

GAZE

BY LISA HILTON

Foucault argues that beneath the dread Gaze, woman “vanishes as a biological entity and becomes instead a socially constituted product which is infinitely malleable and highly unstable”. But what of women who seek to evade the discipline of the gaze by embracing it? Who seek solace in the dictum that il faut souffrir pour etre belle? Consider Pauline reage’s exquisite novel L’Histoire d’O. From the first scene, on the journey to the libertines’ lair at Roissy, where O’s lover slices through the straps of her bra with his penknife, O’s story is concerned as much as anything with the challenges of being beautiful. The progress of her subjection, from the anonymous beatings and buggings at Roissy through the procuring of her lesbian lover Jacqueline as a gift to the libertine collective to the final haunting choreography of the novel’s coda where O is displayed naked, shackled by the labia and masked as an owl to the guests of the sinister Commander, is as much concerned with fashion, of the freedoms and constrictions imposed by clothes, as with the delights available to the adventurous masochist.

O is troubling because its project is far more subversive than even the Sadean abandonment of any form of social contract as the only authentic path to pleasure. O is obsessed with emancipation not from gender norms but from the self herself, a consensual will to disempower. Beauty and fashion form the onjective correlatives to O’s psychological transformation. Once she arrives at Roissy, the well-read connoisseur knows precisely what form her slavery shall take, since the chateau’s staging (though mercifully not the dragging prose in which it is described), is derived

from Sade. The women are costumed as eighteenth century chambermaids, the valets operettic Figaro derivatives. O’s own green gown is a couturier’s miracle, with strings to raise the skirts and frame her captive form like curtains on a stage, from which her torso rises like a slender nightmare flower. Staggering to her cell at night, drunk with beating, O’s progress is hampered by her towering Venetian chopines. When she returns to Paris, O must sacrifice her wardrobe as she has already sacrificed her body, spending a mournful two hours discarding the outfits and accessories which no longer suit his demands for accessibility. She has a sorry moment with her pink corset, and if she has to surrender slipover dresses, she muses practically, perhaps it’s still possible to obtain the same effect from a shirtwaist. O is then presented with new clothes, cunning boleros which unfasten to bare her breasts, cleverly zippered trousers with a convenient rear flap, taffeta corsets which violently confine her wait let leave her body open and vulnerable. Given that most men would rather suffer the torments of Roissy to half an hour on the Via Montenapoleone or the Avenue Montaigne, it’s hard even for those of us not submissively inclined not to envy the interest O’s lover takes in her wardrobe.

Like any vocation, slavery is sartorially demanding, even though there are compensations when the snowy pavements of the Rue Royale create a delicious frisson as a stilletoed foot stirs up the ice against naked flesh. Bathing suits are not an option for the Cote d’Azur- how to accommodate one’s labial padlock, and how to explain to the corsetiere that the breasts must never be

covered? Love demands private as well as public subjugation- O struggles with her makeup, discovering that ordinary lipstick refuses to cling where required, whilst the kissproof sort has a discouragingly arid tendency. The wearying reassembly of the self in preparation for its willful destruction is both punishment and pleasure. Like Swift’s battered Corinnas, O is constantly dragging herself from the “mangled plight” in which her lovers leave her and reforming anew for the next onslaught. Thus she constructs herself, quite consciously, as an object to be taken apart.

O is a happy prisoner, but surely a slave who acknowledges her condition is no less a slave? In comparison with de Sade’s parodically distressed victims, imprisoned first in Gothic labyrinths and again by the psychopathically repetitive list-making of their creator, O’s masochism charms in the complex aesthetic of its detail. Yet her slave’s uniform, whilst it compels, also terrifies. Written in O’s very flesh is the violent disjunction of soul and body. Her submission is a radical reductio ad absurdum of fashion’s raison d’etre. Our manacles might come prettily packaged, but we should not deny the cut of their steel on our skin. Look in the mirror. Ask who you are.