m’embarrassaient et les échanges verbaux pour lesquels je manquais encore de pratique. Aussi n’était-il pas question que je prenne une initiative. [...] En revanche, j’étais en toutes circonstances... disponible (57).

Thus her permanent sexual availability is the counter-balancing act by which she overcomes her self-acknowledged passivity and reclusive nature: “Copuler vraiment

répondait à une nécessité plus large: se frayer une voie sans aspérité dans le monde" (128).

The ironic self-reflexivity in *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.*, makes reference to elements of the autobiographical pact and the constructed "I" of the narrator of autofiction precisely to debunk any adherence to previous generic categorizations of life-writing. Autofictional elements are complicated by an erotic performance at the core of Millet's text where the compulsion to write about herself is intricately linked to sexual experiences and a fabricated persona which demand that the reader believe and simultaneously imagine the narrator's sexual fantasies. However, this work is ultimately a work in progress, as the quest for identity tied to authorship remains an on-going textual performance.

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