15 MICHAEL WORTON

Unnatural women and uncomfortable readers? Clotilde Escalle's tales of transgression

Described by critics variously as one of the 'new barbarians' of French writing,[1] as one of the cruel 'Barbarellas' who seek only to depict the disarray of contemporary French society,[2] and as one of the new breed of women writers who hold a violent and deep-seated grudge against the gaze of men,[3] Clotilde Escalle is remarkable among new writers for the dispassionate way in which she presents violent sexual and familial dramas.

Escalle was born in 1958 in Fez, Morocco, where she lived for many years. When she came to France, it was to join the Théâtre-Laboratoire and work with Ludwik Flaszen, the Polish critic, writer and theorist who had co-founded that radical theatrical enterprise with Jerzy Grotowski. With the publication in 1993 of her first novel, *Un long baiser*, she immediately established herself as a novelist who presents unpalatable scenes and confronts disagreeable truths about interpersonal relationships, notably within families and couples. Each one of her four novels, *Un long baiser*, *Pulsion* (1996), *Herbert jouit* (1999) and *Où est-il cet amour* (2001), challenges the reader to bear with her as she relentlessly anatomises the lives of women who have lost their way, both figuratively and literally. Escalle's women rage against their families and especially against their loveless mothers, who have emotionally mutilated them. They give themselves sexually to any man who will take and abuse them, yet they are not sacrificial victims: that would be to glorify and romanticise their acts of driven wantonness. They very occasionally seek and take revenge on those who have hurt them, but they resort to violence as a means not of salvation, but of survival. Furthermore, the violence is directed much more often against themselves than against others.

These novels are tales of oppression, of violence and abuse, of masochism, of cruelty and despair, of lancinating indifference, and ultimately of

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transgression. They portray a world in which love is strikingly absent, if none the less sometimes – nostalgically rather than prospectively – yearned for. They present sex brutally and almost pornographically. They tear the soul, they can repel the senses, they offer little hope. So why read Escalle? Is she just part of the ephemeral literary phenomenon that is the 'new barbarism' of post-feminism? Or is there a point in reading her which takes us beyond voyeurism and beyond the satisfaction of reading and living in the security of a world that is safer and more comfortable than the hellish limbos of Escalle's imagination? What, if anything, in her work makes her worth reading and rereading – and rereading again? What do her novels *do* that they both demand and merit sustained attention? The answers to these questions are neither single nor simple, but they are worth seeking, because they draw readers into an interrogation of post-feminist sexualities that questions many of the shibboleths of both feminist and masculinist/patriarchal ideologies.

It is axiomatic that one of the defining features of the late twentieth century and early twentieth-first century is the sexual liberation of women. While less fully and less universally realised than some would have us believe, this social, political and personal liberation has enabled among women writers an explosion of exploratory ways of saying sexuality (or, rather, sexualities) and of telling tales of selfdom. Hélène Cixous has argued that what she calls *écriture féminine* (feminine writing) 'means embarking on "the passage toward more than the self, toward another than the self, toward the other"'.[4] Elsewhere, she affirms that feminine writing is a 'fidelity to what exists. To everything that exists. And fidelity is equal respect for what *seems* beautiful to us and what *seems* ugly to us'.[5] Cixous's theoretical position is clear and seductive, but it does rely on a notion of subjectivity that is perhaps questionable. Above all, it assumes that there can be – even temporarily – a sense of certainty in selfness that allows us to know what seems beautiful or ugly to us. On the one hand, Cixous's arguments might lead us to see in Escalle's work a manifestation of a (feminine) writing that gives equal place and weight to the pure and the putrid, to the marvellous and the maimed. On the other hand, in the actual promotion of a writing that articulates and embodies a passage 'toward the other', Cixous's definitions of feminine writing problematically presuppose a self that is grounded – or grounded enough to know what is self and what is other.

Since the feminist debates of the 1980s, our hold on gender identity has become ever less firm and less unitary, as the full force of representation as construction has been recognised. Identity has increasingly been

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understood to be made rather than given, to be a (shifting) product of psycho-social and cultural processes. In 'Women's time', Julia Kristeva poses the crucial question: 'what can "identity", even "sexual identity", mean in a new theoretical and scientific space where the very notion of identity is challenged?'.[6] Other theorists maintain the concept in their thinking, but refuse the presupposition of any fixity or permanence in any given identity. For example, Judith Butler, in her contestatory analysis of both the politics of sexuality and representational politics, argues for a situation in which it is possible to 'affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand'.[7] If identities are to be adopted only within the contingency of individual intentions and needs or particular situations, this brings admirable freedom for psychic movement, but it does pose problems for any stable theory of personal development and social incorporation. Indeed, in one of the most proactively interesting recent analyses of how feminine and masculine identities can be defined and developed, Nancy J. Chodorow argues for the importance of women to recognise that woman as subject can expand into woman as subject–object as 'she becomes object to her own subjectivity as she internally relates to and identifies with or against another internally experienced woman', and she insists that '(w)oman as subject or as subject–object contrasts with woman as object in the masculine psyche'.[8] Chodorow persuasively challenges the founding premise and, implicitly, the historicity of Freud's differentiation of masculine and feminine according to an axis of active and passive, which is actually based on 'the distinction between phallically endowed and castrated: women, basically, are castrated men' (p. 28). According to Chodorow:

> gender makes a difference but does so in particular ways [. . .] What becomes important to an individual is not just femaleness or maleness but the psychologically and culturally *specific* meanings that gender holds *for that individual.*
>
> The problem, then, is how to consider gendered subjectivity without turning such a consideration into objective claims about gender difference [. . .]
>
> [The] sense of gendered self is itself individually created and particular, a unique fusion of cultural meaning with a personal emotional meaning that is tied to the individual psycho-biographical history of any individual. (pp. 90–1)

Although Chodorow does not frame her arguments explicitly in terms of identity and identification (except to have a pertinent side-swipe at Freud's

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construal of gender identity and personality almost exclusively as issues of sexuality (see p. 99, note 4)), her conception of subjectivity as grounded in the lived and gendered experiences of the individual subject is a productive way of approaching an understanding of how senses of the self can be established through looking inwards as well as outwards – and finding plurality in both cases.

As the concept of identity has been shown to be inadequate as a way of accurately defining our means of psycho-social engagement and development, it is gradually being replaced by the more appropriate concept of identification, which has the merit of fusing the psychoanalytical and the political and of addressing the issues of both the individual subject and the group. Yet even identification poses problems, in that a subject may identify with women and/or her mother, yet in a misplaced or even deluded way, since she may see no other alternatives for identification. In Escalle's work, the women protagonists invariably identify with the mother, even if this identificatory process is usually aggressive. The men chosen (or found) as sexual partners are abusers (and not infrequently grubby and unwashed), and the fathers weak, emotionally and familially ineffectual, simultaneously sexually inadequate for their wives and unfaithful to them. The father is therefore an impossible source and target of identification – and yet psychoanalysis, from Freud through to Kristeva, tells us that the first identification is with the father-as-phallus, even if, as Kristeva herself points out, that father is no more than a question mark over the mother's lack of a phallus.[9] In Escalle's desolate world where rough promiscuous sex and the quest for violence seem to be the only substitutes for the lack of love and affection, identification takes the form of an aggressive anti-identification with the mother. The full implications of this in the context of masochism will be explored later, but for now I want to insist on the importance in these novels of a generalised sense of loss which haunts the characters and permeates Escalle's discourse: the term '*abandon*' (abandonment), for instance, occurs time and again in her novels like a leitmotif.

The four novels tell of anger, bitterness, uncertainty, violence, promiscuity and above all the loss – or, more precisely, the absence – of self-knowledge and sense of self-worth. They tell tales that reveal families and societies riven by misunderstandings, silences and cruelties, and seamed through with indifferences that drive the characters to sudden passions and extreme acts of violence. They portray social units in disarray and in the process of disintegrating, and thereby cause anxiety in the reader, but they are not driven by any moral or political purpose. Rather, these narratives –

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all written in the third person, although they often contain reported streams of fantasy-consciousness – unveil, probe and expose what it is to be a woman in an environment in which there is no space for growth and no knowledge of how to grow and separate from one's roots. Significantly, Escalle's protagonists are not always young women and the objects of their erotic attentions can also be not merely older men, but positively decrepit, senile men.

In *Un long baiser*, a disillusioned, lonely old woman returns, after a long absence, to the house in which she grew up in an unnamed town in a hot, unspecified North African country. The house is filled with memories of her past life and of the abuse she suffered at the hands of her mother. Childhood fears and a sense of powerlessness haunt the old woman still, so that when two male intruders break into her house and stalk her, she can do nothing to resist their desires. The older, Gribouille, is grey-haired, bearded, with dirty clothes, like a tramp, and seems to be fleeing the misery of poverty and 'la vie triste' (p. 44) (the sadness of life), whereas the younger, Virgile, is black-haired, with a bruised face, and initially seems to want to flee her anger at their attempted break-in. Both are defined as fleeing (*en fuite*); both, like the old woman, have 'ce goût de poussière dans la bouche, le goût de l'amertume, de la désillusion' (p. 44) (that taste of ashes in the mouth, that taste of bitterness and disillusionment). Gribouille caresses her, slipping a finger into her mouth to see how many teeth she has left, and then slides a hand under her dress, initially to the disgust of his younger friend who none the less joins in the coarse fondling of this aged body of a woman who has 'passé l'âge de l'amour' (p. 46) (passed the age of love). He takes her time and again, in acts of joyless and mindless sex that she accepts only by remembering her lover. Virgile then decides to make her suck him as she is being penetrated brutally by Gribouille. The sex acts become increasingly violent until she is finally kicked and beaten to death. Virgile commits suicide out of despair and disgust, and Gribouille starves alongside their two bodies. All that remains is ugliness and pathos (p. 72).

Pulsion recounts the story of Pauline, who is in her early twenties, the older daughter of French parents living in Morocco. Her father is a respected doctor, her mother an unstable and deeply dissatisfied woman with only one desire – to leave the country to live in France. This fervent wish is not shared by the family – and especially not by Pauline – but the mother's will prevails. The novel follows Pauline's attempts to lessen the pain of the enforced departure through indiscriminate and increasingly violent sex with Arab boys and men. Wild with jealousy, her boyfriend,

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François, takes her away to an isolated hotel where, in scenes demonically evocative of Cocteau's *Les Enfants terribles*, he locks both her and himself in a room, which they gradually destroy. But even here, Pauline initiates sex – with the hotel manager, whom she entices into the room and into sex with her. Jealousy drives François to attack him, and the manager is wounded by a bullet from his own gun. Instead of treating the wound properly, François – with growing cooperation from Pauline – resorts to torture. Eventually, the pain from his partially severed, gangrenous foot grows so extreme that the manager rips it off himself. The two decide to leave, abandoning the manager to be rescued by an ambulance crew, but Pauline remains haunted by 'la magie de la chambre' (p. 80) (the magic of the bedroom). She and her parents finally board the ferry for France, and the fissures between mother and father, and between mother and daughter, widen further.

In *Herbert jouit*, Escalle returns to the virtually taboo subject of the sexuality of the elderly, this time portraying a decrepit old man whose sexuality is revived by a somewhat younger woman. The protagonist, who finally gives her name as Renée, is haunted by violent dreams involving her (now dead) mother. She has carried throughout her life the sense of disgust that her mother felt and expressed about her daughter and her daughter's body. However, in a social club for old people, 'Renée' meets Herbert. By overcoming her own sense of disgust at the aspect and behaviour of Herbert's aged and somewhat dirty body, she rediscovers pleasure in her own body and, in nurturing her geriatric lover like a newborn baby (p. 80), she learns gradually to come to terms with her own childhood rejection. In the end, her sexual satisfaction is as great as his. Both have succeeded in – and enjoyed – cheating death for a while.

Escalle's most recent novel, *Où est-il cet amour*, is her most ambitious and complex work. It tells the story of the perverse sexuality of an abusive, incestuous, secretive and mendacious family. Told from the point of view of the daughter, Anne, who in vain craves affection from her parents, the novel follows Anne's attempts to make sense of the difference between the love shown to her by her nanny, Khadija, the humiliation that her father and grandfather inflict on their respective wives, her father's love of prostitutes and his necrophiliac passion for his dead patients (some of whom were former mistresses), and the masochistic sex that she undergoes with her boyfriend, Léonard. Anne's mother, herself abused as a child by the (much older) man who was to become her husband, is frigid in every sense of the word. She is incapable of loving herself or her children. While she endures

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and ignores her husband's liaisons with prostitutes and women patients from his abortion clinic, she does not know the crucial fact that he has also had a passionate affair with her own mother, an affair that was witnessed – from the wardrobe in which she was often kept locked as a small child – by Anne, who gazed on as her father penetrated her grandmother. Tormented by this family secret, Anne in the end finds grim satisfaction in exacting violent and triumphant revenge on all of her family by murdering her ailing grandmother in a way that can never be traced.

What marks these harrowing novels is their *depth*, a depth which comes from the complexity of emotions and impulses that lurk beneath – and that underpin and, indeed, generate – these simple, spare, direct accounts of 'perverse' desire and sex. Since Aristotle, it has been accepted in the West that sexual pleasure, while desirable, subverts rationality. In the eighteenth century, when so many modern points of reference were determined, reason and rationality were instituted as the foundations of personal freedom – which was true freedom only if it led to and entailed self-discipline and moderation. Furthermore, rationality was considered to be the mark of masculinity, in contra-distinction to feminine intuition and, ultimately, hysteria. However, as Vic Seidler has argued, the identification of masculinity with reason and the consequent manipulation of language by men pose problems for modern men, perhaps most insidiously because 'men can learn to use language to distance and hold in check their experience [. . .] we can learn to use language instrumentally to conceal ourselves'.[10] For men, then, language becomes less a means of communicating or expressing than a defence against self-exposure, a means of distancing themselves from their emotions. While there are other deeply embedded institutional and social reasons for the problems that individual men experience in speaking of themselves, the cultural heritage of enforced silence or, at least, reticence has come to form part of the psychic make-up of modern Western man. Women have not been subject to such silencings, at least not directly, but they have been denied access to language as subjects, being rather maintained, as Luce Irigaray has powerfully argued, in the position of the object of language.[11] Indeed, it is widely recognised that the relationship between women and language is bound up with the degree of consciousness they have been permitted to have within patriarchy (the historical prominence given to hysteria as a 'feminine' condition testifies powerfully to the way in which men have oppressed and maintained women inside a language that they define and control).

In many ways, Escalle's work takes issue with the notion that women

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are silenced through oppression by men. She does not operate a simplistic reversal of oppressive relationships nor does she conceive of or present women's language as some outpouring of intuition or subjectivity. Rather, in her world, women can simply have and use language. This possession of language often frightens those around them, as in *Pulsion*, where Pauline's mother is terrified by her daughter's 'pouvoir de dire' (p. 60) (ability to say), which Pauline herself can see is – for others – a monstrous thing. When she chooses to have rapid, wordless sex with a grubby, middle-aged man who has picked her up when she is hitch-hiking, she offers to have sex with him again, even though she does not find him at all attractive, as long as she can then re-enter the world of language:

> Elle soulève sa robe, pose la main de l'homme contre son sexe.
> 'Nous pourrions recommencer... si je peux parler ensuite.'
> L'homme la pénètre de ses doigts. Il dit:
> 'Si vous arrivez à parler ainsi, pourquoi pas? Alors vous vouliez parler?'
> Jamais elle n'aurait imaginé avoir autant de plaisir. (p. 13)

> (She hitches up her dress, puts the man's hand on her vagina.
> 'We can do it again... if I can talk afterwards.'
> The man penetrates her with his fingers. He says:
> 'If that helps you to talk, then why not? So, you wanted to talk?'
> She had never imagined that she could experience such pleasure.)

It is evident throughout the novel that Pauline sees no need to explain her desire for unknown men or for violence to be inflicted on her (p. 46); rather, her attitude towards language and violence is bound up with a preoccupation with the giving of form and shape. For her, saying is not explaining; it consists of giving names and thereby ordering the chaos around her (cf. p. 89).

The question of consciousness is, of course, at the heart of all attitudes towards existence, whether one is a man or a woman. However, as the French feminist anthropologist, Nicole-Claude Mathieu has shown, society has contrived to make it difficult for women to have access to the information necessary to make informed choices, notably in the realm of sexuality and violence.[12] Women have traditionally been considered by male theorists such as Freud and Krafft-Ebing as 'essentially' masochistic, and for this reason focused on the 'perversion' of masochism in men. However, underpinning their thinking lies the view rehearsed later and most forcefully by Bataille in *Eroticism*: while women are the privileged objects of desire, they are inherently no more desirable than men, 'but they

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lay themselves open to be desired. They put themselves forward as objects for the aggressive desire of men. Not every woman is a potential prostitute, but prostitution is the logical consequence of the feminine [i.e. passive] attitude'.[13]

Bataille's reading of feminine sexuality seems particularly appropriate when reading Escalle's work, since many of her characters are highly promiscuous, having easy sex with many men and putting themselves in the role of passive recipient of male desire, violence and abuse. On the other hand, much feminist thinking has considered masochism to be self-hatred and consequently something from which women should try to free themselves, since masochistic women are perceived not only as being oppressed, but also as colluding in their own oppression. However, Mathieu problematises this, first by questioning whether women can in fact consent to their subordination if they are not fully aware of what their subordination entails and then why it has come about and by arguing that in situations of (domestic, sexual) violence, women are always oppressed before the violence takes place – by the forces of social order – and cannot collude because they are not fully conscious, never mind autonomous (p. 225).

Yet is consciousness always possible – or even desirable? Furthermore, is the insistence on the value of consciousness – even in this context – not simply a reinforcing of the eighteenth-century privileging of reason and rationality and therefore of masculinity?

While based on some premises that feminism would necessarily want to challenge, Bataille's analysis of eroticism none the less offers a useful perspective on how one lives an intense sexuality. For him, eroticism is 'the disequilibrium in which the being consciously calls his own existence in question . . . the deliberate loss of self in eroticism is manifest; no one can question it' (p. 31). A lived sexuality binds life in and towards death: 'Eroticism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death', and 'Desire is really the desire to die' (pp. 11 and 141). A key point here is that there is deliberate, willed loss of self when engaged in erotic sexuality. Bataille's thinking is useful, because it foregrounds the importance of the notion of the relationship with the self without falling into a narrow 'conscious vs. unconscious dichotomy'. There is a conscious choice to lose balance, sense of self and adherence to normative sexuality, yet this is effected in order to be oneself more fully and to avoid what he conceives of as the danger of sexual exuberance being reduced to a mere thing (pp. 155–8). The fundamental paradox for Bataille is that:

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> Sexuality, thought of as filthy or beastly, is still the greatest barrier to the reduction of man to the level of the thing [. . .]
> *Animal nature*, or sexual exuberance, is that which prevents us from being reduced to mere things.
> *Human nature*, on the contrary, geared to specific ends in work, tends to make things of us at the expense of our sexual exuberance. (p. 158)

Bataille's work undermines the hegemony of reason by triangulating willed loss of sense of self, the animal(istic) and the human (the social). He also challenges the principles underpinning both self-discipline and societal discipline and organisation, showing how the controlling of sexuality by laws, customs and taboos infects sex with hypocrisy, guilt, exploitation, anxiety and notions of 'perversion'. For Bataille, it is essential to recognise the necessity of transgression, particularly with regard to the place of violence, which can lead to the liberation of the instincts: he notes that there is a 'complementary relationship uniting taboos which reject violence with acts of transgression which set it free' (p. 49). Without a sense of transgression, he suggests, 'we no longer have the feeling of freedom that the full accomplishment of the sexual act demands, – so much so that a scabrous situation is sometimes necessary to a blasé individual for him to reach the peak of enjoyment' (p. 107).

Most of Escalle's women yearn to leave their homes, both physically and mentally: they are profoundly dissatisfied, unwanted, unloved and lost, seemingly congenitally useless and at a loose end, their lives deadened by ennui. The only domain in which they can exercise choice is that of sexuality, where they choose to be victims in order to experience some sort of intensity and also to find some sort of comfort (cf. *Où est-il cet amour*, pp. 107 and 114). For instance, in *Où est-il cet amour*, after Léo has penetrated Anne with a crude dildo he has made himself from a block of wood, he decides to sodomise her with his fingers, his face becoming ever more distorted as he ploughs deeper into her. She accepts this mutely and muses:

> C'est cela l'amour? songe-t-elle.
> Il se fait plus violent.
> Son corps meurtri n'existe plus. Elle n'en finit pas de frissonner. (p. 68)

> (So is this what love is, she wonders.
> He penetrates her more and more violently.
> Her bruised body no longer exists. She trembles over and over and over again.)

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Gayle Rubin shows how contemporary sexual norms differentiate between 'good sex' which is broadly heterosexual, marital, monogamous and reproductive and 'bad sex', which is the sex of the unmarried, gay or lesbian, promiscuous, non-procreative and those who engage in casual and/or sado-masochistic sex.[14] According to these norms, Escalle's women are all clearly practitioners of 'bad sex' and deviant with regard to the espoused and lived norms of most of her readers. However, while on reading the novels, one cannot but be shocked by the violence and the humiliation the women undergo, one also accepts their treatment, first, because it is presented so directly, without either comment or hyperbolic language, and secondly, because the women so clearly choose a sexuality that is abusive for their own internal reasons.

The feminist philosopher, Linda LeMoncheck, argues that sexuality should not be divided into 'good' and 'bad' or 'normal' and 'perverse', but should be rethought as 'a differentiated category of nonstigmatized sexual variation'.[15] She further argues that from such a perspective:

> both normal and perverse sex become forms of sexual difference. Within this framework, no sexual preference is advantaged by being 'normal' . . . understanding both the normal and the perverse as two types of sexual difference from the 'view from somewhere different' has the added benefit of revealing the ways in which normative judgements about sex may involve pragmatics *and* aesthetics *and* ethics. (p. 108)

The potential triangulation of aesthetics and pragmatics with ethics is a radical step, but a creatively enabling one – one which helps us to view Escalle's women and their choices more positively, since their decisions often avoid or bypass the ethical (which none the less remains as a backdrop), as they opt for particular situations for pragmatic, self-protecting and self-furthering reasons (and occasionally, in an almost Augustinian way, as with Pauline in *Pulsion*, so that language and expression can give shape to their lives).

Escalle's women undoubtedly make masochistic choices. Yet does this make them perverse? In *A Defence of Masochism*, Anita Phillips argues that: 'We are all masochists – at least some of the time, in some form or other, because in an important way, the sense of a self depends on it'.[16] She highlights the fact that post-feminist women can consciously choose masochism, but that this means that 'masochism, once the province of the man who wanted to enjoy the feeling of being placed in an inferior position, can now be seen as a problem for women, who have repudiated secondary

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status and striven for equality' (pp. 48–9). Crucially, her reading of this so-called perversion argues that masochism 'is not so much about bringing pleasure to an existing suffering but about bringing sensation to a state of unfeeling' (p. 63). Escalle's women do not seek to understand or justify; they simply seek to escape from unfeeling by following their instincts – which may seem abnormal, unnatural or perverted to some readers. In many ways, her novels are challenges to, even attacks on, the power of the normal. It is, however, important to remember that the normal is not, and should not be, equated with the natural, but that it is the normal which holds sway in society. Furthermore, we should remember that even the natural is a category that is suspect and invariably context-dependent.

As Phillips argues, in psychoanalytic terms, when a woman chooses masochism in a relationship, sado-masochism can be seen as representing masculine domination and feminine submission in a pure form, with the masochist being 'a woman with a problem: she cannot separate from her mother . . . she has difficulties in becoming *psychologically* autonomous' (p. 52). In this scenario, the woman has an image of a good, powerful mother and protects this fantasy from destruction by 'inhibiting her own aggression, which leads her to identify with a sadist instead to get a vicarious sense of power and freedom' (p. 52). Escalle's novels are striking for their depictions of violent and abusive sex, but it is important to note that the relationships that her women have with men and sex are all bound up with their relationships with their (abusive and cruel) mothers. Maternal love is to be found only in surrogate mothers: for instance, the sole affection and innocent, playful tenderness Anne ever experiences in *Où est-il cet amour* comes from Fatima, the mother of Jilali, the gardener (p. 79).

Each of the novels begins with an evocation of the ways in which the protagonists have been mistreated by their mothers. In *Un long baiser*, the old woman remembers how she was tortured by her mother, who tied her up until she cried and then simply watched her struggling, telling her imperiously to be silent. However, as she recalls these scenes, her attitude changes: 'A présent elle est cet enfant qui veut bouger et cette femme qui l'en empêche' (p. 13) (Right now she is both the child who wants to move about and the woman who stops her from doing so). The aggressive anti-identification with the mother is now doubled by an identification with herself as mother, which makes her both victim and oppressor – of herself. In *Pulsion*, Pauline's mother feels a 'visceral hatred' for her eldest daughter, whom she says, she could happily see die without feeling the slightest regret (pp. 16–17). *Herbert jouit* begins with 'an atrocious nightmare' in

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which Renée's mother is torturing her by disembowelling her with a knife, an experience which the child experiences as an almost sexual 'ecstasy' (p. 7). Renée returns to this scene later, when she 'offers' her ageing body to her dead mother and muses in chillingly eucharistic overtones: 'Tu cherches dans le sang et le corps de ta fille l'idée que tu te faisais de l'amour, de l'enfance, de la maternité' (p. 137) (You seek in the blood and the body of your daughter your idea of what love, childhood and maternity should be). In *Où est-il cet amour*, Anne is often locked in a wardrobe for long periods of time – according to her mother, for 'educational' purposes, so that she learns about 'the vicissitudes of life' (p. 10). Her mother hurts her physically when punishing her, yet it is in the wardrobe, cramped and howling that Anne has her first erotic experiences (pp. 10–11).

The novels suggest clearly that the 'perverse' and self-abusive sexualities of the women characters are formed in childhood, notably in relationship to (and against) cruel mothers who withhold love. However, one must avoid the temptation of thinking simplistically that Escalle's mothers are responsible – and blamed – for their daughters' adult perversities. As Bataille has affirmed, eroticism 'is the problematic part of ourselves' (p. 273). Much more than her men, who conform to stereotypical norms of dominant male heterosexual behaviour, Escalle's women live out unconventional and challenging sexualised lives – because that is how they are. Psychoanalytical and psychological theories and models can aid us to understand the context in which they live and submit, but they are not sufficient, since we are dealing here with fictions, which have meaning on their own terms, rather than as narrations of psychodramas.

Foucault has persuasively argued that in Sade, 'sex is without any norm or intrinsic rule that might be formulated from its own nature'.[17] I would not argue that Escalle is a Sadean woman in any simplistic way, in that her expository scrutiny of 'perverse' sexual practices and sexualities has more to do with the (inner and social) politics of identity than with the philosophy of being. However, it is undeniable that she is a transgressive writer in the sense that she chooses to write about subjects that are surrounded by taboos and moral interdictions. Her novels involve complex personal relationships between people who are emotionally damaged, psychologically unstable and sexually disturbed. At least, that is how we may initially judge them. Yet the reader is drawn into these fictional worlds as if they are quite normal – and certainly the novels present them as such. Escalle deals with the very real problems of abuse, exploitation, emotional inadequacy, violence and 'perverse' sexuality. However, in reality, these

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issues are all too often marginalised, relegated to specialised discourses or simply not discussed at all, or, at worst, criminalised.

Escalle's work confronts the oppressive power of the normal by saying – simply, directly – that another world, another way of living, is (also) normal, one in which the marginal, the silenced and the occulted become mainstream and are posited as the 'norm'. As a creator of fictions, Escalle can and does establish her universe with authority, in a prose which is clear, confident and focused. These novels do not request understanding; they *state* and so compel acceptance, even if only at the time of their reading. The media have been unjust to Escalle in over-rapidly compartmentalising her as one of the 'new barbarians'. Her work is best seen as belonging in the long tradition of exploration of the erotic and of the self's relationship with it that in France is associated especially with such names as Sade and Bataille. However, as her discourse itself reveals, explicitly or intertextually, the engagement is also with psychoanalysis, with Christianity, and with the problematics of post-colonialism. These works are very modern; they also speak of issues which are in us all, but which society silences for its own reasons of control. To read Escalle is not a pleasurable experience, that is certain. However, both intellectually and emotionally, it is immensely challenging and enriching to read her novels which successfully dare to give voice to the silenced and to open the horizons of the blinkered.

Notes

1 See Didier Jacob, 'Les nouveaux barbares', in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 1816 (26 August 1999), http://archives.nouvelobs.com/.

2 See Isabelle Falconnier, *L'Hébdo*, 35 (2 September 1999), www.webdo.ch/hebdo/hebdo_1999/hebdo_35/culture2_35.html.

3 See Damien Le Guay, 'Rentrée féminine?', *France Catholique*, 2714 (12 November 1999), pp. 22–3.

4 Hélène Cixous, *Readings: The Poetics of Blanchot Joyce, Kafka, Kleist, Lispector, and Tsvetayeva*, ed., trans. and introd. Verena Andermatt Conley (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 112.

5 Hélène Cixous, 'The last painting or the portrait of God', in '*Coming to Writing' and Other Essays*, introd. Susan Rubin Suleiman, ed. Deborah Jenson, trans. Sarah Cornell, Deborah Jenson *et al.* (Cambridge, MA and London; Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 119.

6 Julia Kristeva, 'Women's time', trans. Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, in Toril Moi (ed.) *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 187–213 (p. 209).

7 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 5.

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8 Nancy J. Chodorow, *Femininities, Masculinities, Sexualities: Freud and Beyond* (London: Free Association Books, 1994), p. 3.

9 See Julia Kristeva, 'Freud and love: treatment and its discontents', trans. Léon S. Roudiez, in Toril Moi (ed.) *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 238–71 (pp. 256–7).

10 Victor J. Seidler, *Rediscovering Masculinity: Reason, Language and Sexuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 123–4.

11 See, for instance, Luce Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Minuit, 1977), pp. 122 and 133; *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

12 Nicole-Claude Mathieu, *L'Arraisonnement des femmes: essais en anthropologie des sexes* (Paris: Editions de l'école des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1985), pp. 169–245.

13 Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. Mary Dalwood (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1987), p. 131.

14 See Gayle Rubin, 'Thinking sex: notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality', in Carole Vance (ed.), *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (London: Pandora Press, 1989), pp. 267–319, especially pp. 280–4.

15 Linda LeMoncheck, *Loose Women, Lecherous Men: A Feminist Philosophy of Sex* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 108.

16 Anita Phillips, *A Defence of Masochism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998), p. 5.

17 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 149.

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