Name upon Name

Encountering

Pauline Réage
Dominique Aury
Anne Desclos

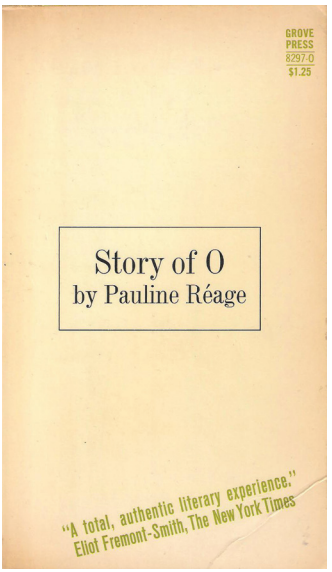
by Gregory Stephenson

"*Through me forbidden voices, voices of sexes*
and lusts, voices veil'd and I remove the veil."
—Walt Whitman

The pornographic paperback with an incongruously chaste white cover had been circulating around the barracks for some weeks before the now creased and curling copy came into my hands. Up to this time of my young life, the only explicit erotic writing that I had read was the thick Grove Press paperback of *My Life and Loves* by Frank Harris and that was all roguish and rollicking and jolly. This book was something altogether different. This was stern and severe, stark and solemn. And hauntingly strange.

The year was 1967, the place was Fort McClellan, Alabama; I was twenty years old, and the book was *Story of O* by Pauline Réage.[1] I read it with intense interest but little real attention, ignoring altogether the learned prefaces by Jean Paulhan and André Pieyre de Mandiargues. Yet even the most casual reader must ultimately find himself implicated in the paradoxes and ambiguities of this unsettling novel. For here is a story with its well-springs in the deepest recesses of consciousness, those William James named "the darker, blinder strata of character;" a story revelatory of the mystery, the power and peril of the erotic appetite. I was, to be sure, intrigued by the

book, aroused and even discomposed while reading it, but—having once finished it and quickly going on to read *I, Jan Cremer,* another sexy Grove Press publication—I thought little more about it, except to feel a kind of lingering low-key awe.



A dozen years after this first encounter with *Story of O,* while browsing in a second-hand bookshop in Denmark, I came across and bought a used copy of the novel. (The same sedate Grove Press paperback edition bound in white covers.) I had at this time only recently read Susan Sontag's brilliant essay on "The Pornographic Imagination," and inspired by Sontag's insights, on this occasion I read *Story of O* much slower and more thoughtfully.

This time I noted the absence of the definitive article in the title. Obvious, of course, but I hadn't taken note of it before or considered its implications. The provisionality of narrative that this deliberate omission suggests is further supported by the alternate beginnings and endings of the novel. I also remarked that although at the outset and throughout nearly all of the novel, an anonymous third person narrator relates the events of the story, maintaining a single character focus (we are told what O thinks and feels, but are not privy to the minds and emotions of other figures in the novel) this authoritative, impersonal, objective voice is not absolute or entirely consistent. Curiously, for a few pages at one point of the novel the third person narrator becomes an

uncertain first person narrator. This narrator's account is characterized by a self-conscious lack of precision. This narrator states that "they left her for half an hour, or an hour, or two hours, I can't be sure, but it seemed forever" Then, with more conviction, the first person narrator declares "I know it was at this point . . .," but soon thereafter admits that "I have no idea how long she remained in the red bedroom, or whether she was really alone, as she surmised." The narrator then further acknowledges limitations to her or his complete knowledge of the events avowing "All I know is that when the two women returned, one was carrying a dressmaker's tape measure and the other a basket." At this point, the first person narrator merges with the third person narrator and never again speaks as a separate voice. These uncustomary, incongruent elements in the text combine to make the novel strangely tentative and to lend it an oddly oneiric quality.

An attentive reading of *Story of O* reveals a resonant, poetic story written with scrupulous restraint. The central theme of the novel is the psychological transformation of the protagonist, O. Originally (anterior to the unfolding events of the story) a selfish, detached temptress, she becomes—through a series of self-willed ordeals—first a selfless lover, and finally a sacred figure. Accompanying O's inward transformation is a seasonal progression from the opening scenes of the novel, which take place upon a rainy autumn dusk to the final scene which takes place upon a clear summer dawn. O is also closely associated in the novel with the waning and waxing, obscurity and clarity of the moon. On the night of her arrival at Roissy, for example, we are told that "the moon raced high among the clouds," while on the night of her final apotheosis at a villa in the south of France, we are informed that "the moon was almost full" and that its bright light "fell full upon O."

The poles of *Story of O* are those of the daylight world and the nocturnal world. The day world in the novel is that of familiar, quotidian reality, a realm of jobs, offices, apartments, furniture, clothes, tea, plants, restaurants, city streets, the weather, even cinemas and ice-cream. The nocturnal world is one of clandestine obsession and solemn ceremony, of instruments of restraint and torture, of willing submission to extremes of pain and humiliation, and of the relentless pursuit of ecstatic self-annihilation. Appropriately, the story begins at dusk, a time of transition between day and night, just as O is about to undertake her own transition from the one realm to the other, from the familiar to the forbidden. O's goal is to surrender to the imperatives of the night domain to such a degree as to overthrow in her mind and spirit the daylight world. She desires to cast it off and repudiate it utterly, allowing the night world to invade and subdue the day, and ultimately to obliterate it altogether. This is the aim that with fear and anticipation O contemplates as she enters ever deeper and more definitively into the nocturnal world: "henceforth the reality of the night and the reality of day would be one and the same. Henceforth—and O was thinking: at last."

O's determination in advancing toward her goal of carnal martyrdom is not, however, without a degree of ambivalence that causes her occasionally to balk, to regret and resist. It is as if there were within O two contending voices, the one impersonal, purposive and certain, the other wary and wavering. The division of O's will can be seen to be exteriorized in the novel's recurrent imagery of mirrors, and is perhaps also reflected in the brief, curious intrusion of a first person narrator, as noted above. In the end, of course, it is O's resolute, impersonal will that wins and O fulfills entirely the course foretokened by her portentous name, becoming a cipher, open,

empty, yet sacred and set apart, attaining the state of one who has died to a profane daylight sensibility and been reborn as an incarnation of mysterious primordial forces. Just as the name O may be seen to express emptiness, it may also be seen to symbolize a having come full circle, the achievement of completion, fulfillment.

That O is engaged in a quest for the absolute is reinforced by recurrent religious imagery in the text. The painful instruments of her self-transcendence are characterized as "blessed"; a submissive posture she must assume is likened to "the manner of the Carmelites"; and in her humiliations and sufferings she is "touched by grace." These are to name but a few such instances. O may be seen as a species of inverted saint, one who through sexual surrender and abasement has willed the negation of her will and identity, one whose aim is self-extinction.

The strange, mythic quality of *Story of O* was until recently augmented by the secret nature of the author's identity, hidden by the pseudonym Pauline Réage. The "Translator's Note" appended to the Grove Press edition of the novel states that "To this day, no one knows who Pauline Réage is." Similarly, in Susan Sontag's essay on "The Pornographic Imagination," Sontag remarks that "The real identity of Pauline Réage remains one of the few well-kept secrets in contemporary letters."[2] There was, inevitably, much speculation as to the identity of the author of this notorious book. Many critics were inclined to believe that despite the feminine pseudonym, the author was a man. Given the quality of the writing, names such as Jean Paulhan, André Pieyre de Mandiargues, André Malraux, Henri de Montherlant and Raymond Queneau were all put forward as being probable candidates for the real author behind the pseudonym of Pauline Réage.

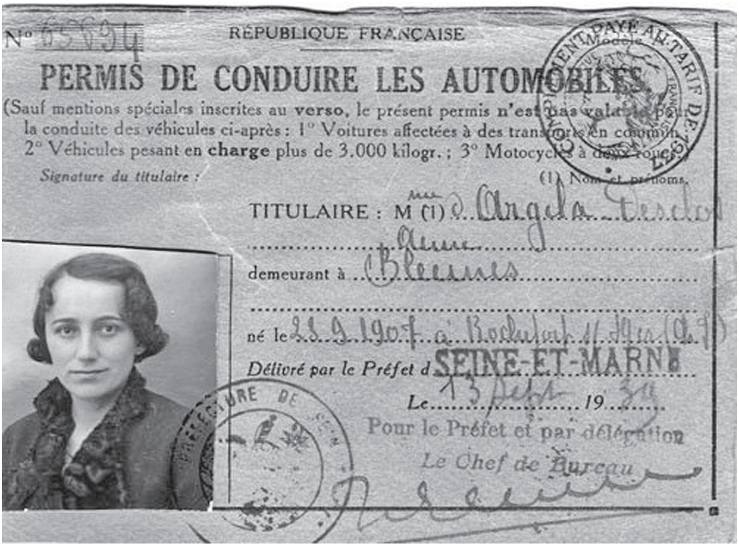
On the basis of the text alone, what inferences can be drawn concerning the anonymous author of *Story of O*? The many precise details of dress and cosmetics, together with frequent references to flowers, would seem to suggest a stereotypically female author, although admittedly such evidence in itself is in no way conclusive. The author would appear to be a person of education and culture. This is indicated not only by the understated elegance of the prose, but also by allusions in the text to Jonathan Swift, Leo Tolstoy and *The Arabian Nights*, and to the painter Jean Antoine Watteau. Culture and education are further indicated by the narrator's knowledge of historical styles of costume, architecture, sculpture and furnishings. With regard to the latter, for example, the narrator can clearly recognize the characteristics of "Restoration swing-mirror" and a "Regency bureau."

Another inference concerning the pseudonymous author of *Story of O* that may be drawn from the text is that, in all likelihood, the author speaks English. While today among French writers and intellectuals this ability may not seem remarkable, at the time of the publication of *Story of O* proficiency in English was an uncommon skill. I base this inference of English proficiency on the frequent occurrence in the text of conversations in English between O and Sir Stephen. There is no indication in these exchanges that O is less than fluent in her command of English. Indeed, she even understands the trace of ambiguity implied in Sir Stephen's statement that iron becomes her, and later following a conversation with him, O reflects upon the coarseness of the English language where erotic matters are concerned. O also recalls having spent two months in Wales as child where a vivid impression was made upon her by a Biblical inscription (in English) painted on the wall of her room. Further evidence of the author's proficiency in English may be seen in the "Translator's Note" which

precedes the text in the Grove Edition of *Story of O.* Here, the translator notes with some pride that through an intermediary, "the author has gone out of her way to say how pleased she is with those portions of the translation she has read."

However, having derived these conclusions or surmises from the text, I gave the matter of the real identity of Pauline Réage no further thought until a day in early January of 1980 when in a bin of books on sale at reduced prices outside a bookshop on the rue St. André des Arts in Paris, I found and bought a copy of a book titled *O m'as dit* by Régine Deforges.[3] Published in 1975, the book consists of a series of interviews conducted by Ms. Deforges with the author of *Story of O.* At the outset, the book confirms that Pauline Réage is, indeed, a woman. The topics discussed during the interviews are many, including eroticism, love, religion, war and literature. Pauline Réage is both candid and expansive in her replies to questions put to her but scrupulously avoids providing specific facts such as names and places, information that might compromise her family and friends ("*pour ne gener personne*" as she says on page 167) or, indeed, serve to reveal her real identity. It is clear from her replies that Ms. Réage is very well read in literature and on a variety of other topics. She admits to having studied the history of costume and to having a passion for all that is English, characterizing herself as "an anglomaniac." In the course of the interviews she employs English words and phrases, cites English maxims, alludes to English authors and expresses a decided preference for the King James translation of the Bible. I could only discover in the interviews one specific bit of personal information that might be useful in establishing the true identity of the pseudonymous author, and that is the year of her birth. At one point, discussing her father's military service in the First World War,

she states that in the year 1914 she was seven years old, later confirming her birth year stating that in 1917 she was ten years of age.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Signature du titulaire :

(1) Nom et prénoms.

TITULAIRE : M (1) Angela Desclos
Anne

demeurant à Blennes

né le

Délivré par le Préfet de SEINE-ET-MARNE

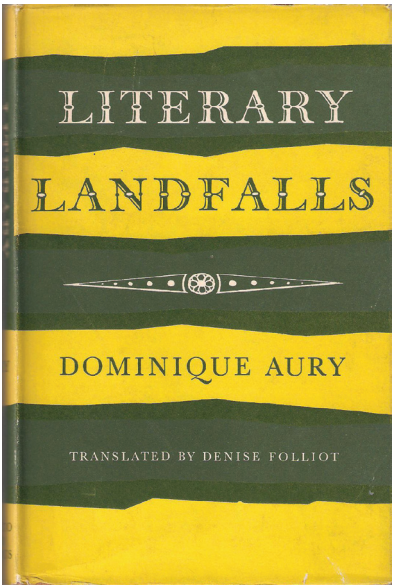
Le 13 Sept 19

Pour le Préfet et par délégation

Le Chef de Bureau

Among the few female names sometimes cited by critics or commentators as a possible real life identity behind the nom de plume of Pauline Réage (most often supposed to be a man) was the name of Dominique Aury. I was utterly unfamiliar with Dominique Aury but since her name was a kind of common denominator among the various speculations concerning Pauline Réage, I decided to determine whether any of the personal information that could be gleaned from the novel itself or from the interviews might correspond to her life and career. Accordingly, at the library I consulted a *Dictionaire Biographique* and read with interest the entry on Dominique Aury. I learned that this name was itself a pseudonym for a French editor and literary critic whose real name was Anne Desclos. I noted that she was born in 1907. Also pertinent to my inquiry was the information that

Dominique Aury had received a Licentiate degree in English and had translated from English to French numerous English and American novels. Moreover, she had also studied at the École de Louvre, which might account for Pauline Réage's acquaintance with the history of costume and knowledge of architecture and styles of household furnishings. I now felt reasonably certain that Dominique Aury (Anne Desclos) was the author of *Story of O.*



To acquaint myself with Madame Aury's writings, I read a collection of her literary essays, *Lectures pour Tous,* or as the book is titled in English, *Literary Landfalls.*[4] There are clear thematic correspondences between the essays collected in *Literary Landfalls* and *Story of O.* Both books celebrate passionate, obsessional, self-annihilating love. Aury's essay on the writer and theologian, Francois Fénelon, treats with sympathy his concept of Pure Love, "the soul abandoned to God" in perfect obedience and in complete surrender to suffering even unto "death to self." Aury expresses her admiration for the courage necessary to undertake such an uncompromising commitment; "to go with one's fate, to reject nothing, surrender oneself to the last." (Pursuant to Aury's essay on Fénelon is the not altogether insignificant biographical sidenote that as a young student she attended the Lycée Fénelon.)

The very title of Aury's essay on the writings of Alfred de Vigny—"Obedience and Death"—resonates with *Story of O.* The ethos that informs Vigny's writings may be seen to represent for Aury a military counterpart to Fénelon's mysticism. "Man loves obedience," she observes, "which delivers him from himself, because secretly he loves not to belong to himself, he loves to lose himself." And in a spirit clearly akin to that of *Story of O,* Aury writes approvingly, indeed longingly, of the "fascinating existence of a universe apart from the everyday universe . . . where the result of formal servitude is inner freedom."

Writing of *Letters of a Portuguese Nun* (1669), Aury is moved by the book's eloquent expression of the ardent love of a young nun for a French cavalry officer. Such passionate, overmastering love, characterized by Aury as "the total possession of one person by another, without any sense, reason or justice" can be seen to correspond to the unreserved, unrestrained love of O for René and later for Sir Stephen. Finally, among the essays, there is a comment on the nature of writing, which might well be taken as an expression of the author's own experiences with regard to her pseudonymous clandestine masterpiece of erotic fiction: "Whoever ventures to write betrays himself. You think you are saying one thing and you are admitting another. You disguise things and speak more truly than you know. The very disguise betrays you."

The presence of so many significant and suggestive parallels between the literary essays of Dominique Aury and the themes expressed in *Story of O* convinced me that in all likelihood Madame Aury was the author behind the pseudonym of Pauline Réage.

One sad summer night in Tempe, Arizona as I walked under the stars and the streetlamps to my lonely job as a janitor, I was struck with the idea of writing a letter to the author of *Story of O.* About a month later—in September of 1980—I sent a birthday card written in French addressed to Anne Desclos (I can't now recall why I thought this name was more appropriate than Dominique Aury) at Éditions Gallimard in faraway Paris. Three months passed and then to my elation I received a reply. A note written in French in blue ink on *Nouvelle Revue Française* stationery thanked me for my friendly attention and for the (Japanese) card I had sent her, which she thought so beautiful that she had mounted it on the interior of a shelf above her bed where she could admire it.

Over the next thirteen years we corresponded intermittently, mostly between Denmark (to which I had returned) and France. For some reason unclear to me now, I persisted in addressing my early correspondence to Anne Desclos and she, in turn, signed her correspondence to me with that name. It was only in her third letter to me that she signed herself first as Anne Desclos and then as Dominique Aury, adding "*comme je m'appelle aussi, maintenant.*" Subsequently, I addressed her by that nom-de-plume. In response to my occasional cards and letters to Dominique Aury, I received from her hand-written cards and short letters. Our correspondence was polite and amicable but never intimate or deep in character. For the most part our letters concerned what we had been doing or reading. I sent her a copy of my first book when it appeared and she very kindly praised it. I sent her copies of a literary journal that I edited together with my wife. I always addressed her formally and respectfully by her full name. Her early letters to me were without an opening salutation but by January of 1987 I was "Cher Gregory Stephenson" and she was signing herself "*tres affectuesement, votre*

vielle ami, Dominique." By September of that same year I had become "Cher ami," and a year later I was "Cher Gregory," remaining so thereafter. I cannot imagine that my letters to her could have meant much to her in her life, but she often thanked me for the fidelity and constancy of my attention to her, claiming repeatedly to have been touched by these qualities which she considered rare in the world.

In addition to this somewhat spare and sporadic correspondence with the author of *Story of O*, comprising sixteen letters altogether, on two occasions I also met and spoke with her. As in my correspondence, I avoided any suggestion that I believed her to be the author of *Story of O*. I felt that to make such an imputation (still less to confront her with a direct question on the matter) would be presumptuous and discourteous in the extreme. The premise of my slender acquaintance with Dominique Aury was that of a shared interest in literature—though of course there was also in it an element of deception on my part. Despite my calculating camouflage, she would very likely have guessed that I thought her to be Pauline Réage, but I hoped that she appreciated my respectful reticence on the topic. On the other hand, it is possible that—once everyone was deceased who might be embarrassed by the revelation of her authorship of the scandalous *Story of O*—she was just waiting for someone to ask her, as did John de St. Jorre in 1994.[5]

I should also add that I was not attracted to the idea of *interviewing* Dominique Aury. I wanted to have a conversation with her. I took no notes during our talks but immediately afterward retired to my hotel room or to a quiet bar where I wrote down the substance and details of our talks.

My first meeting with Dominique Aury took place on the first of September in 1982, at the offices of Editions Gallimard and the *Nouvelle Revue Française* in Paris. We had agreed by telephone to meet at three in the afternoon. I brought with me gifts of a bottle of Danish mead and a bouquet of little pink flowers. We spoke in her narrow, neat office. Small in stature, she was dressed in a dark blue pants suit with a matching sweater worn over her shoulders. She wore a gold necklace and on her left hand a large gold ring (in the form of a scarab). Her gray-white hair was cut short and behind small reading glasses her eyes were a dark hazel color. She was very lightly made up, just the merest, most subtle touches to her cheeks and lips.

We talked at first of the *Nouvelle Revue Française***,** its history and purpose. I then mentioned that I had once read a piece written by the German publisher, Max Niedermayer, concerning the life and thought of the dissident Freudian and pioneer of psychosomatic medicine, Georg Groddeck, in which she was mentioned as an ardent admirer of Groddeck's ideas. Yes, she replied, Groddeck's essential notion that there is an unconscious, unknown force within each of us that expresses itself through our lives—a hidden motive agency by which we are lived—was an idea that she found perspicacious. Her introduction to Groddeck's central work, *The Book of the It,* had come about when she had written a review for *Le Combat* of Lawrence Durrell's novel, *Justine.* Durrell had very much liked her review and she had then been invited by him to a reception where he earnestly and eagerly commended Groddeck's work to her and loaned her a copy of *The Book of the It.* Upon reading it, she had found the book stimulating and insightful and had immediately thought that it *must* be published in French.

I asked Dominique Aury about her translations from English. These included, she said, two books by Arthur Koestler, *The Yogi and the Commissar* and *Promise and Fulfilment;* James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner;* Thomas Browne's majestic *Urn Burial;* F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Crack Up* and other short texts; *The Loved One* by Evelyn Waugh; and a personal favorite of hers, Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage.* She thought that John Houston's film of Crane's book was a rarity: a successful cinematic adaptation of a novel.

She had also translated Henry Miller's *Aller Retour New York* and in 1956 placed the book with a Swiss publisher in Lausanne. Without Dominique Aury's knowledge or consent, however, the publisher had removed from her translation all the obscenities and the lewd passages, publishing the book in that expurgated form. When Henry Miller discovered that his book had been bowdlerized he was very disappointed and when half-a-dozen years later he met Dominique Aury he reprimanded her for editing his book in this fashion. She explained to him what the Swiss publisher had done and proudly informed him that the book was soon to be printed by a French publisher for whom she was currently working to restore all the obscenities and the objectionable passages.

Among her most favorite translations from English was her version of Yukio Mishima's *Death in Midsummer* and a selection of his short fiction. There was a particular story by Mishima that she especially cherished, finding it altogether beautiful and believing also that the story represented the key to Mishima's life and work. The story was titled "Patriotism." She recounted to me the plot of this sad, lyrical, beautiful tale in which a Japanese officer and his wife commit hara-kari. Mishima himself, she told me, had expressed his

pleasure in her translation (from English) preferring it to the other French translation (from the original Japanese) done by Gaston-Ernest Renondeau, a retired French general.

I inquired as to her family background and how it was that she came to study English. Her parents, she told me, were both of poor, peasant families. Her father was born in England because her grandparents had immigrated there during the Franco-Prussian war. Her grandfather had been a member of the "*francs tireurs*," French partisans who fought against the invading Prussians and who were usually executed if captured. Indeed, once her grandfather had been arrested by the Prussians on suspicion of being a partisan and had been led away with his hands bound before him, but he had managed to escape execution and had thereafter fled with his wife to England. There they remained for about twenty years, operating a small restaurant in Soho. In this way, her father was raised in England until he was nearly a young man. Her father was bi-lingual and had dual citizenship as well. She was raised reading English children's books, including Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories,* Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland,* and Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's School Days*. An interest in English literature had seemed naturally to follow from these early experiences with English books.

Although she considered herself an anglophile, her deepest allegiances were to her home region of Brittany, to the landscape and the people. How she loved the austere Breton landscape, the rocky mountainous areas with sparse trees growing only where sheltered from the wind, the huge clouds scudding overhead, the wild ocean. She loved, too, the Breton people, their wildness, their pride, their affinity with the sea. The proudest claim in her family was to have had an ancestor who served aboard a ship of the line against

the English. There was, she said, an old saying that there were two kinds of Bretons, sailors and farmers, the former clean, the latter dirty.

She recounted how when she sailed to French Guinea in the company of Jean Paulhan, two of the five passengers on board the ship were Bretons. These two quickly announced to the other passengers that they were Bretons and whenever the ship docked at ports en route to Guinea it was the local Bretons who came to see what passengers were aboard, hoping that among them there might be fellow Bretons. She also related how once in a very small bar in a street off the rue Mouffetard she had seen two men performing a dance similar in movement to the Scottish Sword Dance, chanting as they danced: "Vive la Brétagne! Vive les Bretons!" The spectacle had stirred her deeply and had remained vivid in her memory. She very much admired this kind of attachment to a place and a people.

As to her family, the Desclos, they were Breton peasants, rooted in Brittany. It's only a peasant name, she said, but still ordinary people are often the best. There had been one black sheep in the Desclos family, one bad boy sometime in the 18th century who had gotten into some kind of scrape and had fled to the West Indies and was never heard of again. But after World War II when American troops had been billeted outside Paris, an American officer had contacted her father (who was then teaching English at a college near Paris) and told her father that he shared his surname and was a member of the New Orleans branch of the Desclos family descended from the young runaway and that the cemeteries of New Orleans were full of Desclos.

I asked her about her participation in the French Resistance movement during the war years. She shrugged modestly and said that her role had

been very minor and unheroic. She had worked for *Lettres Françaises*, a clandestine journal. She was responsible for mailing and delivering copies of the journal, and sometimes books as well. In truth, she said smiling, she had been little more than an underground postmistress, and only very rarely had she been in any kind of danger.

There was about her person, I thought, a repose or poise, reflected in the quiet elegance of her appearance. At the same time, though, her eyes were alert, lively and humorous, and she spoke with animation, moving her body, her hands, making her face expressive. She was given to miming certain acts or events; for example, when she recounted the act of hara-kiri performed by the young officer in the Mishima tale, she formed both of her hands to mime the gripped knife and its motion. Or, later, when she told me how her grandfather was arrested and led away by the Prussians, she joined her wrists in such a way as to indicate that his hands were bound together and that he was pulled forward with a rope attached to them. And, again, when she related to me the Breton dance she had once witnessed in a bar, she mimicked for me the arm and body movements of the dancers.

She was very courteous and gracious to me, signing my copy of *Literary Landscapes* with the inscription *"avec beaucoup de sympathie et très amicalement."*

My second meeting with Dominique Aury took place at the offices of Gallimard on the eleventh of April, 1989. She was now eighty-one years of age and looked thinner than when I saw her last. She was attired on this occasion in brown pants, a brown blouse and a brown sweater. Again, her only jewelry was a thin gold chain about her neck and the gold scarab ring

on her hand. And, again, her make-up consisted of the merest, faintest tinting to her cheeks and lips. Her hair was now colored with a blue rinse. On her feet were laced brown half-boots.

I complimented her on the recent publication of a volume of Jean Paulhan's selected letters, *Choix de Lettres, 1917-1936,* of which she was co-editor.[6] The book had entailed enormous work, she said, but had been a labor of love and was a monument to a great intellect. A second volume was in preparation. I expressed my surprise at one incident referred to by Jean Paulhan in a couple of his letters for the year 1927, that is a bitter quarrel that took place between Paulhan and André Breton, a quarrel so vehement that at length it led to Paulhan solemnly and in dead earnest challenging Breton to a duel. Yes, she smiled with a kind of wonder and admiration, Paulhan had actually engaged two of his friends to act as his seconds in the affair and had dispatched them to deliver his formal challenge to André Breton. Breton had quite simply refused to accept the challenge and Paulhan had thereafter viewed him as a contemptible coward.

The two men were not reconciled until twenty years had passed, she said. She was present on the night that their reconciliation took place, at a party given in honor of Breton's first publisher, at which both Paulhan and Breton were present. I sat to the right of Breton that night, she related. She thought Breton inflated with self-importance, much given to rhetorical flights and polemics. And his original insults to Paulhan had really been vicious, scurrilous and even threatening. Breton's enmity had been provoked by an article written in the *N.R.F.* by Paulhan under a pseudonym in which Paulhan had rather mildly criticized the surrealist group for their anti-literary stance. Paulhan's resort to duelling was not an isolated instance, she

assured me, such challenges were not uncommon in France even in literary milieus. The practice of duelling did not altogether disappear until the German Occupation.

She also deplored the influence that Breton had exerted on so many writers and artists, an influence that she thought pernicious. Even André Pieyre de Mandiargues was awed by him, she told me, adding that she considered Mandiargues to be a far, far superior writer to Breton. This remark led us to discuss both Mandiargues's short fiction and his novels, *Le Lys de Mer, La Marge,* (for which he received the Prix Goncourt) and *La Motorcyclette,* which she admired. She had served on the committee for the Prix Fémina the year that *La Motorcyclette* appeared and wanted very much to award the prize to Mandiargues for that novel. She was rigorously opposed in this intention, though, by a very religious old lady on the committee who objected very strongly to the erotic content of Mandiargues's book. The lady "did not wish to have such a book on her conscience," as she herself expressed it. Dominique Aury was both annoyed and amused by this statement and told the lady that the erotic incidents described in the novel would scarcely be news to many people.

Somehow, we moved on to Proust and Céline, whom she considered to be the two great French writers of the 20th century and as utterly unlike each other as two writers might be. I mentioned that I had recently read a book concerning Céline's postwar incarceration in Denmark and how virulently he hated Denmark. Ah, he hated everything, she said, everything. So, Denmark was not special, she said smiling. She had met him after his release from prison and his return to France in the early 1950s and she found him insufferable as a man, but nevertheless a great stylist in French prose.

In contrast to the unrelenting catalog of the horrors and absurdities of war as described in certain of Céline's novels, she cited the far more inclusive and much more balanced perspective of Alfred de Vigny in his classic work, *Servitude et Grandeurs Militaires.* It could not be said that Vigny had neglected in his writing to depict the terrible events of war, the blunders and stupidities of the general staff, the appalling sufferings of the soldiers, but neither did he neglect to portray the beautiful acts of individual courage, the sublimity and nobility that are also aspects of war, though to say so has become unfashionable and unpopular, she added. She had long wished to write a full-length study of Vigny but unfortunately had never done so.

I mentioned that—inspired by her essay on Jacques Cazotte—I had read a Danish translation of *Le Diable Amoureux* and found it a singularly strange work, in some respects proto-surrealist in character. This semi-surreal element, she explained, derives in large part from the mystical or occult traditions in which Cazotte and several of his contemporaries were immersed. In Cazotte's writings hermetic allusions are made and these create startling, incongruous images. The occult traditions embraced by Cazotte are not French, she informed me, but Germanic, though through Cazotte and his direct heir, Gerard de Nerval, hermeticism entered French literature and the arts. I brought up Cazotte's prophecies concerning the advent and ultimate direction of the French revolution and his specific predictions concerning the coming fates of his acquaintances, predictions which proved to be true. Yes, she said, the incident was quite uncanny and inexplicable.

I said that I had read that in the 1930s an incendiary device was detonated at the offices of the *Nouvelle Revue Française.* Clearly, the magazine must have offended someone or some group more vindictive than André Breton

and the surrealists. Was she working for the magazine at the time? Did she know who was responsible for the bomb or why it was directed at the *Nouvelle Revue Française*? She had not joined the *N.R.F.* until the 1940s, she said, and though she knew of the bomb she did not know who the perpetrators were or what ideology they had meant to further by their act. In those days, she said, everyone was so excitable, both on the right and the left. In those days, in 1934, she had attended a large political demonstration in which the police opened fire into the crowd. She had thrown herself flat on the pavement, together with others around her. She had found the danger exhilarating and had subsequently attended demonstrations both of the right and the left merely for the excitement, the thrill of danger. Her husband had thought her mad for doing so. In fact, she was not in the least politically inclined and could not understand the fascination that politics has for so many people. In this regard, she mentioned *Bitter Lemons,* Lawrence Durrell's book on Cyprus, in which the first half of the book concerning the landscape and the people of the island is so charming and so absorbing, whereas the second half of the book, concerning the politics of the island, is so tedious as to be unreadable.

She had been fired upon again, on a later occasion, she told me. Once during the war she had been travelling with her young son, as part of a column of civilians, when an Italian pilot had repeatedly strafed the column. They had all taken cover in ditches alongside the road. She had shielded with her body her son who was crying in fear and she had calmed him by telling him that it didn't hurt to be killed by bullets, you didn't feel it. The column had quite unmistakably consisted of civilians, she said, yet the pilot dived and fired upon them again and again. I commented on the sheer malevolence of such an act. She shrugged and cited Lord Acton: "All power corrupts. Absolute

power corrupts absolutely." The pilot was enjoying absolute power.

In this regard, she thought Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* an extremely prescient work. It could be read as a myth of the 20th century, she said, a metaphor not only for colonialism but for all the fanatical ideologies that had held sway in so many countries leading to mass murder and also for a darkness latent in the human heart. The figure of Kurtz could be seen as a prophetic metaphor for the exercise of power that had led so many naïve idealists to perpetrate atrocities in the name of enlightened principles and also for certain other acts of mindless murder. Her father had told her of an incident in Chad where two French army officers "of the professional class" had gone amok, killing natives, shooting them, decapitating them, dismembering them. As in the case of Conrad's Kurtz or in the instance of the Italian pilot strafing the civilians, the potential for such purely malicious murderous behavior is always latent and may be suddenly called forth by a situation of supreme power. Truly, she said, Conrad had seen it clearly but no one had ever stated this psychological principle with greater vigor or conciseness of expression than Lord Acton.

It was because of this latent human capacity for senseless slaughter, she said, that she esteemed honest, honorable service in wartime. Her great-grandfather, her grandfather, and her father had served honorably in nearly all the wars of France. Her son had served in the Algerian war and had come home with his stomach ruined by disease. This ideal of honorable service was a quality she especially admired in the Bretons, together with their stubborn courage, their sense of personal dignity. They are often left in the lurch, she said, but they obey orders, they keep their word, they die to the last man. As they should, she added.

I noted again that Dominique Aury was alert and acute yet composed and self-possessed. In conversation she was very lively, speaking with her whole body, assuming postures and facial expressions, miming the actions that she was relating, indicating with her arms and her torso how she flung herself to the pavement when fired upon by the police and how she shielded her son beneath her when strafed by the Italian pilot. And yet even in relating these dramatic incidents it was as if she regarded them with a kind of detached fatalism.

It seemed to me that Dominique Aury (Anne Desclos) had worked out an independent and highly individual code by which she lived. The code derived from her awareness of dark ambiguities in the human psyche: destructive impulses, the urge for self-extinction, the aspiration to pure love, the appetite for the absolute. She was skeptical of all political programs to redeem or perfect humanity, persuaded that the roots of human suffering are to be found far beneath the social surface. Her private code was, I think, based on assent to fate rather than resistance to it. She believed that greater courage and resolve were required to embrace ones fate than to rebel against it. Although her literary tastes were clearly broad and inclusive, I think she valued most in literature that which illuminated the primal mysteries of love and courage, fidelity and death, themes as elemental and essential as the stark Breton landscape she loved.

In old French, the word "*desclos*" was the past participle of the verb *desclore,* meaning to open, unlock or reveal, and thus "*desclos*" meant open, exposed, plain, explicit. (The English word "disclose" derives from "*desclos.*") In one sense, the life of Anne Desclos, hidden as it was behind her pseudonyms, Dominique Aury and Pauline Réage, might seem anything but open, plain

and exposed. In another sense, however, perhaps it was the pseudonyms themselves that served to quicken to life and give utterance to voices latent and hitherto silent in Anne Desclos. Perhaps, paradoxically, it was the masks, the disguises, the concealing names that permitted her to assert her true identity, to disclose secret selves.

Notes

[1] *Story of O* by Pauline Réage, New York: Grove Press, 1965. Page references hereafter are to the paperback edition, Grove Press, 1967.

[2] *Styles of Radical Will* by Susan Sontag, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969, p. 192.

[3] *O m'as dit* by Régine Deforges, Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1975.

[4] *Lectures pour Tous* by Dominique Aury, Paris: Gallimard, 1958. The English translation is *Literary Landmarks,* London: Chatto & Windus, 1960. Page references hereafter are to this edition.

[5] "The Unmasking of O" by John de St. Jorre, *The New Yorker,* August 1, 1994, pp. 42 – 50. Reprinted in *The Good Ship Venus, the Erotic Voyage of the Olympia Press* by John de St. Jorre, London: Hutchinson, 1994. A curious detail of John de St. Jorre's account of his interview with Dominique Aury whom he definitively identifies as Pauline Réage is his statement that these two names conceal "yet another persona, her true identity. She asked me not to reveal it, or the details of her family, and this I agreed to do" (231). I thought it had been for some long time and perhaps always common knowledge that Dominique Aury and Anne Desclos were one and the same. The *Dictionaire Biographique* that I consulted in 1980 stated quite openly that Dominique Aury was a pseudonym for Anne Desclos. And it will be recalled that I addressed my early letters to Anne Desclos at Gallimard, letters to which she replied signing herself by that name. Strange, then, that Dominique Aury extracted from John de St. Jorre a promise not to reveal what was already widely known and a matter of public record.

[6] *Jean Paulhan, Choix de Lettres, 1917-1936,* edited by Dominique Aury and Jean-Claude Zylberstein, Paris: Gallimard, 1986.