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Summary

The article reviews and interprets the *Story of O* in an effort to clarify what constitutes the O or Zero of the identity and nature of man and life/reality. It soon becomes evident that defining the authentic O is well-nigh impossible as all sign systems, or texts, are, in the final analysis inadequate, as the origin and essence of identity and life remain elusive and inscrutable. The symbols employed, relevant either to conscious life or to unconscious existence, attempt to reveal O, but cannot succeed unequivocally. Despite the imposing influence wielded by knowledge and reason, man remains insecure and uncertain.

Opsomming

Die artikel bespreek en interpreteer die *Story of O* in 'n poging om te verduidelik presies wat die O of Zero van die mens se identiteit en aard, asook lewe/werklikheid, konstitueer. Dit blyk spoedig dat die outentieke O nie sondermeer gedefinieer kan word nie, aangesien alle simboolsisteme of tekste, op stuk van sake ontoereikend is omdat die oorsprong en essensie van identiteit en lewe ontwykend en onpeilbaar bly. Die simbole wat ingespan word, hetsy relevant tot die bewustelike lewe of die onbewustelike bestaan, poeg om O te onthul, maar slaag nie onomwonde daarin nie. Ten spyte van die effektiewe bydrae wat kennis en rede maak, bly die mens wankelend en onseker.

You might well ask why I, a member of the Afrikaans Department, have chosen an English translation of a French novel to illustrate what I have to say on this occasion. My main reasons are: firstly, the official language at this University is English and it is, therefore, customary for inaugural addresses to be given in English. In this regard, if one may call it that, the same questions could be raised about using a translation of a sample taken from Afrikaans Literature, whether I have done the translation myself or not. The choice as to which of the two alternatives would have been the better one as well as deciding whether or not I, as a speaker of Afrikaans, am sufficiently competent to read an English translation of a French text, I leave to you. Secondly and lastly, consisting of signs, Pauline Réage's novel, *Story of O* (1992), is part of man's semiotic universe, that is, it uses signs or symbols to communicate with other human beings about something which lies beyond our signs, and which man symbolically calls his identity

and the world.

In this respect, *Story of O*, illustrates in a unique way how each sign system, such as for example the philosophical one, has its own devotees on a local, national and eventually international level, devotees who may differ among themselves, but nevertheless also share what Wittgenstein in his *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (1971) calls "family resemblances". For Wittgenstein these sign systems are different "language games" each of these communities play in order to reach out symbolically to that something, that O or Zero of what they call identity and life. In this sense there are different clans, e.g. the literary, the philosophical and the scientific, each playing their game according to an own set of rules or rites distinguishing between what they symbolically call O locally, nationally or internationally and the O of the next clan. In the last instance, however, all these different families belong as producers and users of signs to one big family, that is, the symbolic or semiotic universe of man.

As a teacher of the literary semiotic system, or discourse as it is nowadays called, I, therefore, whether consciously or not, am part of a local, national and international community. Should I be considered a defector in reading the familial English translation of my French relatives as *Story of O*, I can at least not be called a nepotist.

For Wittgenstein's (1971) interrelatedness of discourses called "family resemblances" I use the more theoretical concept, intertext, around which my whole argument revolves. This practice of synonymous usage is applied throughout for other more theoretical terms, e.g. for text, narrative/story and myth. I realize that all words/terms are eventually theoretical in that they refer to a specific category of things, classifying them as more or less similar: without his generalities man cannot specify. In using synonyms I hope to temper the accusation of being theoretically too esoteric in employing what I consider the tools of my trade as a teacher, namely literary theory, as my basic frame of reference. I consider a shared theory as a prerequisite for every familial discourse on a local, national and international level. In applying a common theory the members of each family attempt to communicate as objectively and scientifically as possible with one another about the symbolic O of their discourse. This would not only assist each in understanding his own local or national experience of O better, but also the similar experience of others. In this way each member would become an initiate in the larger international family of that specific discourse. Instead, therefore, of local or national theoretical esotericism or exclusivity, preference is given to an international or more inclusive kind of esotericism to enhance a mutual understanding of how the literary discourse or family differs from for example the botanical one, although

both eventually belong to the same semiotic universe in their quest for the O of identity and life.

The O in the title, *Story of O*, according to my reading/interpretation, refers to an idea that has haunted man throughout the ages. Stated as a question: what is the O or Zero of the identity and nature of man and life/reality? Considering the modern/postmodern legitimization crisis of reason and knowledge in all our discourses, we are today as uncertain and, therefore, as insecure as ever before regarding the elusive O. Hence the immediacy and popularity of this two-part novel.

Part I of this diptych, published in 1954, has seen, since its first publication in 1972 in English, twenty-one reprints of which the last was in 1992, while part II, published in 1969, went through five reprints, since its first publication in 1985 in English of which the last one was in 1992.

The popularity of the diptych, to which the reprints attest, may be ascribed to the physical/emotional and intellectual/rational impact it has on its reader. To oversimplify: it shocks the reader in both contexts out of his complacent slumber, forcing him to look again at himself and his ideas about O. The greatness of the diptych of the *Story of O* lies in the fact that the different faculties of man complement one another in a rather unusual or, for some readers, an abnormal or unnatural way. In the latter instance what this diptych conveys is unacceptable to the reader because it does not restate his conventional pattern of how these faculties should be integrated. He calls it pornographic, banal and bathetic without, however, realizing that this kind of labelling is actually what the *Story of O* is about, i.e., what the O or Zero of the labelling is.

The *Story of O*, as should be clear, is haunted by the same ghost which is repeatedly reincarnated not only in the literary aesthetic discourse, but in all discourses of man which deal with this apparently impossible quest of a meeting with the authentic O of man and life, be the discourse philosophy, psychology, political science or one of the natural sciences.

All these discourses of man, in using signs or symbols, can never be that to which they point, since the authentic O lies beyond these sign systems or texts. In this sense all texts create "as if" worlds, i.e. they attempt to come to grips with something that always escapes them. These, "as if" worlds are therefore symbolic creations or texts which we write and read in order to understand, to write and read ourselves and what we call the world. As texts they are merely translations of O, of the Kantian "Ding an sich", the thing in itself, i.e. of the origin or energy of identity and life. Pauline Réage assesses this elusive being or thing as follows:

It escapes us and escapes us endlessly, through the walls, the ages, the interdictions. It passes from the one to the other, from one age to another, from one country to another. Those who speak in its behalf are merely translators who, without knowing why (why they, why that particular moment in time?) have been allowed for one brief moment to seize a few strands of this immemorial network of forbidden dreams

(Réage 1992 II: 16)

All these texts, these discourses, intersect as symbolic representations of the idea of the intertext, the *Story of O*, and symbolize different dreams of translating the eventual ineffable meeting with O.

As has been said, my argument revolves around the concept of intertext. In order to situate it I have chosen deconstruction as my theoretical framework. Deconstruction is not so much a philosophy as a way of thinking about our texts and our readings. Within this framework no text is new or original, but a quotation of other texts, a meeting place where they echo, an intertext, which in some way or other relates texts with each other. This intertext is the foundation of man and culture, since both identity and culture are written and read by man in order to understand himself. Writing, and by implication reading, are here understood in the Derridean sense as an archewriting or -reading i.e. a primeval writing and reading which, as what is called "The Book of Nature", existed and exist prior to what we ordinarily call speech and writing. This archewriting is simultaneously present and absent as O, as origin or source, when we speak or write, whether we call our speaking and writing French, English or Zulu. The Cartesian *Cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) within the deconstructionist perspective is, therefore, replaced by what the Afrikaans author Koos Prinsloo (1992: 127) in his anthology of short stories translated as "Slaughterhouse" says: "I quote, therefore I am". As human beings and consequently part of the process of semiosis, both writer and reader are intertexts which determine their beings: David Harvey in *The Condition of Post-modernity* explains this in the following way:

Writers who create texts or use words do so on the basis of all other texts and words they have encountered, while readers deal with them in the same way. Cultural life is then viewed as a series of texts intersecting with other texts, producing more texts (including that of the literary critic, who aims to produce another piece of literature in which texts under consideration are intersecting freely with other texts that happen to have affected his or her writing). This intertextual weaving has a life of its own. Whatever we write conveys meanings we do not or could not possibly intend, and our words cannot say what we mean. It is vain to try and master a text because the perpetual weaving is beyond our control. Recognizing that, the deconstructionist impulse is to look inside one text for

another, dissolve one text into another, or build one text into another.

(Harvey 1990: 49-50)

My text or story is, therefore, an attempt to look inside one text, or in this case the *Story of O* for another text or intertext into which both my own and *Story of O* dissolve. It is in this sense that the title of this paper, "A story of a story of *Story of O*", should be understood.

The title of a text is usually an important interpretative clue in finding one text in another, i.e. looking for its intertextuality. The *Story of O*, the identical title for both parts I and II of Pauline Réage's diptych, is in this regard no exception. Having read it one realizes that the missing definite article and the O suggest that it is not so much the stories of what happened to a specific individual at a distinct time and place, but rather the symbolic enactment of a question as old as man or the world itself: what is the authentic O of the identity of man and nature/reality? The *Story of O* is therefore one of the many texts which dramatically enact the intertext of man in search of the Self and of life or the Cosmos.

This intertext of the idea of O in its many different adaptations not only writes man as individual, but also as group or culture symbolizing his varied semiotic meetings with O. These texts determine his existence in the sense that man repetitiously writes, reads and quotes them, whether consciously or unconsciously, to determine what he himself is, and what life is. In this way he creates himself, and at the same time becomes the master and slave of his own creations or destiny. Embodying his systems of conditions and customs, whether religious, political, ethical or otherwise, these texts embody the foundations of his existence and as such he reveres them, and they acquire a cultic status.

Pauline Réage's *Story of O* is, therefore, one of the many versions of the intertext *Story of O*, a story already present in the dramatized and ritualized enactments of the primeval myths of man as dramas or theatres of life. These rites are, to the individual, a passage to the meeting with the O of existence, they are initiation processes or tests to which he subjects himself voluntarily to become an initiate in a specific way of life. As a novice he first gets a personal initiator/teacher or high priest to assist him in the rites affecting a meeting with O and the way of existence of that specific community assembled around their symbolic adaptation of O. Eventually, as an initiate, he must execute those rites automatically, i.e. without the assistance of the personal initiator/teacher, to become in turn, amongst other things, a personal initiator to others.

A symbolic meeting with O can, as has been said, never be a meeting with the authentic O. Tom Chetwynd in his *Dictionary of Symbols* expresses

this problem in religious terms:

The problem of God: On the supra-human level, the problem for symbolism is to account for the large proportion of symbols which point beyond human experience. Or to put it another way, the danger of the psychological approach to symbolism is that it may be missing the most important point by tending to become too man-based and man-centred. For example, the fact that Jung calls the highest totality of man "the Self" does little to dispel this feeling of uneasiness. His elaborate definitions of the word - which has its background more in Hinduism than in the West - do not always get through. Without a firm grasp of man's dependence upon the processes of life, of which he has a share, people can get inflated with an unpleasant selfimportance which could become a widespread social catastrophe, as well as a personal one.

(Chetwynd 1982: 341)

The symbol becomes man-centred when absolutized by human reason as the authentic O of the Self or life/reality. What Chetwynd also makes clear is the problematical nature of the symbolic identity called the Self, and that absolutizations of the symbolic O have catastrophic consequences for both individual and group. The different absolutizations result in power struggles for hegemony: in the panoply of O, individual and group take the field against one another, reducing the other to an object or animal which must be destroyed or killed as the enemy of their authentic O, as contra human nature.

The different symbolic adaptations of O are no more and no less than semiotic concretizations of the idea of O in which O paradoxically remains simultaneously present and absent, an anonymous and impersonal someone, something or power. All texts belonging to the intertext, *Story of O*, are therefore ritual incantations in order to conjure up this known/unknown One of the Self and the Cosmos:

In the framework of symbolism, all the different religions can only be viewed as varied expressions of the undivided Truth. Because life cannot be divided from life, so there is only one TREE of life with many branches. The human psyche, mankind, the energy of the Cosmos and whatever lies beyond the limited range of human perceptions is all-there-is for symbolism to refer to, in a partial or incomplete way. The differences in religion arise from the differences of symbolism, but not in what the symbols refer to: a man and the Cosmos, from which man can deduce something of the nature of conscious life and unconscious existence; and the relationship between the two.

(Chetwynd 1982: 341-342)

Our symbols, whether of conscious life or unconscious existence, therefore reveal something of O, but can never equal it. This is true especially of the

cosmic TREE, the Aristotelian "unmoved mover", which as part of unconscious existence propels both the Self and the living Cosmos as a ghostlike O, which is experienced as the known/unknown One but can never be perceived. In absolutizing O differently, each community gathered around its symbolic representation of O, knits its members harmoniously together, but comes into conflict with another clan which ritually gathers around a different absolutized O. The same applies to the individual who wishes voluntarily to migrate from one community to another: he is either rejected, should he not sustain its initiation processes, or hailed as a convert.

The catastrophic consequences for both individual and group are applicable to all walks of life, be they religious, political or scientific. As initiate in the pains and joys of another way of life, the old Self or identity must die. The end or "death" of the personal communion with the initiator/teacher is the final test before the individual can arise again in a new life as a full member who can then practise the rites of this meeting with O automatically and independently. Should he not succeed, there are two basic choices: a figural death, travelling as an outsider alone through life, or a literal death arising in another or next dimension of the Cosmos. G. Bataille (*Death and Sensuality* 1984: 21), in his version of the intertext, the *Story of O*, explains the cosmic resurrection as either of two things: either arising as part of the living Cosmos in the sense that what is left after the physical decomposition becomes integrated in the continuity of that Cosmos or, in the religious sense, arising in a Great Beyond in an eternal communion with the authentic O. When different symbolizations of O meet each other as absolutized thesis and antithesis of different groups, it is either a fight to the death, or the minority/weaker group must go underground and operate clandestinely.

The symbolic O, whether consciously or unconsciously experienced, remains schizophrenic and uncertain. There would, therefore, always be a dialectical tension involved in the sense that our texts of O are the thesis of an antithesis, i.e. these texts are similar to the authentic O but, as they are symbolic, simultaneously also dissimilar. The similarity of the "as if" world temporarily and very briefly induces an experience of ecstasy, in which that which is consciously processed in strict intellectual terms as oppositions such as life/death or joy/pain dissolves in a kind of epiphany in the presence of O. Chetwynd says in this regard:

But it takes great trust, as well as great scepticism, for anyone to reach out into the UNKNOWN. Only by dissolving all rigid intellectual concepts of the conscious EGO ... can the individual let life speak for itself. This is the symbolic solution. Only then can a person compare his own authentic, spontaneous and inward ex-

perience with that of others, as expressed symbolically down the ages. Then the objective validity of such inward experience becomes apparent. The difficulty lies in creating the time and the circumstances.

(Chetwynd 1982: 341)

The real difficulty is, however, that after the ecstatic but evanescent trance, one again becomes part of the semiotic universe or what Lacan calls the Symbolic Order. Our symbolic comparisons, which result in Chetwynd's "objective validity", are therefore a symbolic validity in which the dialectical tension of thesis, i.e. like O, and its antithesis, unlike O, returns with all its previous force.

The modern legitimization crisis of reason and knowledge, considered in this light, is as old as the intertext, the *Story of O*. In Western thought it could at least already be found in Plato's distinction between "physis" and "nomos", i.e. the thing in itself and our symbolic translations of it. In Jacques Derrida's more modern story of O, namely *Of Grammatology* (1984), the problem of symbolism is explained in terms of what Derrida calls Logo-centrism and a Metaphysics of Presence. *Logos* in Greek, to put it simply, refers to the signs or words which represent thought or human reason. In Christian theology *logos* becomes the Word of God, which is His Power of Creation, and which in Christ becomes flesh or presence.

For Derrida, the word and nature/reality are identified in Western thought, in the sense that the word has become presence, it is the origin of authentic O. In those texts a system of convictions is developed in terms of which certain words are the origin or O of the Paradise of the Old Testament before man ate the forbidden fruit of the TREE of Good and Evil. Since everything before this Fall was good, such words as evil, wrong etc. became apostates which long for their previous state of being good, which is the origin, the authentic O. They therefore, in their present state, represent an absence of O which is directly and fully present in the hierarchical first terms of the system: good and bad, beautiful and ugly, right and wrong.

This identity between signs/words and things i.e. logocentrism, Derrida (1984) calls a Metaphysics of Presence, since words can never be the authentic O which lies beyond them. However, authentic O is never totally absent in our words, but simultaneously present and absent as the known-unknown One. It could be compared with the O or origin of the flight of an arrow: the origin of its movement can never be arrested as a presence since its O not only differs from moment to moment (i.e. its present is simultaneously already past and future) but it is also always deferred or postponed as a present absence. All that remains are traces of O. Derrida

undermines or deconstructs this hierarchical and absolutized oppositional structure or system in the stories of the West by showing how the oppositions in these texts could be reversed. He illustrates, as does Pauline Réage in her *Story of O*, that in experiencing LOVE for example, life and death, joy and pain become interchangeable and are no longer hierarchical oppositions, but complement each other in this ecstatic meeting with O. To put it in another way: it is Becoming rather than Being.

Jean Francois Lyotard in his *Story of O*, namely, *The Postmodern Condition* (1994) calls these stories in which the word has become flesh, and especially those who claim to be universally valid, masternarratives. He rejects them in terms of the modern/postmodern legitimization crisis of reason and knowledge. Instead of these masternarratives with a universal claim to the truth or authenticity of their meeting with O, he proposes "little" narratives in which O is locally determined. Lyotard's proposal in a paradoxical way becomes his own masternarrative of O without really solving the problematical status of O. This is clear if one considers all the civil wars today which could be seen as the catastrophic consequence of absolutizing a local esotericism of O.

Life is a theatre, a stage on which the intertext of the *Story of O* is enacted. The characters, who at different times and places play in it, are, therefore, reduced to a specific role which is ritually staged day after day as a symbolic portrayal of this idea of a meeting with the authentic O. As has already been said, the obsessional preoccupation in pursuing this idea throughout the ages in the texts of man, surely makes it one of the most prostituted ideas in the history of man. In a kind of preface entitled "A girl in LOVE" Pauline Réage, a pseudonym for the real or flesh and blood author, the intertextual source or origin of her *Story of O*, says in this regard:

After the abbreviated cast of characters, as at the theatre, is there any point in clarifying the places [and times, I should like to add] where the action occurs. They belong to everyone But once having taken into account the fair share played by the fantastic and fanciful, and by the endless repetition in the assuagement of obsessions (the endless repetition of pleasures and brutality being as necessary as it is absurd and impossible to achieve) everything blends together faithfully, dreamed or experienced, everything unfolds as being commonly shared in the universe of a like madness - and if you manage to look at them squarely - horrors, wonders, dreams and lies - everything there is conjuration and release.
(Réage 1992 II: 19-20)

The preface is, as has been said, no ordinary one, but actually a third or

next part of the *Story of O*. It contains the same intertext of O in a varied version entitled "A girl in LOVE" but it might as well be called the "Story of Pauline Réage", who becomes a synonymous pseudonym for O, the female main character of parts I and II. Pauline Réage is, however, in all three parts not only a pseudonym for the real flesh and blood source or origin of these stories of O, but is also as abstract narrator-author a representative of the real flesh and blood origins of all abstract author-narrators of stories about this idea of O. As abstract narrator-authors all of them arise again temporarily in the guise of Pauline Réage's abstract narrator-author who leaves traces of her presence through metafictional comments as a present but also absent known-unknown One, and whose real identity is as veiled as those of her compeers: Pauline Réage begins *Story of O* first as:

Her lover one day takes off for a walk, but this time in a part of the city ... where they've never been before

(1992 I: 5)

and comments on this beginning as abstract narrator-author metafictionally:

Another version of the same beginning was simpler, more direct: similarly dressed the young women was taken off in a car by her lover.

(1992 I: 7)

The preface is, therefore, no ordinary one, but another version of Pauline Réage's idea of the intertext, *Story of O*. The beginning of the preface entitled "A girl in LOVE" is therefore, like the two beginnings of the *Story of O*, a variation on the archetypical beginning of the conventional story or fairy-tale, namely, "Once upon a time".

The preface begins:

One day a girl said to the man she loved: "I could also write the kind of stories you like Do you really think so?" he answered

(1992 II: 9)

The fact that "LOVE" is printed in capital letters, that "girl" is preceded by an indefinite article, and that a pseudonym, Pauline Réage, appears at the end of the preface, makes the title "A girl in LOVE" as functional as that of parts I and II. In the preface there is also a quest for the O of the Self, the real, and not the flesh and blood identity of the author, as well as a quest for the O of what is called LOVE/LIFE:

As for revealing how the manuscript came into the hands of Jean Paulhan, I promised not to reveal it, as I promised not to divulge the real name of Pauline

Réage Besides nothing is more fallacious and shifting than an identity
(1992 II: 14)

A major writer outraged by the publication of *O* thought he saw in my story the memoirs of a courtesan - admitting by way of excuse that he had not read the book - but he was wrong on two scores: they are not memoirs, and I am not a courtesan, however delicate the expression may be. Let us say so as not to offend him that it was doubtless a matter of having missed my chosen calling. After the abbreviated cast of characters, is there any point in clarifying the places where the action occurs? They belong to everyone

(1992 II: 19)

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

"What intrigued and excited him, I mean the person for whom I was writing this story", she went on, "was the relationship it might have with my own life. Could it be that the story was the deformed, the inverted image of my life?" I saw, between what I thought myself to be and what I was relating and thought I was making up, both a distance and a kinship so profound that I was incapable of recognizing myself in it. I no doubt accepted my life with such patience (or passivity or weakness) only because I was so certain of being able to find whenever I wanted that other, obscure life, that is life's consolation, that other life unacknowledged and unshared - and then all of a sudden thanks to the man I loved I did acknowledge it, and henceforth would share it with any and all, as perfectly prostituted in the anonymity of a book as in the book [*Story of O*] that faceless, ageless, nameless (even first-nameless) girl

(1992 II: 17)

"Who am I finally" said Pauline Réage, "if not the long silent part of someone, the secret and nocturnal part which has never betrayed itself in public by any thought, word, or deed, but communicates through the subterranean depth of the imaginary with dreams as old as the world itself?"

(1992 II: 14-15)

Identity, therefore, has two faces, the public or daytime face and the unconscious, secretive, nocturnal face. Both these texts of the Self, the conscious/dreamed one and the unconscious/imagined one, are, as symbolic representations, the thesis of an antithesis, i.e. similar to but also different from the authentic *O* of identity, which is simultaneously the known-unknown One. Both are, as symbolic representations, dreams of *O*. Both the real name and Pauline Réage are therefore pseudonyms for that anonymous and impersonal *O*, for that "faceless, ageless, nameless (even first-

nameless)" girl of the intertext, the *Story of O*.

The pseudonym's first function is that of a mask to protect the flesh and blood author against social castigation. The hegemonic group, the group of people in power, "normal" people like you and me, normally castigate those who practise sado-masochism. But in the narrative the quest for O is conducted by a sado-masochistic commune. In absolutizing its experienced/dreamed meeting with O, the hegemonic group rejects the sado-masochistic group as contra nature or contra O. In Derridean terms, their Metaphysics of Presence considers sado-masochism as evil, as hierarchically opposed to their goodness, in which O is flesh or directly and fully present. As apostates the sado-masochists must be prosecuted and if necessary imprisoned, should they not be willing to be initiated and so to become members of authentic society. In order to survive, the sado-masochists must go underground and execute their rites of O clandestinely.

Both texts, i.e. that of the power group plus that of the sado-masochists, however, demand from their respective individual devotees a total surrender to their symbolic adaptations of the authentic O, which in both cases are, however, deferred as an ever present-absent and known-unknown One, since

the purest and wildest love always sanctioned, or rather always demanded, the most frightful surrender, in which childish images of chains and whips added to constraint, the symbols of constraint

(1992 II: 15)

These stories/texts of man which write him and his way of life, eventually become masternarratives of which he is at the same time master and slave. In this way man writes his own destiny as individual and group. The text to which he voluntarily belongs and which he absolutizes as authentic O considers another text and its initiates as "Friends of Crime":

So it was that the Marquis De Sade's castles, discovered long after I had silently built my own, never surprised me, as I was not surprised by the discovery of his society, The Friends of Crime: I already had my own secret society, however minor and inoffensive. But De Sade made me understand that we are jailers and all in prison, in that there is always someone within us whom we silence. By a curious kind of reverse shock it can happen that prison itself can open the gates to freedom. The stone walls of a cell, the solitude, but also the night ... the silence free this creature whom we have kept locked. It escapes us and escapes endlessly, through the walls, the ages, the interdictions Those who speak in its behalf are merely translators ... who have been allowed, for one brief moment, to seize a few strands of this immemorial network of forbidden dreams

(1992 II: 16)

In Pauline Réage's *Story of O* the love of a woman ("A girl in LOVE") is used metaphorically to illustrate the joys and pains of experiencing the O of the Self and the reality, not only of love, but of life as such. Not only in the orgasmic climax of physical and spiritual love, but also in our evanescent lives, pain and joy are, in the Derridean sense, not hierarchically opposed as differences, but complement each other and are therefore interchangeable.

Although there are different possible symbolic adaptations of the beginning of the intertext, *Story of O*, all could be reduced to the same ever-present/absent authentic O or beginning: the lovers as a fraternity are together in or on their way to their clandestine love nest. Here, in accordance with the classic rites of love, both of them experience in a selfless ecstasy a meeting with authentic O which is afterwards symbolically called LOVE/-EROS. The dispossession of the Self in this evanescent ecstatic meeting, the "death" of the conscious/public Self is at the same time an arising to the life of the unconscious/nocturnal Self in which LIFE/EROS and PAIN/THANATOS dissolve, become interchangeable. As commune the lovers are conversant with a secret language which sets them apart and free from the everyday public language which imprisons them when they are not together:

It was already a stroke of luck that he had been able to get away at all. Otherwise she would have waited for an hour and then come back the following day at the same time, the same place, in accordance with the classic rules of clandestine lovers. He said "get away" because they both used a vocabulary of prisoners The idea that they would have to return home gave a special meaning to that stolen time, which came to exist outside the pale of real time, in a sort of strange and eternal present

(1992 II: 13-14)

Together they dwelt in the books they loved ... poets had written for them, the letters of lovers from times past came down to them through the obscurity of ancient languages, of modes and mores long since come and gone - all of which was read in a toneless voice in an unknown room, the sordid and miraculous dungeon against which the crowd outside for a few short hours, beat in vain.

(1992 II: 10)

When they are not together, they are like sleepwalkers and cannot wait until the next meeting to awaken and so dispel the pain of uncertainty when they were apart:

They did not demand to be happy, but having once *known* each other, they simply asked with fear and trembling that it last, in the name of all that is holy, that it last ... that one not suddenly seemed estranged from the other, that this un hoped for fraternity, rarer than desire, more precious than love - or which perhaps at last was

love - should endure. So that everything was a risk; an encounter, a new dress, a trip, an unknown trip, an unknown poem. But nothing could stand in the way of taking these risks

(1992 II: 13)

At the beginning of Part I this stage of finding an identity only in the company of each other is waning. René, her lover, takes O as a test of their mutual love to the castle of Roissy, the clandestine meeting place of a sado-masochistic commune, where each in his or her way must undergo the pain of sharing the loved one with others. Here René and O voluntarily but temporarily subject themselves to the rites of this fraternity. They endure the pain they are suffering gladly for the sake of each other. This, however, is the beginning of the end. After returning from this visit to Roissy their previous identities have already started to shift; they now fraternize in ways they were taught at Roissy. René also starts sharing her temporarily, as proof of their mutual love, with Sir Stephen, his half-brother, one of the high priests at Roissy. More painfully than at Roissy, he further initiates her into the rites of sado-masochism. Eventually she no longer goes to Sir Stephen in order to satisfy René, but having fallen in love with him she voluntarily becomes the master and slave of Sir Stephen's story or text of the meeting with O, which she painfully/joyously shares with him.

At the end of Part I, O realizes despairingly that this relationship is waning. As there are different versions of the beginning, there are also different adaptations of the end of the authentic meeting with O: death, either figuratively or literally, of the Self. In the first case the old Self or identity is finally renounced when the last test in attaining another identity or Self is successfully completed.

This implies the end or death of the personal relationship with an initiator, and becoming a personally independent but fully initiated permanent member, dependent only on the rites of the clan in a mutual meeting with the ever-present-absent, known/unknown O of identity and a new way of life. In the case of a literal death, the Self either believes that after decomposition he will arise as part of the ever-living Cosmos or, in a religious sense, that he will arise in an eternal Hereafter permanently in the company of the authentic O of the Self and life.

At Sir Stephen's request and with the courage of despair, O again goes to Roissy, hoping it will be, as previously with René, only temporary. This end is the beginning of Part II of the *Story of O*, but as the abstract narrator-author metafictionally comments:

There existed also another ending to story of O. Seeing herself to be left by Sir Stephen, she preferred to die. To which he gave his consent.

(1992 I: 175)

In the Derridean sense, as the beginning/preface "A girl in LOVE" is simultaneously also an end/epilogue for the two parts of the *Story of O*, so all texts/stories belonging to the intertext *Story of O* are at the same time a preface/epilogue for man's symbolic quest to find the always present/absent O of the Self and life. These texts are different, ritualistic, repetitive incantations designed to conjure up the ghost of the experienced/dreamt, known/unknown One.

Eventually O becomes a permanent member of the clandestine sado-masochistic commune at Roissy. Like the high-priestess Anne-Marie, she will never again be personally possessed by any other individual member of the clan, since each who is fully initiated, as she is now, only uses the other and the rites as an instrument in meeting evanescently that anonymous and impersonal known/unknown One. This anonymity and impersonality of the present/absent O is finally the common meeting place of all our different texts of the intertext of the *Story of O*.

The pleasure upon which Anne-Marie opened her wide eyes in the smiting glare of daylight was an anonymous pleasure, an impersonal one where O was the mere instrument. It mattered not at all to her whether O admired her smooth and rejuvenated face, her fine panting mouth, of no matter to her whether O heard her moan She simply seized O by the hair and pressed her face harder against her loins, and only loosened her grip in order to tell her: "Do it again". O had loved Jacqueline in a like manner. She had possessed Jacqueline, at least she'd thought so. But the similarity of the gestures signified nothing. O did not possess Anne-Marie. Anne-Marie demanded, extracted caresses without concerning herself for what those who caressed her felt, and surrendered herself with an insolent liberty

....

(1992 I: 141-142)

When Sir Stephen eventually disappears, O is financially independent since one of her visitors has given her invaluable diamonds. At this stage, however, she has undergone a complete identity change. The diamonds belong to a previous life and have no value whatsoever to her. She therefore volunteers to stay on permanently at Roissy:

"You're free now, O" said Anne-Marie. "We can remove your irons, your collar and bracelets, and even erase the brand. You have the diamonds, you can go home."

O did not cry, nor did she display any sign of bitterness. Nor did she answer

Anne-Marie. "But if you prefer", Anne-Marie went on, "you can stay on here."
(1992 II: 137)

In this way each of us is voluntarily the master and slave of his own destiny or the text he writes and reads. Which of the two parts of the meeting with O, with the Self and life, should be considered a degradation of the other, Pauline Réage, the anonymous and impersonal source of the *Story of O*, subtly leaves to the reader in the following ambiguous words:

The pages that follow are a sequel to *Story of O* [Part I]. They deliberately suggest the degradation of that work, and cannot under any circumstances be integrated into it.

(1992 II: 21)

Each reader of the *Story of O* is therefore confronted with the question: is your own text of the intertext, *Story of O*, an example of the logocentric Metaphysics of Presence in which you absolutize your symbolic meeting with O as flesh and blood or presence?

In conclusion; this paper is not meant to be sexist, although the non-sexist formula he/she is not used. This was done out of practical considerations and it could only be said, that those who feel affronted may sleep peacefully if what is rumoured is true. According to these rumours, *Story of O* was written not by "A girl in LOVE", but by one of the most famous male French authors, i.e. "A man in Love". In that case the *Story of O* as a search for the Self and life would not be the search of a man and a woman who are hierarchically opposed. As complements of each other, as interchangeable, they would dissolve into masculine and feminine in the Chinese sense, of the Yang-Yin, the universal whirlwind in which all opposites coincide:

Guénon considers that the Yang-Yin is a helicoidal symbol, that is, that it is a section of the universal whirlwind which brings opposites together and engenders perpetual motion, metamorphosis and continuity in situations characterized by contradiction

(Cirlot 1962: 360)

In conclusion the following quotation from G. Bataille's *Death and Sensuality*:

Where would we be without language? It has made us what we are. It alone can show us the sovereign moment at the farthest point of being where it can no longer act as currency. In the end the articulate man confesses his own impotence.

(Bataille 1984: 276)

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