

**GENDER, POLITICS AND FICTION IN 1930s FRANCE**

by Angela Kershaw, M.A.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study examines French political fiction of the 1930s, taking gender as its primary category of analysis. It considers texts by female novelists whose work has been largely excluded from critical attention, in order to bring their particular contribution to inter-war French literature to light. It integrates this analysis into a consideration of relevant and representative texts of the exclusively male canon of French political fiction dating from the 1930s, exploring points of contact and divergences to show how the work of the female authors relates to the wider context of French inter-war literary activity. Texts by eight writers are considered in detail, namely Madeleine Pelletier, Edith Thomas, Henriette Valet, Louise Weiss, Louis Aragon, Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, André Malraux and Paul Nizan. The analysis of the female-authored novels informs the study of their male counterparts, whose texts also offer fertile ground for an analysis in terms of gender. The corpus is approached, in broad terms, through the themes of commitment, sexuality and the body. These themes permit an investigation of the gendering of politicization as it is manifested in 1930s literature.

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A.M.D.G.

## ABBREVIATIONS

*AA - Aden Arabie, Paul Nizan*

*BMD - Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand*

*C - La Conspiration, Paul Nizan*

*CB - Les Cloches de Bâle, Louis Aragon*

*CE - Combats pour L'Europe, Louise Weiss*

*CF - Combats pour les femmes, Louise Weiss*

*CH - La Condition humaine, André Malraux*

*D - Délivrance, Louise Weiss*

*E - L'Espoir, André Malraux*

*FV - La Femme vierge, Madeleine Pelletier*

*G - Gilles, Pierre Drieu la Rochelle*

*MSB - Madame 60<sup>BIS</sup>, Henriette Valet*

*R - Le Refus, Edith Thomas*

*TC - Le Témoin compromis, Edith Thomas*

*VF - Le Vote des femmes, Colette Yver*

*VN - Une Vie nouvelle, Madeleine Pelletier*

## INTRODUCTION

This study began with a deceptively simple-sounding question: were women writing fiction about politics in France in the 1930s? Various works of criticism, literary history and bibliographical sources have confirmed that women's fictional output was considerable in the inter-war period.<sup>1</sup> Most recently, Jennifer Milligan's *The Forgotten Generation: French Women Writers of the Inter-war Period* has made an extremely significant contribution to scholarship in this field, answering her own hope that 'some of the missing links in the chronicles of literary history will be filled'.<sup>2</sup> Literary history has described the popular, almost feminist novels of Marcelle Tinayre, and the equally popular but less feminist novels of Colette Yver, as well as the symbolist poetry of Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, and even the novels of the working-class Marguerite Audoux, whose 'Marie-Claire' series was widely read in the 1920s and 1930s, so that these names are becoming familiar. But literary history would have us believe that this is where the story ends. It has not so far attempted to investigate possible links between inter-war writing by women and the genre which is more usually taken to characterize French inter-war literature, and particularly 1930s literature, namely, the literature of commitment, or *littérature engagée*, in Jean-Paul Sartre's terms.<sup>3</sup> That is the purpose of this study.

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<sup>1</sup> S. Dreher and M. Rolli, *Bibliographie de la littérature française 1930-1939* (Lille: Librairie Giard; Geneva: Librairie E. Droz, 1948) includes a not inconsiderable number of female entries. Relevant recent critical works include Margaret Crossland, *Women of Iron and Velvet* (London: Constable, 1976), Dominique Desanti, *La Femme au temps des années folles* (Paris: Stock, 1984), Donna C. Stanton, *The Defiant Muse* (New York: Feminist Press, 1986), Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris 1900-1940* (London: Virago, 1987), Jennifer Waelti-Walters, *Feminist Novelists of the Belle Epoque: Love as a Lifestyle* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) and Waelti-Walters and Steven C. Hause, *Feminisms of the Belle Epoque: A Historical and Literary Anthology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Milligan, *The Forgotten Generation: French Women Writers of the Inter-war Period* (Oxford: Berg, 1996), p.5.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948).

Happily, the answer to my initial question is, yes. This study examines in detail the work of four such authors: Madeleine Pelletier, Louise Weiss, Edith Thomas and Henriette Valet.<sup>4</sup> The first two names will be very familiar to scholars of French women's history. Madeleine Pelletier (1874-1939) has been the subject of various critical and biographical studies.<sup>5</sup> The child of a right-wing Catholic greengrocer and a disabled father, Pelletier received a Catholic education until the age of twelve, after which, although her formal education ceased, she continued to study independently, passing the *baccalauréat* and gaining entrance to medical school. Her political career began at an early age when she became involved with anarchist groups after having left school. As an adult her commitment was to feminism and socialism. In 1921 Pelletier travelled to the Soviet Union to witness Russian politics first hand. On her return to France she became president of the feminist organization Solidarité des femmes which produced a journal, *La Suffragiste*. It was in the 1930s that Pelletier turned seriously to fiction, although there is no evidence to suggest that her novels were widely read. Pelletier's main profession was as a doctor. She famously advocated abortion, and for these activities was incarcerated in the asylum of Parray-Vaucluse at the age of 65, where she died. Her *œuvre* includes a large number of essays encompassing political, sociological, medical and psychoanalytic topics, but only four works of fiction: a play, *Supérieur!* (1923), which traces the political development of an anarchist sympathizer, two novels, *Une Vie nouvelle* (1932) and *La Femme vierge* (1933), and an undated collection of short

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<sup>4</sup> Milligan's study makes brief reference to Pelletier and Weiss, although it does not mention their 1930s fiction at all, referring only to their feminist activities and to Weiss's autobiography. Milligan does not include Thomas or Valet in her study.

<sup>5</sup> The most detailed is Felicia Gordon's *The Integral Feminist: Madeleine Pelletier 1874-1939* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990). See also *Madeleine Pelletier (1874-1939): Logique et infortunes d'un combat pour l'égalité*, ed. by Christine Bard (Paris : côté femmes, 1992), and Gordon and Maire Cross, *Early French Feminisms, 1830-1940: A Passion for Liberty* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1996) which makes available some important essays by Pelletier in translation for the first time.

stories, *Trois contes*.<sup>6</sup>

Louise Weiss (1893-1983) remained politically active until the 1970s: she founded the Institut des sciences de la paix in Strasbourg in 1970 and was elected as a Gaullist Deputy to the European Parliament in 1979. Her life, which she documented herself with tremendous detail in the six volumes of her autobiography, *Mémoires d'une Européenne*, was dominated by feminism and pacifism. Her career as a journalist was accompanied by work with *L'Europe nouvelle*, the pacifist organization of which she was the founder and driving force until increasing hostility between the states of Europe made her internationalist position untenable. So, in 1934, she turned her attention to suffragism, founding the group *La Femme nouvelle* and gaining notoriety for her street politics which included mock female elections, symbolic chaining and throwing face powder at policemen. She was ultimately awarded the *Légion d'honneur*. Weiss was active in the Resistance during the Second World War. Many of the countless obituaries which survey her life and work suggest that her fictional writing began only in 1951 with *Sabine Legrand*, omitting to mention her 1936 novel *Délivrance*, or her three-volume post-Second World War work, *La Marseillaise*. Weiss continued to write until the late 1970s, publishing a final novel, *Dernières voluptés*, in 1978. In the closing words of the last volume of her memoirs, Weiss imagines how she will be remembered after her death:

Ci-gît  
 LOUISE L'EUROPÉENNE  
 Une Française du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle  
 Une aristo-prolo  
 Une impie respectueuse  
 Les femmes diront qu'elle a voulu faire l'ange  
 Les hommes protesteront qu'elle a fait la bête  
 Souën, le Parfait-Roi-des-Singes, grimacera qu'en l'imitant

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<sup>6</sup> Gordon, *The Integral Feminist* includes an exhaustive bibliography of Pelletier's writing.



Elle a, par l'esprit, percé le vide  
Alors, pour une fois, elle sera d'accord avec tout le monde.<sup>7</sup>

Weiss is well known in France: Albin Michel made available all of the six volumes of her memoirs in the late 1970s and early 1980s; a commemorative postage stamp celebrated her life; there is even a *rue Louise Weiss* in the 13th *arrondissement* in Paris; and Weiss's name is resplendent on the wall of the old Richelieu site of the Bibliothèque Nationale, even if for her financial rather than literary contribution. An exhibition and conference, entitled 'Louise l'Européenne: Hommage à Louise Weiss 1893-1983', took place at the Palais de Luxembourg in October 1985 to commemorate her death.

Edith Thomas (1909-1970) is best known, where she is known at all, for her Resistance activities. She was instrumental in setting up the Comité national des écrivains, a group of around fifteen influential writers and intellectuals including Sartre, Guéhenno, Paulhan and Eluard, and in establishing and maintaining the clandestine journal, *Les lettres françaises*.<sup>8</sup> Before the war Thomas was involved with the Association des écrivains et artistes révolutionnaires (AEAR); she joined the PCF in 1942 but resigned, disillusioned, in 1949. Thomas was a historian, journalist and archivist as well as a novelist, working as a curator at the Archives Nationales in Paris after the Second World War.<sup>9</sup> Her fictional output spans a period from 1933, when she won the

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<sup>7</sup> Louise Weiss, *Tempête sur l'Occident, 1945-1975* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1976), p.517.

<sup>8</sup> See *La Résistance intellectuelle*, ed. by Jacques Debû-Bridel (Paris: Julliard, 1970), Margaret Atack, *Literature and the French Resistance: Cultural Politics and Narrative Forms* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989) and L. Leigh Westerfield, 'Bonds of Communion as Sources of Power: Women Writers and Resistance in France and Germany' (unpublished thesis, Indiana University, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> Dorothy Kaufman's three recent articles on Thomas provide much biographical information: ' "Le Témoin compromis": Diaries of Resistance and Collaboration', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 33.1 (Spring 1993), 17-28; 'Uncovering a Woman's Life: Edith Thomas (novelist, historian, résistante)', *The French Review*, 67.1 (October 1993), 61-72; 'Resistance and Survival: Edith Thomas: Simone de Beauvoir's Shadow Sister', *Simone de Beauvoir Studies*, 12 (1995), 33-37. See also Mona Ozouf, 'Thomas la claire', *Nouvel Observateur*, 30 March - 5 April 1995, p.97.

Prix du premier roman for *La Mort de Marie*, up to 1970 when she published her last novel, *Le Jeu d'échecs*. She published three other novels in the 1930s: *L'Homme criminel* (1934), a novel which adopts an existentialist approach to recount the life of an *autodidacte*,<sup>10</sup> *Sept sorts* (1935), which tells the story of a small contemporary rural community, and *Le Refus* (1936), the most directly 'political' of Thomas's novels.

Much less information is available about Henriette Valet. She is included in Jean Maitron's enormous *Dictionnaire biographique du mouvement ouvrier français* which tells us that Valet was born in Paris in 1909, the daughter of 'artisans tailleurs'; her father was an active syndicalist.<sup>11</sup> After passing the *brevet élémentaire* she worked as a telephonist. She became involved in leftist intellectual circles in Paris, where she met Henri Lefebvre whom she later married. Before the Second World War she abandoned her job in favour of journalism. Valet wrote two novels in the 1930s: *Madame 60<sup>BIS</sup>* (1934), and *Le Mauvais temps* (1937), and published articles in *Commune*, the review of the AEAR. According to the Maitron dictionary, *Madame 60<sup>BIS</sup>* was reviewed in both *Le Peuple*, by M. Lapierre, and in the *Nouvelle revue française*, by Lefebvre.

After this brief biographical survey, I should perhaps indicate some of the names that have been excluded from this study, in order to suggest the wide range of writing activity in which inter-war women were engaged, as well as to begin to point to my criteria for the selection of texts. Those criteria concern genre and period. I will come later to a more detailed consideration of the definition of 'political' literature; suffice it to say for the moment that all the texts in question express a precise, discernable political 'message'. There must necessarily be something artificial about any strict demarcation

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<sup>10</sup> The link with Sartre's *La Nausée* (1938), which Thomas's text predates, is noteworthy.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Maitron, *Dictionnaire biographique du mouvement ouvrier français 1914-1939*, 43 vols (Paris: Les Éditions ouvrières, 1982-93), XLIII (1993), 16.

by dates; I focus on the 1930s because it is the decade most closely associated with social and political upheaval and also, perhaps consequently, with the literature of commitment. Also it allows a path to be steered between a literature stemming specifically from the First World War, and the literature of the Resistance, two distinct genres which have received critical attention in their own right.

According to these criteria, neither Simone de Beauvoir nor Elsa Triolet appear in detail in these pages because neither produced political novels, in the sense in which this study understands it, before 1939. Similarly, Simone Weil is absent: although her political activities and writings are fascinating in themselves, and engage with issues of female commitment, female political action and the role of the body in politics which arise time and again in the novels I include, she did not use the fictional form to express her politics.<sup>12</sup> Adrienne Monnier, famous for allowing her bookshop, *La Maison des amis des livres*, to function as the first lending library in Paris, also avoided the fictional form, although her essays and journalism deserve much more critical attention that they have received to date. Simone Téry, in her *Front de la liberté*, and Marguerite Jouve, in her *Vu, en Espagne, février 1936-février 1937* offer personal *témoignages* of the Spanish Civil War which seem to belong to a distinct genre which deserves more detailed, separate analysis and would equally depart too far from the focus of this study. Finally, the prolific Russian Jewish novelist Irène Nemirovsky, ultimately a victim of the holocaust, is not included because her writing, although influenced by her experience of fleeing the Russian Revolution in 1917 with her wealthy parents, does not aim to express

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<sup>12</sup> I am extremely grateful to Professor David McLellan for generously making available to me a wealth of material relating to Simone Weil, particularly the *Cahiers Simone Weil*, which proved to be an immensely fruitful resource.

an explicit political message.<sup>13</sup>

But this study is not exclusively concerned with writing by women. It includes equally detailed analysis of novels from the period and genre written by men. The reasons for this are threefold. Firstly, these now almost canonical works offer fertile ground for analysis in terms of gender; this is not an approach which has been widely adopted by critics of these texts, and so this study hopes to contribute in some way to the small but growing number of analyses which consider masculinity and femininity to be useful avenues of inquiry as regards these novels. Secondly, the analysis of male- as well as female-authored texts is appropriate to a broadly feminist methodology which seeks to review cultural production not only in terms of women's own contribution, but also in terms of the ways in which they have been represented by men. Siân Reynolds has suggested that feminist history must aim 'to force a reevaluation of the past as a whole, not just women's past'; this holds true for feminist literary history.<sup>14</sup> Thirdly, there is a sense in which the female-authored texts in question are less comprehensible outside of the context of the popular and critically acclaimed male-authored fiction of which they must themselves have been aware whilst formulating their own writing projects. Equally however, I would suggest that a reading of canonical male-authored 1930s committed literature which does not take account of the context of female literary production in the same genre is similarly impoverished. An approach which analyses texts from both sides of the gender divide permits those analyses to be mutually enriching.

The potential field from which to select male authors on which to base this study

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<sup>13</sup> Nemirovsky's daughter, Elizabeth Gille, recently published a fictional autobiography, which she terms 'mémoires rêvés', of her mother, entitled *Le Mirador* (Paris: Presses de la Renaissance, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> Siân Reynolds, 'Marianne's Citizens? Women, the Republic and Universal Suffrage in France', in *Women, State and Revolution*, ed. by Siân Reynolds (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1986), pp.102-122 (p.120).

being considerably wider than that of the field of female-authored political fiction, I have rather pragmatically chosen ‘mainstream’ novels which permit appropriate and productive analysis via comparison with the work of Pelletier, Weiss, Thomas and Valet. The male authors and their texts are well known and need little introduction. I consider Drieu la Rochelle’s *Gilles* (1939), André Malraux’s *La Condition humaine* (1933) and *L’Espoir* (1937), Paul Nizan’s *Aden Arabie* (1931) and *La Conspiration* (1938), and Louis Aragon’s *Les Cloches de Bâle* (1934). I do not claim that these choices were the only possible ones. The future of this work lies in part in applying its approaches and conclusions to other male-authored texts, the inclusion of which time and space have not permitted. My study is necessarily selective; it cannot and does not purport exhaustively to survey 1930s political literature in France.

In all then, I consider the work of eight authors spanning three generations. Pelletier is the oldest, being already forty when the First World War broke out. Aragon, Weiss and Drieu were among the young men and women of 1914; Aragon was seventeen, and Weiss and Drieu both twenty-one. The youngest generation comprises those who were children when war broke out: Valet and Thomas (both five), Nizan (nine) and Malraux (thirteen). Thus in 1930, Pelletier was fifty-six, Weiss and Drieu thirty-seven, Aragon thirty-three, Malraux thirty-one, Nizan twenty-five, and Valet and Thomas twenty-one. It should perhaps be borne in mind then that Pelletier’s and Drieu’s 1930s texts date from the end of their careers, whilst those of Valet and Thomas represent the works of youth.

Just as the corpus is not homogenous as regards age, neither is it homogenous in political orientation. Nizan and Aragon write from a specifically communist viewpoint, Drieu from a specifically fascist perspective. Thomas and Malraux might more accurately

be described as *compagnons de route*, since Thomas joined the PCF only in 1942, and Malraux, it seems, never did.<sup>15</sup> Pelletier adopts a socialist and feminist position, whilst Weiss's feminism is accompanied by centrist pacifism. Her own term 'aristo-prolo' is a good summary: opposed to inequality and to fascism, she was equally opposed to communism. Valet, by contrast, is decidedly 'prolo' and leftist. In this study, the left/right opposition is not used as a structuring device in any way: my analysis crosses this divide to investigate the inscription of politics of various colours in fictional discourses. My research has not indicated that a specifically 'leftist' or 'rightist' political aesthetic exists; rather, I have been struck by the frequency with which texts stemming from very different political standpoints share aesthetic forms.

However, Sartre's now famous adage that it is impossible to write a good novel advocating anti-Semitism cannot simply be ignored, particularly when one of the authors in question is Pierre Drieu la Rochelle.<sup>16</sup> Susan Suleiman has provided the most nuanced exploration of this problem.<sup>17</sup> Drawing on the work of Wayne Booth, which suggests that all fictional writing is 'rhetorical' in that it requires 'assent' from the reader as regards, for example, its manipulation of form, Suleiman asks what happens in a realist novel when the text asks the reader to assent not only to its formal properties, but also to a specific political ideology which is, in fact, unacceptable to that reader.<sup>18</sup> For Suleiman, the process is one whereby the reader ceases to accept as reliable the viewpoint of a supposedly authoritative narrator. For although the reader will accept the imparting of

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<sup>15</sup> Denis Boak, *André Malraux* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), pp.9-13.

<sup>16</sup> Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, p.70.

<sup>17</sup> Susan Suleiman, 'Ideological Dissent from Works of Fiction: Toward a Rhetoric of the *Roman à Thèse*', *Neophilologus*, 60 (1976), 162-77.

<sup>18</sup> The work in question is Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

‘objective information’ by the narrator, such as the date or the characters’ surroundings, and will even accept the narrator’s subjective view of characters’ motivations or emotions, as long as this narratorial subjectivity remains ‘totally interior to the fictional world’, she will not necessarily accept subjective narratorial judgements which concern ‘a general proposition regarding life, as I myself have or might have experienced it’. Suleiman’s example is *Gilles*’s narrator’s description of feminism as ‘la forme la plus fâcheuse de la prétention moderne’.<sup>19</sup> Suleiman acknowledges the subjectivity of the reader’s response: assent or dissent of this sort of course depends on whether the reader is feminist, misogynist, fascist, communist and so on. As David L. Schalk points out, ‘one is always somebody else’s fascist’: the problem poses itself regarding texts rooted in any discernable political ideology.<sup>20</sup> However, to conceptualize the problem in terms of narratorial reliability seems to me to be extremely helpful: a given reader might very well, according to Suleiman’s model, assent to the text’s rhetoric and to its characterization, or, in other words, read the text as a ‘good’ novel in aesthetic terms, whilst refusing to assent to the narrator’s interpretation of social reality. This sort of discrimination regarding the reliability of the narrator opens up the possibility of a sophisticated reading that is forced neither to reject the novel out of hand because of its odious political thesis, nor to accept it wholesale in order to do justice to its aesthetic merits.

The work of Susan Suleiman brings us inexorably to the issue of how exactly

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<sup>19</sup> Suleiman, ‘Ideological Dissent from Works of Fiction’, pp.168-69.

<sup>20</sup> David L. Schalk, *The Spectrum of Political Engagement: Mounier, Benda, Nizan, Brasillach, Sartre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p.76. Schalk later discusses, in relation to Robert Brasillach, the question of ‘the right to error’ (pp.105-09) which is a rather different question and one which concerns the moral sphere rather than the aesthetic. My concern here is with the aesthetic, that is, with the representation of a particular political ideology in fictional discourse; my analysis does not seek to make moral judgements of this sort.

political fiction is to be defined for the purposes of this study. In my view, Suleiman's work on the *roman à thèse*, work which has largely rescued this genre from its previously pejorative connotation, represents the most productive point of entry into an area which has been extensively debated.<sup>21</sup> This is how Suleiman describes her project at the beginning of *Authoritarian Fictions*:

This book is about novels with a clear ideological message - novels that seek, through the vehicle of fiction, to persuade their readers of the 'correctness' of a particular way of interpreting the world. I call such novels ideological, not in the broad sense in which we can say that any representation of human reality depends on, and in some ways expresses, a more or less consciously defined ideology (in this sense, any work of fiction, indeed any work of art can be considered ideological), but in the more narrow sense in which we might call a discourse ideological if it refers explicitly to, and identifies itself with, a recognized body of doctrine or system of ideas.<sup>22</sup>

My approach concurs with this formulation of the role of 'message' in a given text and with its working definition of 'ideology'. Suleiman goes on to define the genre more precisely as follows:

*a roman à thèse is a novel written in the realistic mode (that is, based on an aesthetic of verisimilitude and representation), which signals itself to the reader as primarily didactic in intent, seeking to demonstrate the validity of a political, philosophical, or religious doctrine. (Suleiman's*

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<sup>21</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1962), Catharine Savage, 'Malraux, Sartre and Aragon as Political Novelists', *University of Florida Monographs: Humanities*, 17 (Fall 1964), M. Adereth, *Commitment in Modern French Literature: Politics and Society in Péguy, Aragon and Sartre* (New York: Schocken, 1968), Rima Drell Reck, *Literature and Responsibility: The French Novel in the Twentieth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), J.E. Flower, *Writers and Politics in Modern France* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), Barrie Cadwallader, *Crisis of the European Mind: A Study of André Malraux and Pierre Drieu la Rochelle* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1981), Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Methuen, 1981), Irving Howe, *Politics and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

<sup>22</sup> Susan Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel As a Literary Genre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p.1.



itallics)<sup>23</sup>

She specifies that '[i]n a *roman à thèse*, the 'correct' interpretation of the story is inscribed in capital letters, in such a way that there can be no mistaking it'.<sup>24</sup>

According to these definitions, the novels on which this study is focused can all be described as political *romans à thèse*. All are written in the realist mode, all have a clear political message, comprehensible in relation to some externally existing political ideas system, which they seek didactically to convey to the reader. 'Political' in this sense refers to specific ideologies which aim to prescribe or confirm the distribution of power over the organization and mechanisms of society; it is a question of the public face of politics. Furthermore, all the novels in question address themselves specifically to the political organization of inter-war France, that is, they are concerned with contemporary politics.

A recent essay by Steven Ungar will allow us to add a further element to these definitions.<sup>25</sup> Describing the genesis of committed literature in France, he remarks:

Well into the twentieth century, evolved forms of the *Bildungsroman* from Gustave Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale* (1869) to André Gide's *L'Immoraliste* (1901) increasingly inscribed the thematics of decision and identity centred on the individual within issues of social involvement and allegiance to specific doctrines, world-views, and ideologies. Through the 1930s, this broadened sense of identity and apprenticeship remained integral to novels by established writers such as Gide, Marcel Proust and Roger Martin du Gard as well as those of a younger generation including Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Paul Nizan and

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p.7.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p.10.

<sup>25</sup> Steven Ungar, 'Existentialism, engagement, ideology', in *The Cambridge Companion to the French Novel*, ed. by Timothy Unwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp.145-60.

André Malraux.<sup>26</sup>

He defines what he terms the 'ideological novel' as 'the fictional representation of identity and commitment to a discrete doctrine or cause'.<sup>27</sup> Whilst not wishing to diminish the didactic function of the political *romans à thèse* in this study, it is important to point out that they also share a common concern with the ideas of decision and identity, the expression of these themes through fictional subjectivities, whilst always in relation to some doctrine, being an equally important part of their project.

Although the aim of these theoretical remarks is to point to the logic of the corpus, rather than to suggest that what follows will attempt at every stage to investigate precisely to what extent the novels in question conform to the genre - that would be quite a different project - some indications of this sort seem appropriate, not least because both Ungar and Suleiman raise Malraux's work as being particularly problematic in terms of genre definition.<sup>28</sup> Let us begin then with Malraux. Suleiman concludes that *L'Espoir* expresses multiple *thèses* (that fascism must be opposed, that discipline is necessary for effective opposition), as opposed to the work of, say, Nizan which is 'monological' in its clear recommendation of communism as the ultimate solution.<sup>29</sup> Ungar must be right to emphasize the particular desire which emerges from Malraux's work to investigate, in existential terms, the complexity of the human condition; indeed this has rightly been seen as one of the strengths of Malraux's fiction. But an extended concern with issues of identity and decision is not incompatible with the presence of a didactic *thèse*. For me,

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p.145.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p.155.

<sup>28</sup> Ungar, in *ibid.*, p.154, points to '[t]he absence of a dominant ideological thesis in *La Condition humaine*', a view with which I find I cannot agree.

<sup>29</sup> Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions*, pp.132-41.

the political *thèse* of *La Condition humaine* is, as Lucien Goldman has suggested, that the sort of grass-roots revolutionary politics exemplified by the Shanghai revolutionaries is to be privileged over slavish adherence to the Communist Party line.<sup>30</sup> In the case of Aragon and Drieu, the question is more straightforward; whilst both are obviously also concerned with decision and identity, *Les Cloches de Bâle* recommends communism as clearly as does *La Conspiration*, and the recommendation of fascism emerges incontrovertibly from *Gilles*. Still within discourses of decision and identity, Thomas's *Le Refus* is also a monological recommendation of communism, as Valet's *Madame 60 BIS* is of socialist egalitarianism in direct opposition to the undemocratic Republic. Pelletier and Weiss both present dual *thèses*: socialism and feminism in the case of Pelletier, and feminism and pacifism, which is specifically opposed to communism, in the case of Weiss.

So the female-authored political *roman à thèse* does exist in France in the 1930s. But this statement is perhaps problematic in itself in gender terms, since it amounts to the allocation of genre definitions which have been derived in the light of work by numerous critics through the study of exclusively male-authored texts. This sort of problem relates to the more general question of 'women's imaginative encounters with a literary tradition of which they are not an obvious part', in the words of Nancy A. Walker.<sup>31</sup> Because of the gender bias of canon formation, women have not been part of the genesis of narrative norms. So that the claim that women have been excluded from narrative in this way does not seem exaggerated, let us consider some of the views of inter-war French, and, of

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<sup>30</sup> Lucien Goldman, *Pour une sociologie du roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).

<sup>31</sup> Nancy A. Walker, *The Disobedient Writer: Women and Narrative Tradition* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), p.3. These are exactly the sorts of issues with which Virginia Woolf engaged in 1928 in her *A Room of One's Own*, 2nd edn (London: Penguin Books, 1945).

course, male, literary critics. Writing on Colette Yver's *Comment s'en vont les reines*, in 1907, an anonymous critic suggested the following:

On y sent encore l'inaptitude féminine à exprimer des idées - mais déjà l'aptitude, elle très féminine, à exprimer des sensations. Avez-vous remarqué les expositions d'art féminin? Presque jamais de pensée créatrice [...] Mais quelle maîtrise dans les arts décoratifs, où la main a surtout besoin d'habileté, où la finesse du doigt remplace celle du cerveau!<sup>32</sup>

Such examples are not difficult to find: Jean Larnac's 1929 *Histoire de la littérature féminine en France*, for example, constantly distinguishes a female proclivity for inspiration, sentiment and passion from a male propensity for reason, argument, judgement and abstraction.<sup>33</sup> But more pertinent to the present study is Larnac's view of the subject matter of women's writing. For him, because women are predisposed to inspiration, sentiment and passion, 'l'amour sous tous ses aspects fait le centre de leurs romans', whilst 'l'homme a d'autres soucis que l'amour, nécessités par l'existence qu'il mène: la femme, elle, n'en a qu'un: aimer'.<sup>34</sup> Thomas is clearly writing against such received wisdom when she remarks: 'Le scandale qu'on laisse aux femmes est celui de leurs expériences amoureuses. Cela m'importe peu et pour moi, le scandale est ailleurs.'<sup>35</sup> Thomas, Weiss, Pelletier and Valet all share a desire for part of the existence supposedly led only by men as opposed to, or at least in addition to, 'leurs expériences amoureuses'. But to include such experience in writing is, for a woman, an act of disobedience in relation to narrative tradition, at least according to Larnac, who is of the opinion that

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<sup>32</sup> *La Liberté d'opinion*, April/May 1907, Dossier Colette Yver, Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand.

<sup>33</sup> Jean Larnac, *Histoire de la littérature féminine en France* (Paris: Éditions Kra, 1929).

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p.252.

<sup>35</sup> Edith Thomas, *Le Témoin compromis* (Paris: Viviane Hamy, 1995), p.34.

‘l’homme écrit les rumeurs du monde. La femme entend les rumeurs de son être’. For Larnac, women have no predisposition towards philosophical thought; furthermore, he reads enormous significance into the fact that ‘le mot *historienne* n’existe même pas dans notre vocabulaire’.<sup>36</sup> If women are excluded from writing, they are all the more excluded from writing which explores the domain of the political, which turns around precisely the issues for which women are said to have no predilection.

Larnac concludes that in the case of women, the writing of literature fulfils ‘une valeur de remplacement’, that is, compensates for some failure in their lives. Thus: ‘Tel est le drame du génie féminin: il ne peut exister dans le bonheur d’une vie normale’. The ‘normal’ woman is, predictably, ‘celle qui s’abandonne à son sort d’épouse et de mère’.<sup>37</sup> Whilst refusing to subscribe to these definitions of female subjectivity and the appropriate focus of female writing, the female-authored novels I examine in this study reveal, through their particular treatment of the questions of decision and identity, a very real awareness of the sorts of *idées reçues* which Larnac exemplifies.<sup>38</sup>

It remains then only to indicate in outline the ways in which this study approaches the issues I have raised. Chapter 1 turns around the question of commitment. The gendering of commitment is seen to be indexed in the first instance by the unenfranchised

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<sup>36</sup> Larnac, *Histoire de la littérature féminine en France*, p.269, p.256-7.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, p.276, p.274.

<sup>38</sup> It seems that little progress had been made by the 1940s. F. Baldensperger, in his *La Littérature française entre les deux guerres*, 2nd edn (Marseille: Sagittaire, 1943) makes scant reference to works by women, and then in terms of a *littérature de désenchantement* which he introduces in the following terms: ‘Par une grâce d’état qui est un fait de nature, l’individualisme douloureux semble, ‘du côté des dames’, avoir été sujet à des crises fort différentes, correspondant à un phase plus tardive de la vie, à en juger par les aveux féminins. Après avoir conquis le droit au mariage librement consenti, le droit au divorce aisément obtenu, le droit à la profession normalement exercée, l’Eternel Féminin se désolait encore - et ce n’était pas, en général, pour des droits électoraux insuffisants et des rebuffades sénatoriales humiliantes, mais bien plutôt, dirait-on, parce que des facilités variées n’en laissaient que plus ‘désenchantées’ maintes sensibilités nullement dévoyées, simplement déçues’ (p.28). Baldensperger does not mention Pelletier, Weiss, Thomas or Valet.

woman's formal exclusion from the polity; the chapter's focus is the inscription of this problematic in more general terms in the fictional text. Part I begins by adopting a historical perspective in order to clarify the cultural and political context in which the texts in question were produced. This strategy indicates a particular methodological choice: that it is productive to take account of the historical context of a particular work of fiction. This approach is particularly germane to the analysis of texts in the political genre. The argument moves from history to literature to consider the work of Nizan which exemplifies the sort of gender bias which associates masculinity with commitment to the exclusion of femininity. The relationships between masculinity and commitment are examined in more detail through *La Conspiration*, a text in which commitment, although constantly aligned with masculinity, is not necessarily achieved with ease by the male subject. Part II compares the perspectives of Thomas, Weiss and Pelletier concerning the question of commitment. Thomas's non-fictional texts suggest a reluctance to embrace femininity in various forms; I investigate the manifestation of this reluctance in *Le Refus*. I also consider Thomas's concern with the problem of finding a form for female political action. Weiss's *œuvre* provides a contrast to this perspective in its affirmation of a desire for the advent of a politics that is characterized precisely by femininity. Finally I consider Pelletier's concept of femininity as antithetical to politics. I investigate her overt hostility towards the 'feminine', as well as her active embracing of the 'masculine'. The analysis is concluded in Part III with reference to Aragon's *Les Cloches de Bâle*, a text which professes to resolve many of the problems regarding the relationship of women to commitment raised by the female authors.

The second and third chapters consider the intersections between sexuality and politics. I investigate both the sexual identity of the committed subject and the function

of sexuality in representational terms in the fictional political discourse, taking into account both heterosexuality and homosexuality. Chapter 2 takes as its point of departure a historical and cultural perspective. The chapter's central proposition - that female sexuality is in general separated from politics - is raised through a brief analysis of Colette Yver's *Le Vote des femmes*, a novel which effects this separation in structural terms. The analysis proceeds by pairing texts in order to compare and contrast their treatment of female sexuality. Thus, in Part I, Thomas and Nizan are brought together in order to exploit the contrast between a complete refusal of sexuality as a hindrance to politics on the part of the central female protagonist in the former, and, in the latter, a refusal on the part of the text to allow potentially politically productive female sexuality to achieve that potential. In Part II, the complete banishment of female sexuality from the sphere of politics which characterizes both Pelletier's *La Femme vierge* and Drieu's *Gilles* is explored. This coincidence may seem surprising given Pelletier's fierce feminism and Drieu's no less fierce misogyny; it is a striking element of correspondence between two texts whose ideological allegiances are in complete opposition. Part III brings together the work of Weiss and Malraux. It investigates the presentation in *Délivrance* of the relationship of the female subject to cultural definitions of her sexuality through the diametrically opposed characters of Noémi, whose sphere of activity is politics, and Marie, whose sphere of activity is romantic love. It goes on to investigate the supposed coincidence of romantic love and politics in the character of May in *La Condition humaine*.

Chapter 3 takes as its point of departure, in Part I, the work of Kaja Silverman on the 'dominant fiction' of masculinity, in order to probe the equivalence that seems frequently to be presumed to exist between male sexuality and politics. In methodological

terms, the critical manipulation of theoretical material here serves to elucidate the fictional texts in question: it is not my intention to refine existing theories of masculinity, nor to suggest new ones. I do however suggest a link between Silverman's dominant fiction and recent work which has been carried out on the subject of neurasthenia, or shell shock, and the First World War. The motif of war is taken to be relevant to, although not of course synonymous with, politics. Part II inquires into the effects of Drieu's sexualization of politics in the context of his exclusion of women and of female sexuality from politics. It attempts to ascertain the precise political location of the dominant fiction and of 'castration', its opposite, in *Gilles*. I go on to examine the neutralization of the threat of castration, or masculinity trauma, in Malraux's *L'Espoir*, making comparisons also with *La Condition humaine*. Where Part II is concerned with representations of the gender and sexual identifications of the male subject, Part III turns instead to an analysis of the dominant fiction as a cultural myth. Through the work of Pelletier and Thomas, it moves on to assess both the implications of the dominant fiction for culture in general and for the female subject, and the attempts of these two authors to challenge the dominant fiction. Part IV returns to Weiss's *Délivrance* to investigate a possible alternative to phallic male sexuality in the character of Merri. Merri returns the analysis specifically to the First World War, since he is revealed to the reader through the letters he sends to the narrator from the trenches.

Chapter 4 moves on from the male fighting body to consider the female procreating body. The analysis departs at all stages from Henriette Valet's *Madame 60*<sup>BIS</sup>. Here a theoretical framework is provided by Mikhail Bakhtin's work on carnival and the grotesque. Thus, Part I firstly explores the relevant areas of Bakhtin's analysis, and secondly suggests the various ways in which *Madame 60*<sup>BIS</sup> can be read as an example



of the grotesque. Part II goes on to make comparisons with other texts. I begin by focusing on the embodiment/disembodiment opposition, considering the relationship of the body to politics in the work of Nizan, Pelletier, Aragon and Drieu. I then turn to the ways in which motifs of pregnancy, miscarriage and abortion are used as a means to achieve sociological analysis in *Délivrance*, *Les Cloches de Bâle*, and *La Femme vierge*, pausing to examine Weiss's disembodiment of maternity, before moving on to consider the metaphorical function of these motifs in *Gilles* and *Les Cloches de Bâle*. I conclude the section with a consideration of the mutilated body in the work of Aragon and Malraux, and of the sick body in the work of Thomas and Nizan. Part III concludes the chapter by assessing the political potential of the motif of the female body in Valet's novel.

It will be clear from this summary that my study makes propositions relating to a wide range of texts, whilst not of course claiming exhaustivity. It includes extensive close readings of those texts, readings which are intended to contribute to the corpus of criticism around individual texts and authors, where such a corpus exists, as well as to advance the overall argument. Where little work has been done on a particular text, it hopes to make incisions which will productively open up the field. Through these readings my study aims to investigate the multiple ways in which political activity, and, more specifically, writing about politics, were gendered occupations in France in the 1930s.

## CHAPTER ONE

**‘LA FRANÇAISE DÉSIRE ADMINISTRER LES INTÉRÊTS DE LA CITÉ  
COMME ELLE ADMINISTRE LES INTÉRÊTS DE SON FOYER’:<sup>1</sup>**

**LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER AND COMMITMENT.**

Foucault also emphasised [...] that power relations are never seamless, but always spawning new forms of culture and subjectivity, new openings for potential resistance to emerge. Where there is power, he came to see, there is also resistance. I would add to this that prevailing norms themselves have transformative potential.<sup>2</sup>

Taking her cue from Foucault, Susan Bordo investigates the relationship between gender and politics in terms of the role apparently oppressive structures might play in achieving political change. Politics has frequently presented women with a seemingly impenetrable web of oppressive structures. In a French context, women’s comparatively late accession to suffrage - 1944 - is often cited as a concrete manifestation of her exclusion from a province which was clearly constructed both symbolically and legally as a male preserve. For a woman, to claim the right to political commitment has been to fight a tradition of political philosophy dating back to Plato which associates women with the private sphere of the household, of inactivity, lack of freedom, silence and emotions, and ascribes value to the ‘male’ spheres of the polity, activity, freedom, speech and reason. This chapter considers fiction in which

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<sup>1</sup> Louise Weiss, *Combats pour les femmes, 1934-1939*, 2nd edn (Paris: Albin Michel, 1980), p.83.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Bordo, ‘Feminism, Foucault and the politics of the body’, in *Up Against Foucault*, ed. by Caroline Ramazanoğlu (London: Routledge, 1993), pp.179-202 (p.193).

women unpick the seams to create openings for resistance to those norms and to create new forms of subjectivity in the shape of female political commitment. It also makes comparisons with texts in which masculinity and politics are tightly stitched together. I do not thereby intend to imply that the relationship between masculinity and politics should necessarily be taken as self-evident. The history of men in 1930s France has been written in the familiar terms of economic crisis, of strikes, of the left/right divide, the Popular Front and the Spanish Civil War: men's history has not been rewritten with a gender focus to the same extent as women's history.<sup>3</sup> I am concerned here however with investigating literary representations of the problematic of female commitment in a cultural and political context which tended to make easy associations between masculinity and commitment. Gender *per se* has not been a criterion for men's exclusion from politics: immigrant or non-property-owning males for example have been excluded from suffrage on the grounds of race and wealth, not sex. It is certainly possible that cultural constructions of both masculinity and politics have been oppressive to men, however the fact that neither culture nor the law has perceived any contradiction between masculinity and commitment implies that gender is unlikely to be a central issue for men in their relationship to politics in the way I argue that it will be for women.

First, some definition of the term 'commitment' is needed. Considerable critical effort has been expended on the question; one of the most useful theoretical

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<sup>3</sup> Recent work on gender and war points in this direction, for example Elaine Showalter's 'Rivers and Sassoon: The Inscription of Male Gender Anxieties' in *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, ed. by Margaret Randolph Higonnet et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) and Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London: Reaktion Books, 1996).

considerations of it for our purposes is provided by David L. Schalk.<sup>4</sup> My aim here is not to attempt any theoretical honing of the word's multiple and complex connotations but rather to achieve a useful and workable definition of commitment as it appears in the novels with which this study is concerned. Schalk preliminarily defines engagement as 'political involvement, usually by members of the intellectual class'.<sup>5</sup> This brief formulation encompasses two important points: firstly, that the idea of 'involvement' implies action, and secondly, that the idea of 'intellectuality' implies critical awareness and an element of choice and freedom. Commitment is not then the blind adherence to a given doctrine which Sartre was to term *mauvaise foi*,<sup>6</sup> nor is it forced compliance. Since we are dealing here with *political* commitment however, reasoned allegiance to a given political 'ism' is by no means excluded; indeed it is generally the vehicle through which commitment is expressed. Thus, commitment for our purposes requires the passing from political belief to political action through a conscious and willed decision by a reasoning subjectivity. The ideas of action and of critical reason characterize the commitment both of the authors of the novels in question and of the committed characters they portray.

Gender was in a sense at the forefront of the political climate in which these authors were writing, both in terms of culture and the legislature. Mary Louise Roberts has argued persuasively for a consideration of gender as a central symbolic focus for

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<sup>4</sup> Schalk, *The Spectrum of Political Engagement*. The second chapter of Schalk's *War and the Ivory Tower: Algeria and Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp.38-60, is also pertinent.

<sup>5</sup> Schalk, *The Spectrum of Political Engagement*, p.ix. The source of the term *engagement* is, as Schalk points out, often cited as Jean-Paul Sartre's *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, first published in 1948. Schalk establishes Paul Nizan's *Les Chiens de garde* (Paris: Éditions Rieder, 1932) as an earlier and more important source in the history of the idea (pp.9-17).

<sup>6</sup> The concept of *mauvaise foi* is investigated throughout *L'Être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943).

post- First World War cultural and political change of a more general nature.<sup>7</sup> Paul Smith has suggested that ‘votes for women was seldom off the political agenda between the two world wars, forming part of an open and sometimes vicious debate over the gender of citizenship’.<sup>8</sup> In all, thirty-five suffrage bills and resolutions made their way onto the agenda of the Chamber of Deputies between 1927 and 1935, and four votes were taken in the Senate.<sup>9</sup> Other forms of suffrage in which women would play at least some part in the polity were also debated. At the end of the First World War it had been suggested that women vote in municipal elections. ‘Le suffrage des morts’ - that widows should vote in place of dead soldiers - was also raised as a possibility, as was a family vote in various guises.<sup>10</sup> I shall not begin with a factual, chronological history of suffrage debates and women’s political activities between the wars: this history is well documented and I cannot begin to do the subject justice in this brief introduction.<sup>11</sup> I highlight certain tension points arising from that history which manifest themselves in the novels I go on to examine.

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<sup>7</sup> Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization Without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Post-War France, 1917-1927* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Paul Smith, *Feminism and the Third Republic: Women’s Political and Civil Rights in France 1918-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p.10. The Chamber of Deputies voted in favour of women’s suffrage in 1919, 1925, 1932, 1935 and 1936, but on each occasion reform was blocked by the Senate. See Albert and Nicole du Roy, *Citoyennes!* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994), p.113, Christine Bard, *Les Filles de Marianne* (Paris: Fayard, 1995), pp.145-49 and pp.331-42, and, for an exhaustive account of the progress of the various suffrage bills through parliament, Smith, *Feminism and the Third Republic*, pp.104-62.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, *Feminism and the Third Republic*, p.151.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, pp.105-06, pp.226-46.

<sup>11</sup> There is now a cluster of texts which chart women’s history of the period. See for example Laurence Klejeman and Florence Rochefort, *Égalité en marche!* (Paris: des femmes, 1989), Roberts, *Civilization Without Sexes*, du Roy and du Roy, *Citoyennes!*, Bard, *Les Filles de Marianne*, Siân Reynolds, *France Between the Wars: Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996), and Paul Smith, *Feminism and the Third Republic*. I am greatly indebted to these texts for the following analysis.

## I

*A history of exclusion?*

Bearing in mind that recent historians justly warn against an exclusive focus on the suffrage question in any account of women and politics between the wars in France,<sup>12</sup> it is nonetheless not without significance that the novels this study will examine were all produced in a political culture which formally excluded women from the basic unit of political participation - the vote.<sup>13</sup> Legal exclusion was bolstered by certain discursive constructions of femininity with the clear political aim of ensuring that women's exclusion from suffrage was preserved. Anti-suffrage arguments maintained that women were physically too weak and too emotional for politics, that their allotted role was to reproduce the species and to care for the home. They were thought not intelligent enough to vote, too delicate to be subjected to the violence of the political arena, which would either destroy or masculinize them. To grant women the vote would undermine the authority of the husband and father and would be in conflict with her legal status as a dependent minor as enshrined in the *Code Civil*.<sup>14</sup> In any case, it was asserted, women did not want to vote and would vote 'wrongly' and threaten

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<sup>12</sup> See for example Siân Reynolds, *Alternative Politics: Women and Public Life Between the Wars* (Stirling: University of Stirling, 1993), pp.1-2.

<sup>13</sup> Anne Phillips, in her *Engendering Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991) refers to the vote as 'the least demanding task of political participation' (p.99) and identifies as a minimum criterion for democracy that 'governments should be elected and all adults have the equal right to vote' (p.10).

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of women's status under the *Code Civil* and inter-war attempts to reform it, see Smith, *Feminism and the Third Republic*, pp.163-211.

France's political stability because they were not really interested in politics.<sup>15</sup>

The political reasons for French women's exclusion from the polity are complex. It is not of course a simple question of misogyny. The often-referred to fear of a clerical and rightist female vote played a large part, especially within the Radical Party which dominated the inter-war parliaments and thus had the power to block female suffrage on these grounds. The communists, theoretically in favour of women's emancipation, saw no urgency in the matter, and no cause for a separate campaign, believing change would come in any case with the revolution. The leftist coalition represented by the Popular Front government did not advance the cause either, since they did not wish to become involved in issues of constitutional reform which had become associated with the right. The right-wing Alliance démocratique coalition, although supposedly pro-suffrage, was willing to sacrifice its feminism when it seemed politically expedient to do so. No one had a strong political interest in promoting female suffrage. According to Smith:

Woman's suffrage did not come about because it was not acceptable to important political players, and could only have occurred if one or a number of significant changes took place: either the Radicals changed their views on votes for women, or the Radicals diminished as a political power in the Republic, or an individual of equal power and prestige imposed women's suffrage by act of fiat. In the end, it took a combination of the last two to see women vote in France.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See du Roy and du Roy, *Citoyennes!*, pp.130-42 for a summary of anti-suffrage arguments, and also Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième sexe*, 2nd edn, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1976; first published Paris: Gallimard, 1949), I, 211-12.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, *Feminism and the Third Republic*, p.162. See also du Roy and du Roy, *Citoyennes!*, pp.190-95 and Bard, *Les Filles de Marianne*, pp.356-61. Also of interest is Jean-Louis Robert, 'Le PCF et la question féminine 1920-1939', *Bulletin du Centre de recherches d'histoire des mouvements sociaux et du syndicalisme*, 3 (1978-79), 56-82.

Despite women's exclusion from suffrage, the inter-war period in France saw a slow but marked increase in possibilities for women's political participation in the form of party membership. Organized feminism maintained a meaningful dialogue with 'mainstream' party politics which began to make female politicization thinkable if nonetheless problematic.<sup>17</sup> In the mid-1930s various parties created women's sections, some having previously admitted women to their ranks. Louise Saumoneau and Elizabeth Renaud had set up the Groupe féministe socialiste in 1901. However after its relaunch in 1914 it was suppressed by the SFIO in 1917, and it was only in 1931 that the Conseil national des femmes socialistes, officially recognised by the French socialist party, came into being. The PCF seems to have been rather out of step with other leftist groups. It had established a women's section in 1921 and its journal, *L'Ouvrière* existed until 1935 when it was replaced by a women's page in *L'Humanité*, 'La femme et l'enfant'. The Radical Party established a women's section in 1935, having admitted women to party membership in 1924. On the right, the group Femme française, linked to the Alliance démocratique, was set up in 1935. In 1935 also, the Section féminine de la Fédération Républicaine was set up, followed in 1936 by a Christian Democrat initiative in the form of the Fédération nationale féminine du Parti Démocrate Populaire.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, this rash of women-focused party organs did not cure the contradictions which were inherent in female politicization. For example, the priority

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<sup>17</sup> Although the history of inter-war feminism is well documented, less material exists on women's participation in mainstream political parties. The information which follows is drawn in very large measure from Paul Smith's detailed investigation of the topic in *Feminism and the Third Republic*, pp.63-103.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Smith, 'Political Parties, Parliament and Women's Suffrage in France, 1919-1939', *French History* 11.3 (September 1997), 338-58.



of class struggle over gender struggle in both socialist and communist thinking demanded of women primary allegiance to their comrades rather than to their sisters.<sup>19</sup> Bourgeois feminism was to be seen as a class enemy, particularly in its concern over married women's property rights, rather than as having any community of interest with women on the left. Thus women's political interests were torn. The case of Cécile Brunschvicg, a Radical nominated by Blum in 1936 as junior minister for education, points up particularly clearly some of the difficulties faced by a woman active in party politics in 1930s France.<sup>20</sup> Brunschvicg, described by Bard as 'l'animatrice de la plus importante association suffragiste', the Union française pour le suffrage des femmes, found herself, on her election, very publicly allied to a party which continued systematically to oppose female suffrage, a contradiction which less generous observers such as Weiss did not fail to point out.<sup>21</sup> Also, like her colleague Suzanne Lacore, appointed to 'la protection de l'enfance', Brunschvicg was 'type-cast' in a female role - education.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, as Weiss remarks, the three women ministers were 'nommées et point élues' and therefore were reliant on male patronage:<sup>23</sup> accordingly when Blum resigned their brief political careers were over. Brunschvicg's case demonstrates the precarious position of the professional female politician in inter-war

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<sup>19</sup> On this question, see Richard J. Evans, *Comrades and Sisters: Feminism, Socialism and Pacifism in Europe 1870-1945* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1987).

<sup>20</sup> On the appointment of women ministers to Blum's Popular Front government, see Siân Reynolds, 'Women and the Popular Front in France: The Case of the Three Women Ministers', *French History*, 8.2 (June 1994), 196-224. Weiss comments on their appointment in *Combats pour les femmes*, p.123ff under the telling title 'Trois hirondelles ne font pas le printemps'.

<sup>21</sup> Bard, *Les Filles de Marianne*, p.31.

<sup>22</sup> Reynolds, *France Between the Wars*, p.210. Reynolds warns against a too-dismissive attitude to such 'type-casting': I consider below ways in which conventional femininity was politicized.

<sup>23</sup> Weiss, *Combats pour les femmes*, p.123.

France: neither elected nor elector, she was bound by narrow notions of what constituted 'female' political concerns and could not expect even the party which supported her as an individual to subscribe to an egalitarian doctrine of female political participation. A contradictory position indeed.

Perhaps the greatest perceived contradiction to blight female commitment was that between conventional notions of a woman's role and the supposed 'maleness' of political activity. Female politicization was supposed to herald a masculinization of women and, perhaps worse, a subsequent feminization of men: Beauvoir cites the fear that '[s]i elles votaient, les hommes s'effémineraient', amongst other anti-suffrage arguments.<sup>24</sup> The fear that the adoption by women of a 'male' role would lead to the eradication of sexual difference was a fierce weapon in the antifeminist armoury. Madeleine Pelletier most famously fuelled the fire of the debate by overtly advocating *virilisation*, wearing masculine clothing and vehemently rejecting all the trappings of conventional femininity. She did not thus win the support of feminism in general. Most were scandalized by her audacity; her close friend Arria Ly more perceptively objected that her behaviour perpetuated oppressive gender oppositions:

Il est indispensable comme le dit fort justement Madeleine Pelletier que la femme s'applique - je ne dirai pas à se viriliser l'expression étant impropre et masculiniste - mais à tremper son caractère. Et au sujet des expressions masculinistes, je me permets d'adresser une critique à Madeleine Pelletier: pourquoi continue-t-elle les anciens errements? Pourquoi fait-elle de viril un synonyme de fermeté et de féminité un synonyme de faiblesse? Cela détonne sous une plume féministe et c'est

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<sup>24</sup> Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième sexe*, I, p.212.

d'ailleurs confondre l'effet avec la cause.<sup>25</sup>

Ly here argues that femininity should be valued in itself, and that the alternative to this is an undesirable impersonation of the male which ascribes superiority to the latter. The debate is one between equality conceived of as sameness, and equality which respects difference. Reynolds points out that women were obliged to imitate men to some degree if they were to gain access to politics which was in practice a male realm: Pelletier represents an extreme example of such an approach to female politicization.

However Reynolds also points out that female difference could be a useful political tool.<sup>26</sup> And some women did take the 'prevailing norms', to return to the terminology of the quotation with which we began, of their female gender identity as a springboard for political commitment. Between the wars, some women were clearly fighting from within the status quo. Their rhetoric proclaimed it. Cécile Brunschvicg declared, 'Les hommes peuvent être rassurés. Avec ou sans leurs droits politiques, les femmes ne renonceront jamais à leur plaisir'. Similarly Louise Weiss: 'Même si vous nous donnez le droit de vote, vos chaussettes seront raccommodées'.<sup>27</sup> Reynolds examines the issue of the role of 'prevailing norms' in her chapter concerning women's involvement in social work, concluding that although this type of activity fell within conventional notions of female activity and although it was considered apolitical, women nonetheless achieved something positive in political terms via their participation

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<sup>25</sup> Arria Ly, 'Pages à méditer', *La Suffragiste*, February 1908. Quoted in Bard, *Les Filles de Marianne*, pp.195-96.

<sup>26</sup> Reynolds, *France Between the Wars*, pp.175-76.

<sup>27</sup> Cécile Brunschvicg and others, *La Femme émancipée* (Paris: Montaigne, 1927), p.20 and *Almanach Vermot*, 2 July 1937. Quoted in Bard, *Les Filles de Marianne*, p.204 and p.339.

in *le service social*.<sup>28</sup> A tension exists then between the potential oppressiveness of conventional constructions of female difference and the possibility of using them to achieve a degree of power and liberation.

The impact of the suffrage campaigns led by Louise Weiss depended precisely on this tension.<sup>29</sup> *La Femme nouvelle*, the feminist organization Weiss had founded in 1934, organized unofficial elections with female candidates during the municipal elections of 1935 and the general election of April 1936.<sup>30</sup> Instead of voting urns, hat boxes were used. Hat boxes represented conventional femininity. And the focusing of the campaign in a very high-profile manner on women's formal debarment from suffrage was a means of exploiting the very legislative structures which deprived women of a political persona. As Reynolds points out, not having the vote was a tremendous catalyst for political activity for women.<sup>31</sup> Exploitation of oppressive norms was a useful vehicle for protest.

A certain willingness to comply with conventional notions of femininity could also facilitate commitment. Female participation in the peace movement in the inter-war

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<sup>28</sup> Reynolds, *France Between the Wars*, pp.132-55. See also pp.156-80, where Reynolds develops the notion of *apolitisme*, using it as a springboard to redefine the parameters of the 'political'.

<sup>29</sup> Louise Weiss gives a full account of her inter-war feminist activities in *Combats pour les femmes*. See also Bard, *Les Filles de Marianne*, pp.334-42.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, *Feminism and the Third Republic*, p.144, p.146. The press treated such campaigns as an amusing *fait divers* whilst acknowledging their impact: 'Enfin, et ce n'est pas le côté le moins pittoresque de la campagne, il y a les candidatures féminines [...] Ces tentatives, dépourvues qu'elles soient de valeur légale ne peuvent manquer de présenter une grande force de propagande. Elles seront l'une des particularités dominantes de cette campagne électorale'. *Paris-Midi*, 24 April 1936, *Dossier Louise Weiss*, BMD.

<sup>31</sup> Reynolds, *France Between the Wars*, p.219 and p.221.

period offers an interesting example.<sup>32</sup> Women were seen to have a natural, essential affinity with peace because of their biological role as mothers, as givers of life. Women placed themselves on the side of life and concord, associating men with death and discord, with war:

grâce au mouvement féministe qui seul pouvait susciter la conscience d'intérêts spécifiques à défendre, le sentiment pacifiste allait se répandre chez les femmes du XXe siècle au point de devenir une préoccupation essentielle des féministes. Mais l'alliance du féminisme et du pacifisme n'en demeure pas moins liée à l'histoire du consentement féminin à un rôle prescrit, imposé, et néanmoins valorisé par les féministes, fières d'être du côté de la vie, de l'amour, de la paix.<sup>33</sup>

Christine Bard's assessment is that groups such as the Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme or the Ligue des femmes contre la guerre were a real force within pacifism. Norman Ingram agrees, maintaining that '[t]here is no doubt that women played an important role in the French pacifist groups of the twenties and thirties'.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, as Siân Reynolds argues, pacifism was one of the 'powerful forces at work in the inter-war years to draw women into public life in a multitude of ways'.<sup>35</sup> Pacifism represented a form of political engagement in which women excluded from citizenship could participate. Here women could resist structures of power relations which excluded them from politics. Here they could emerge from the margins

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<sup>32</sup> See Bard, *Les Filles de Marianne*, pp.129-41 and *ibid.*, pp.181-203.

<sup>33</sup> Bard, *Les Filles de Marianne*, p.313.

<sup>34</sup> Norman Ingram, *The Politics of Dissent: Pacifism in France 1919-1939* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p.250.

<sup>35</sup> Reynolds, *France Between the Wars*, p.202.

of history and participate in the reconstruction of the world. Perhaps this sort of enthusiasm should be tempered, since, as Ingram points out, pacifist politics was ‘the politics of the margins’; ultimately, of course, ‘the pacifist voice was not heard’.<sup>36</sup> But it is nonetheless possible to assert with enthusiasm that, even if inter-war pacifism did little to change the course of world events, it did change women by allowing them access to politics. According to Ingram:

Feminist pacifism [...] maintained close links with political society despite their espousal of an absolute pacifism.

women’s peace initiatives in interwar France became infected with the same dilemmas, distortions, detours, and hard political choices as did more ‘masculinist’ efforts for peace.<sup>37</sup>

Such ‘infection’ played its part in encouraging female politicization. And yet to some degree, women’s participation in the peace movement had its source in highly conventional constructions of femininity.<sup>38</sup> Women were politicizing their experience and yet they could be said to be doing so from within the structures which had been oppressing them for centuries. Here is an example of the transformative potential of prevailing norms, of women’s manipulation of traditional structures. To read women’s inter-war pacifist activities in the light of Bordo’s comments with which we began is to permit a reading more optimistic in feminist terms than might otherwise be possible.

It would of course be a gross over-simplification to suggest that pacifism

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<sup>36</sup> Ingram, *The Politics of Dissent*, pp.15-16.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, pp.14-15, pp.314-15.

<sup>38</sup> See *ibid.*, pp.249-50 on this point.

provided the definitive answer to the dilemma of female commitment in inter-war France. Pacifism itself was a problematic movement being, in Ingram's terms, a 'politics of dissent', which, although 'lively and probably numerically significant', was also 'a balkanized, splintered movement' which, although clear about its ends, was often divided over the appropriate means to achieve them.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, according to Bard, women went to pacifism partly through a sense of guilt, 'une des sources les plus puissantes, bien que la moins avouable, du pacifisme qui se développe chez les féministes dans l'entre-deux-guerres'.<sup>40</sup> Women's lack of participation in the First World War resulted in hostile misogyny, even though a civilian identity had been forced upon them. The soldier-male could come to resent the sacrifice of his kind at the front so that increasingly powerful, liberated, autonomous women could sleep safe in their beds on the home front. Female war guilt is the internalization of such misogyny.<sup>41</sup> Ambivalence and contradiction characterize women's participation in pacifism, just as we have seen to be the case concerning women's participation in mainstream political parties, governments and elections. Firstly, participation in pacifism was not guaranteed to win the approbation of the male soldier-citizen: certainly no one desired another carnage, but the myth of the virile military hero had tremendous resonance and national and masculine pride were not to be sacrificed either. It was not possible simply to valorize the female-life-peace side of the opposition and

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<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, pp.2-4.

<sup>40</sup> Bard, *Les Filles de Marianne*, p.129.

<sup>41</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert, 'Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women and the Great War', in *Behind the Lines*, ed. by Higgonet et al., pp.197-226 (pp.223-24).

condemn the male-death-war equation.<sup>42</sup> Secondly, to opt for the female-life-peace path left unresolved fundamental questions about equality and difference since it did nothing to achieve gender balance in general political participation.

The history of women and politics between the wars in France is one of questions. Historians have suggested answers; the female-authored novels this chapter analyses offer fictional investigations of those questions. How can a woman achieve political commitment when culture and the law do everything in their power to exclude her? What kinds of interactions are possible with conventionally 'female' political questions and subjectivities if oppressive essentialism is to be avoided? To what extent can norms of femininity be manipulated for positive political ends? What kinds of interactions are possible with the 'male norm' of politics? A brief historical journey has permitted the raising of these questions in their cultural and political context; I now turn to the literary context and cast a critical eye over the 'male norm' in practice.

### *A story of exclusion*

Nizan's *Aden Arabie*, his first major literary articulation of his own political commitment, is very much cast in the masculine mode:<sup>43</sup>

Que de fois j'aurai répété le mot homme. Mais qu'on m'en donne un autre. C'est de ceci qu'il s'agit: énoncer ce qui est et ce qui n'est pas

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<sup>42</sup> See Ingram, *The Politics of Dissent*, pp.6-7 on the question of the pejorative connotation of pacifism in the French historical imagination.

<sup>43</sup> Paul Nizan, *Aden Arabie*, 2nd edn (Paris: Maspero, 1960; first published Paris: Éditions Rieder, 1931). Further references, to the Maspero edition of this work, are given after quotations in the text.



dans le mot homme. (AA, pp.112-13)

Vocabulary such as 'marcher vers les hommes' and 'saisir les hommes' also figures to describe the *prise de conscience* which acquires a specific political meaning in the text (AA, p.132 and p.134):

On peut comprendre que la Révolution a des raisons plus méthodiques, mais peu de raisons plus persuasives que celle-ci: il faut des loisirs pour être un homme. (AA, p.108)

'Être un homme' implies action and choice and as such demands time for reflection. Susan Suleiman notes both the ideological implications of 'être un homme' in *Aden Arabie*, and its relationship to authenticity: 'être un homme, c'est combattre le système qui propose aux jeunes une fausse image de l'homme'.<sup>44</sup> She does not however develop the gender implications of the use of this word *homme* which becomes a linchpin in *Aden Arabie* and in Nizan's politics in general. It could be argued that the word *homme* simply has a universalist meaning, that a historical perspective avoiding anachronism must be maintained, since it is only in more recent theory that the male bias of such supposedly all-encompassing terms has been identified. Edith Thomas after all also employs the word with all its universalist connotations in her own writing.<sup>45</sup> The modern reader cannot expect Nizan to have avoided such a vocabulary. However, the prevalence of this vocabulary teaches her that the world in which women such as Thomas, Weiss and Pelletier were approaching commitment was a world in which the

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<sup>44</sup> Susan Suleiman, 'Pour une poétique du roman à thèse: l'exemple de Nizan', *Critique*, 30 (1974), 995-1021 (p.1003).

<sup>45</sup> Thomas, *Le Témoin compromis*, p.193 and p.227.

universal was unquestioningly accepted as masculine, and in which there was no existing vocabulary with which to rethink such associations.

Abstract masculine universalism translates into a very real exclusion of women from the political sphere. Nizan's gendered concept of commitment provides ample illustration. During the Aden trip Nizan wrote to Rirette, his future wife:

La seule chose qui me cause parfois un intolérable sentiment d'exil, ce n'est pas vous (pardonnez-moi), c'est la bande de la rue d'Ulm.

Si la bande de la rue d'Ulm était là nous ferions de grandes choses; nous créerions dans l'ombre des événements.<sup>46</sup>

On this journey which represents for Nizan his coming to politics, he regrets only the male solidarity he has left behind. If he does not miss Rirette, it is because a woman could have very little relevance to this *Bildung*. Accordingly, women in *Aden Arabie* are simply part of the environment of the *voyageur*. His material surroundings are variously connoted as female - the ship is 'une femme' or 'une vieille épouse', the sea is 'une putain' (AA, p.86). Women occupy object positions in relation to the subjectivity of the *voyageur*. Women in this text are never seen behaving as autonomous subjects: 'Elles ne courent pas les routes' (AA, p.83). A *voyageuse* is not a possibility for Nizan because the journey has political resonances, and the assumption of politics coincides with the assumption of masculinity in the guise of 'être un homme'.

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<sup>46</sup> *Paul Nizan: intellectuel communiste*, ed. by J.J. Brochier, 2 vols (Paris: Maspero, 1979), I, 93, 99. Nizan's Aden correspondence is collected in this volume, 85-113. Annie Cohen-Solal quotes from some unpublished correspondence of the period in her *Paul Nizan: communiste impossible* (Paris: Grasset, 1980).

Women's exclusion from the political realm is further pointed up in relation to *Aden Arabie* in the contrast between the two narrations of the period which exist. Nizan's Aden correspondence is addressed to a female narratee, his future wife Rirette, whilst *Aden Arabie*, written two years after the expedition, is clearly addressed to men. The correspondence is not an in-depth political meditation like *Aden Arabie*. Annie Cohen-Solal maintains, in fact, that the correspondence constituted rather the building of the close relationship between Rirette and Nizan that was to stabilize his emotional life in his remaining years. She suggests that Aden was not a political revelation for Nizan until after his return, that is, until the time of the writing of *Aden Arabie*.<sup>47</sup> *Aden Arabie* by contrast is a retrospective and overtly political reconstruction of Nizan's experiences in Aden. Significantly, this political reconstruction necessitates a total masculinization of material which was once narrated to a woman. Sartre, in his 1960 preface to *Aden Arabie*, puts his finger on the point when he identifies its 'public naturel' as 'des fils de vingt ans, nos petits-fils', that is, exclusively male (AA, p.11). Sartre's hopes for the text's contemporary readership demonstrate that it is not destined for women: 'A présent, que les vieux s'éloignent, qu'ils laissent cet adolescent parler à ses frères' (AA, p.49). Of course, much is also revealed here about Sartre's own gender bias, but his comments are not without textual justification. When Nizan addresses his reader directly as *vous*, that *vous* is always presumed to be *un frère*. Take these examples from the text's closing pages:

Vous êtes solitaires. Quand vous dînez, quand vous êtes dans un théâtre,

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<sup>47</sup> Cohen-Solal, *Paul Nizan: communiste impossible*, pp.56-57 and pp.120-24. Schalk makes the same point in *The Spectrum of Political Engagement*, p.57.

dans un cinéma, quand vous marchez sur un trottoir, quand vous êtes dans un lit avec une femme, cherchez des pièges [...] Cette guerre est entièrement privée de noblesse: les adversaires n'y sont pas des égaux: c'est une lutte où vous méprisez vos ennemis, vous qui voulez être des hommes [...] Si vous trouvez que vos parents, que vos femmes sont du parti ennemi, vous les abandonnez. (AA, pp.154-55)

Nizan wrote in 1932 that '[u]ne des tâches immédiates de la littérature révolutionnaire est de se créer son public, d'atteindre son public'.<sup>48</sup> Sartre unwittingly points to the fact that *Aden Arabie* recommends for itself an exclusively male readership.

Such gender bias in political texts that are intended to facilitate commitment renders them more of a hindrance than a help for the female subject seeking politicization. The question then poses itself as to the position of the female subject in relation to 'être un homme' if politicization is her goal. Nizan does not need to engage with the issue of his masculinity in *Aden Arabie* because 'être un homme' and commitment are imbricated.<sup>49</sup> However, for a woman writing about politics, femininity is likely to represent a hurdle to be overcome, and gender is thus likely to be for her a central concern. The imbrication of masculinity and politics so frequently perceptible in male-authored political texts suggests that, in inter-war France, a woman was obliged to reinvent herself, to spawn new forms of culture and subjectivity, in Bordo's words, if she was to write about and participate in politics.

Nizan's 1938 novel *La Conspiration* replicates *Aden Arabie*'s presentation of male characters as acting subjects and female characters as the objects of male political

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<sup>48</sup> Paul Nizan, 'La Littérature révolutionnaire en France', in *Pour une nouvelle culture*, ed. by Susan Suleiman (Paris: Grasset, 1971), pp.33-43 (p.37).

<sup>49</sup> That is not to say that the relationship of the male subject to politics is always straightforward - Nizan's problematic relationship with the PCF amply demonstrates this.

subjectivity.<sup>50</sup> The novel traces the development of five *normaliens* on their journey towards political commitment in the late 1920s. Recalling Nizan's own nostalgia for 'la bande de la rue d'Ulm' during his Aden trip, collectivity initially characterizes the students' commitment. In the first part of the novel they are often referred to as 'on', as 'les jeunes gens', they initially have their feelings, experiences and emotions in common. Political activity in this novel then is to take place within the confines of 'la camaraderie virile' (C, p.32). However this fraternity has strict political rules. Pluvinage's membership of the group turns out to be motivated only by a petit-bourgeois desire to be accepted and admired by his superior bourgeois peers; his supposed communist commitment is ultimately revealed to be a sham. The text asserts that male solidarity must be the result of shared commitment rather than its motivation, if that commitment is to be authentic.

Commitment is unquestioningly masculine. Carré, the textual voice of mature communist commitment, maintains that '[m]ême maladroitement, même à tatons, même s'il retombe, le communiste a l'ambition d'être absolument un homme' (C, p.212). 'Être un homme' here not only acquires the precise political meaning of specifically communist commitment, but also combines both an existential and a political discourse: political commitment also provides the concrete expression of the transition to manhood of the students. According to Laforgue, this political apprenticeship is much more difficult than traditional sexual initiation rites which allowed the passage from male adolescence to 'l'âge viril':

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<sup>50</sup> Paul Nizan, *La Conspiration* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938). Further references to this work are given after quotations in the text.

Les primitifs ont bien de la chance, se dit-il, avec leurs rituels de passage... Il y a de grandes danses et de la boisson, on leur révèle au milieu d'une obscurité truquée, dans le mugissement des bull roarers, des tas de secrets virils, on leur casse une canine ou on les circonçoit, ou on leur fait des incisions assez élégantes dans la peau du dos, je ne vais tout de même pas me faire circonceire, je manquerais de foi... Ce sont des histoires assez simples de sang et d'érections, avec de la souffrance qui vient du dehors, mais après, c'est comme dans les passages à tabac, c'est réglé, on est initié, on a eu la gueule bien cassée, mais on peut discuter le coup avec les ancêtres et faire le malin près des femmes pour ce qui est de la magie blanche, on est un homme... Mais nous autres, pas d'hommes-médecins pour nous faciliter les choses... c'est l'amour, la mort, la saloperie, les maladies de l'esprit... (C, p.302)

The students have discovered their 'secrets virils' through politics; their own 'incisions' have been ideological and emotional. Laforgue's musing is the only example in the text of the male subject's awareness of his own masculinity in relation to commitment.<sup>51</sup> Politics and the transition to manhood may be difficult but they are compatible, and so there is no need for any complex rethinking of gender.

The text presents an ideal coincidence of masculinity and commitment in the character of Carré. He represents the successful resolution of the political apprenticeship upon which Laforgue muses. Mature communist commitment manifests itself in practical, politically productive male solidarity which is exemplified by Carré's relationship with Régnier. Régnier hides Carré from the police; as a sort of grateful exchange, Carré engages in long conversations with the less politically developed Régnier in an attempt to further the latter's commitment. Pluvinage on the other hand is diametrically opposed to Carré, representing failed commitment and failed masculinity. Pluvinage's denunciation of Carré to the police ruptures male solidarity

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<sup>51</sup> Suleiman, in her 'Pour une poétique du roman à thèse' (p.1016) suggests that Laforgue is the only member of the group to move towards the position represented by 'être un homme'.

as well as representing a direct attack on communism, and thus it constitutes a betrayal of both masculinity and commitment. Pluvinage's malicious political betrayal is the reverse of 'être un homme'. Régnier's words are carefully chosen when he comments 'j'hésiterai toujours à croire un homme capable d'une dénonciation' (C, p.216): Pluvinage reveals himself to be indeed 'capable d'une dénonciation' and therefore not really a man. Pluvinage demonstrates the interconnected nature of commitment and masculinity since he fails in gender terms just as he fails in terms of communism. He is physically dwarfed by his enormous mother and sister and by his lover, 'une grande fille virile' (C, p.42) who 'lui fait l'effet d'une très grande femme' (C, p.263). The gender angle of the representation of Pluvinage ensures that his political failure is read as a personal failure and that consequently, the validity of the Communist Party and the text's own commitment to communism are not called into question. Pluvinage himself bitterly remarks: 'Il est dur de penser que les communistes avaient raison, que je n'ai pas seulement trahi les hommes détestés, mais la vérité et l'espoir' (C, p.299). It is true that on the one hand Pluvinage has achieved commitment since he has undertaken an action which has serious repercussions both for himself and for others: 'il savait que la trahison est irrémédiable comme la mort, et que, comme la mort, elle ne s'efface jamais' (C, p.255). But he is condemned because his commitment has been to the detriment of the ideology recommended by the text. It is not then commitment in the abstract which is aligned with masculinity, but rather commitment to the particular political stance the text advocates.<sup>52</sup> At the end of the text, Laforgue asks, 'Fallait-il donc risquer la mort pour être un homme?' (C, p.307). The text's answer is that 'être

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<sup>52</sup> This is obvious from the briefest of comparisons with right-wing texts. In Drieu la Rochelle's *Gilles* for example, masculinity is of course aligned with fascism.

un homme' demands a commitment whose consequences are as serious as death. But of course, that commitment must be to the 'correct' ideology.

The students' attempt to achieve the twin goals of adult masculinity and commitment which Carré has achieved are the focus of an ironic narrative voice which according to Michael Scriven represents 'a merciless demystifying account of the delusions and traumas experienced by the sons of the bourgeoisie in their attempts to make the painful transition from immaturity to manhood'.<sup>53</sup> Their early 'revolutionary' action is completely anodine. According to the narrator: 'personne n'aurait songé à les trouver dangereux' (*C*, p.60). The narrator pokes fun at their naivety, insisting perhaps, from a very communist standpoint, that there is more to the revolution than the leftist posturing of young bourgeois intellectuals whose fathers' money allows them the leisure to interest themselves in the class struggle. Rosenthal eventually realizes that their activities to date do not constitute real commitment. In a letter to Laforgue, he writes:

Il est clair, et tu dois le sentir comme moi, que les articles que nous avons publiés et les discours que nous ne manquerons pas de faire ne nous engagent pas, pour longtemps au moins, dangereusement. Comme il existe des ouvrages de dames, ce ne sont guère que des ouvrages de jeunes gens, qui relèvent de l'art habile et de la complaisance. (*C*, p.82)

What Rosenthal now demands is 'engagement irréversible' (*C*, p.80) and 'des actes [...] qui nous compromettent, assez pour que nous ne puissions jamais *retourner*' (*C*, p.81), as opposed to insignificant 'ouvrages de dames': the gender bias of this phrase is immediately striking. Rosenthal attempts to achieve this irrevocable commitment

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<sup>53</sup> Michael Scriven, *Paul Nizan: Communist Novelist* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p.148.



through a woman, by embarking upon an incestuous affair with his sister-in-law. On the one hand, this attempt at a sexualized political commitment is the focus of narratorial irony and is dismissed as bourgeois adolescent neurosis:

Il [Rosenthal] était d'une génération où l'on confondait presque toujours les succès de l'amour avec ceux d'une insurrection: toutes les femmes conquises, tous les scandales paraissaient des victoires sur la bourgeoisie; c'était mil huit cent trente. Bernard était persuadé que l'amour est un acte de révolte, il ne se doutait pas qu'il est une complicité, une amitié, ou une paresse. (C, pp.223-24)

However I would like to argue that the text also presents the affair as a transgression of bourgeois codes of behaviour and therefore as being potentially political. In this novel, incest is politically significant because it is socially transgressive.<sup>54</sup> Adèle King maintains that the students 'cherchent plutôt à se définir, à se révolter contre leurs familles qu'à s'engager dans une action vraiment politique'.<sup>55</sup> I want to argue that in the case of Rosenthal it is precisely his revolt against his family that offers him the opportunity for real political action. I would disagree with Scriven's characterization of the Rosenthal-Catherine relationship as 'conspicuously detached from any overt ideological significance': it seems absurd to assert that 'the entirety of this second section of the novel does not accede to the political sphere, rooted as it is in

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<sup>54</sup> The question of whether a relationship between a man and his sister-in-law really does constitute incest need not concern us too much here. The text names the relationship as incest, and since the present analysis is focused on the aesthetic rather than the moral, it seems reasonable to accept this textual definition which permits analysis of the symbolic function of the relationship in terms of the text's political agenda.

<sup>55</sup> Adèle King, *Paul Nizan Écrivain* (Paris: Didier, 1976), pp.131-32.

interpersonal and family relations'.<sup>56</sup> On the contrary, this section constitutes a complex interweaving of discourses of the personal and the political, the conclusions of which impact greatly on the political and gender messages of the text as a whole.

The affair offers Rosenthal the opportunity to translate his political belief into action with meaningful consequences:

Pour Bernard, l'amour n'est peut-être que l'entrée en scène de la réalité, Catherine, sa première chance, parce qu'elle est l'occasion de son premier choc, le prétexte de sa première action (C, p.174)<sup>57</sup>

Rosenthal classes his relationship with Catherine as 'un acte de révolte' whereas the narrator dismisses it as 'une complicité'. Taking into account Bordo's reformulation of Foucault's remarks on power and resistance with which we began, it is possible to arrive at a plausible reading which moves between these two positions. Incest is by its nature duplicitous, being at once an attack on the family, bastion of bourgeois ideology, but also occurring within the confines of that family. Incest for Rosenthal means enjoying the material comforts of Catherine's world and indulging in bourgeois male adolescent neurosis by attempting to seduce an incarnation of bourgeois ideals in female form, whilst at the same time shattering bourgeois coherence by transgressing its fundamental codes of behaviour. Through this combination of revolt and complicity Rosenthal, although in the position of oppressor as a member of the bourgeoisie, has

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<sup>56</sup> Scriven, *Paul Nizan: Communist Novelist*, p.157. Helena Shilloy, in her 'Le thème de la trahison dans les romans de Paul Nizan', *The French Review*, 44.3 (February 1971), 492-99, also suggests that Rosenthal does not pursue his revolutionary activities after the André Simon incident. She considers Rosenthal as a traitor, but not as a traitor to the bourgeoisie, despite asserting that '[I]a vision de Nizan implique [...] une transmutation de valeurs qui fera de la trahison une vertu révolutionnaire' (p.493).

<sup>57</sup> See Chapter 2, pp.105-14 where I consider the relationship from Catherine's point of view.

the opportunity to manipulate that role for the good of the oppressed, to further the revolution by attacking the bourgeoisie from the inside. There is a comparison to be made here between such a manipulation of prevailing class norms and the manipulation of gender norms exemplified by women's participation in the peace movement.

The text thus carves out a positive role for the recalcitrant bourgeois in the revolution. Nizan maintains that, in a period of transition:

beaucoup d'écrivains révolutionnaires des pays capitalistes seront des fils révoltés de la bourgeoisie: la littérature révolutionnaire sera donc partiellement défigurée par les souillures de la vie bourgeoise.<sup>58</sup>

Rosenthal's complicity is an example of just such a *souillure* that is nonetheless politically useful.<sup>59</sup> According to Scriven, Nizan's particular contribution to 1930s cultural production is precisely 'a constructive fusion between the political ideology of one class and the cultural form of another'.<sup>60</sup> The use of bourgeois cultural forms to express a proletarian ideology that is perceptible throughout Nizan's *œuvre* is present in microcosm in the Catherine-Rosenthal relationship. In *La Conspiration* incest, the betrayal of the family from within, functions as a metaphor for the betrayal of a whole

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<sup>58</sup> Nizan, 'La littérature révolutionnaire en France', p.35.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas suggests that a bourgeois identity *magré soi* is a significant politicizing force which can be marshalled against the bourgeoisie from within it: 'Se perdre dans le terrain vague de leurs rêves personnels serait sans doute leur plus secret désir: ouvriers, ils n'adhérent pas à aucun parti et laisseraient la pièce se dérouler devant eux, non tant par lâcheté que par chronique indifférence. Mais, parce qu'ils sont d'origine bourgeoise et qu'ils se trouvent, par cela même, rattachés automatiquement à la bourgeoisie, s'ils ne font un acte contraire, parce que, dans leur situation, n'être pas ouvertement pour le prolétariat, c'est être contre lui, ils se trouvent dans la position difficile de ne pouvoir rester ce qu'ils sont, des partisans par naissance d'un ordre qu'ils réprouvent, sans trop savoir s'ils peuvent être loyalement accueillis ailleurs'. Edith Thomas, 'La position sentimentale', *Commune*, 9 (1934), 865-70 (pp.866-67).

<sup>60</sup> Michael Scriven, 'Class divisions in the cultural production of Paul Nizan', *Nottingham French Studies*, 31.2 (Autumn 1992), 102-11 (p.111).

class from within. And indeed, the affair almost causes the safe haven of bourgeois family life to crumble. However Rosenthal's suicide allows his family to recuperate their son, to blame his friends for his waywardness, to reassert bourgeois order and respectability: 'tout était établi dans l'ordre de la mort' (C, p.237), 'tout était véritablement pardonné' (C, p.238). Rosenthal's death is not a revolutionary triumph but an index of defeat: 'Voilà Rosenthal rentré enfin dans le sein des Familles, elles n'en lâcheront rien' (C, p.242).

What is significant in terms of the relationships between gender and commitment in the text is that it is Catherine who bears the blame in no small measure for the wasting of the political opportunity which incest presented. Her participation is indispensable if the affair is to succeed in political terms: 'Si je leur arrache Catherine, se dit-il, je suis définitivement sauvé. S'ils la gardent, que ferai-je de ma défaite?' (C, p.224). If the affair is to represent real commitment as opposed to the hypocritical interior revolt so far typical of Rosenthal, Catherine must also be prepared to stand publicly against her family and her class:

Pouvait-il [Rosenthal] ajouter qu'il souhaitait que sa victoire sur son frère et les siens ne fût pas une victoire clandestine, inconnue des vaincus, mais un éclat, une rupture qui fissent de Catherine le témoin public, rayonnant, scandaleux de son triomphe? (C, p.192)

Rosenthal cannot make use of the potential for revolutionary activity because Catherine is too entrenched in bourgeois ideology to assume the role of 'le témoin public, rayonnant, scandaleux de son triomphe'. She is simply 'une femme pareille aux autres' (C, p.229), unthinkingly entrenched in a stereotype of class and gender, just like her

husband:

Le malheur est que Catherine n'avait jamais pensé à ces choses, qu'elle ne comprenait pas un mot de ce que Bernard lui disait, et que ses réponses n'étaient dictées que par la grâce facile des jeunes femmes: Bernard ne parlait qu'à une sourde, il ne soupçonnait pas que Catherine était parfaitement assortie à Claude, comme on dit. (C, p.205)

Catherine deprives Rosenthal of the opportunity to live up to the demands of 'être un homme', emasculating him sexually and politically. Rosenthal's fate recalls Pluvinage's: again, a man who fails the revolution is deemed to fail in terms of masculinity. Woman in this text then appears as an obstacle both to commitment and to masculinity. Rosenthal's revolutionary potential is stifled by femininity, bourgeois ideology and death: woman plays her part in ensuring that, in Suleiman's words, Rosenthal's political trajectory exemplifies an 'apprentissage anti-exemplaire'.<sup>61</sup> After Greimas, Suleiman asserts that in Rosenthal's case, the *Opposant*, represented by the whole family but particularly by Claude, is stronger than the *Adjuvant*, represented by 'un vague désir d'action libératrice et révolutionnaire' on Rosenthal's part.<sup>62</sup> It seems plausible however to argue that it is Catherine who occupies the role of *Opposant*, thus placing femininity in a position of direct antagonism to revolutionary politics. In *La Conspiration*, the net is closed around commitment, politics and masculinity, not only excluding female participation, but also blaming woman for the failure of man to accede to commitment.

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<sup>61</sup> Suleiman, 'Pour une poétique du roman à thèse', pp.1014-1016.

<sup>62</sup> Pascal Ory, in his *Paul Nizan: Destin d'un révolté* (Paris: Éditions Ramsay, 1980), p.158, points out that Catherine moves on from this position to achieve a positive *Bildung*. See Chapter 2, p.110 on this point.

The example of Nizan offers some insight into the literary and cultural context of which women writing about politics in inter-war France were obliged to take account. His work exemplifies the tacit assumption that a natural alliance exists between masculinity and politics which renders the female subject either irrelevant or detrimental to commitment. I should like to move on to consider three female responses to this culture of exclusion.

## II

### *Le tombeau de la féminité*

According to Dorothy Kaufmann, in her preface to Edith Thomas's memoirs, Thomas 'parle peu de sa condition de femme'.<sup>63</sup> But her reticence is revelatory. She does not dwell on this question because she conceives of her political agenda in terms of a rejection of conventional femininity in favour of commitment. Which is not to say that femininity is irrelevant to her *œuvre*, indeed her fiction, memoirs and journals constitute a nuanced study of the relationship between femininity and politics, of the gender identifications of the committed female subject. However, her *œuvre* testifies to a belief that 'pour une femme, consentir à sa singularité est déjà un tombeau'.<sup>64</sup> This belief manifests itself in a suspicion of gender separatism as a useful way forward for female commitment:

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<sup>63</sup> Thomas, *Le Témoin compromis*, p.23. Further references to this work are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>64</sup> Edith Thomas, *Pages de journal, 1939-1944* (Paris: Viviane Hamy, 1995), p.189.

Un groupement de femmes, dans la Résistance, me paraissait inutile et périmé. C'était pour moi une étape dépassée et je ne voyais pas comment je pourrais être utile à une organisation dont les préoccupations, en tant que femme, précisément, m'étaient étrangères. (TC, p.118)

Thomas's ambivalence concerning her work on the journal *Femmes françaises* reveals the same attitude (TC, p.171).<sup>65</sup> Thomas can perceive no parity between the 'female' concerns of such organizations and her own experience of being a woman. We have seen that recent historians such as Reynolds discern a possibility for recuperating a degree of political efficacy for conventional femininity. A different theoretical angle on such questions which is closer to Thomas's stance is exemplified by Joan W. Scott's problematization of feminist 'identity politics' and the reading of 'woman', and more specifically of 'female experience', as coherent categories of analysis.<sup>66</sup> Scott asks rather how that experience is produced in the first place and questions the subsuming of differences under the title 'woman'. For Thomas, 'identity politics' cannot facilitate female commitment because she does not subscribe to the view that common beliefs, activities and aims can necessarily be attributed to individuals on the basis of having their sex in common.

Thomas's rejection of 'female experience' is not however unproblematic. The consequences of such a stance are explored in her 1936 novel, *Le Refus*.<sup>67</sup> *Le Refus* is the

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<sup>65</sup> It is noteworthy however that specifically female organizations could be useful to Thomas. In 1946 her associations with L'Union des femmes françaises permitted a politically interesting visit to the USSR (TC, pp.194-99).

<sup>66</sup> Joan W. Scott, ' "Experience" ', in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.22-40. The contemporary debate over the role of female experience in feminism is well documented. See for example Chantal Mouffe's essay 'Feminism, Citizenship and Radical Democratic Politics' in the same volume, pp.369-84, Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990) and Phillips, *Engendering Democracy*, pp.70-73.

<sup>67</sup> Edith Thomas, *Le Refus* (Paris: Éditions Sociales Internationales, 1936). Further references to this work are given after quotations in the text.

story of Brigitte's personal and political development. The novel begins with Brigitte's return home after a long illness, and traces her gradual renewal of contact with her family and her turning against their bourgeois lifestyle and ideology. An acute awareness of proletarian hatred for the bourgeoisie provokes in Brigitte a profound sense of shame which is ultimately enabling in political terms. Rejecting academic research and a good bourgeois marriage as solutions to her quest for an authentic existence, Brigitte is inspired to investigate communism by a visit to her father's factory. She attends a meeting where she alone does not know the words of the *Internationale*. In order to overcome her class allegiance which she experiences as an insurmountable barrier to potential solidarity with the workers, she departs for England to become a *répétitrice*. When the novel closes Brigitte has not progressed far enough along her ideological journey to join the Communist Party, but the text suggests that this is the goal she will ultimately succeed in achieving. That this goal must be achieved at the expense of Brigitte's sexuality is an issue with which I engage in detail in Chapter 2. Suffice it to say, for the moment, that Brigitte cannot combine a political and a sexual identity because she cannot separate heterosexuality from a highly class-specific, conventional mode of femininity which contradicts her own political inclinations. Lesbian desire does not permit an escape from oppression any more than marriage since it too threatens the female subject with a relational existence. Thomas's rejection of homoeroticism no doubt also relates to her animosity towards female specificity.<sup>68</sup> She is clearly hostile to an investigation of female subjectivity based, as convention might dictate, upon love: 'Le scandale qu'on laisse aux femmes est celui de leurs expériences amoureuses. Cela m'importe peu et pour moi le scandale est ailleurs' (*TC*, p.34). Accordingly, 'Les

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<sup>68</sup> This aspect of Thomas's early writing is particularly interesting given her later relationship with the writer Dominique Aury.



expériences amoureuses' in *Le Refus* do not represent a positive political force.

Unwilling to align herself with romantic female experience, Brigitte also rejects the lifestyle of the bourgeois female as it is experienced by most of the women of her entourage, including her mother, her aunt, her friends. Religion, family social occasions designed to further the social status of the hosts, fashion, also a reflection of the latter and a manifestation of wealth, and motherhood, which simply reinforces female dependency, all come under Brigitte's critical scrutiny. Thus, sympathetic to the proletariat, uninterested in the usual trappings of femininity, Brigitte is alien to her class and to her sex. However, the translation of her beliefs into commitment is complicated by the fact that the outsider looking in sees only the roles she wants to refuse: bourgeois and female, she is not to be easily accepted by communism, she will not slip unnoticed into the male working-class culture of leftist political meetings. Severed from her roots by her political beliefs, Brigitte fears that her attempt to translate those beliefs into action will result in rejection precisely because of those roots: 'Elle n'avait plus qu'une crainte, c'est qu'on ne la laissât pas entrer, qu'on la rejetât de l'autre côté' (*R*, p.239-40). She does gain access to the meeting, but when the *Internationale* is sung, '[e]lle seule ne savait pas la chanter: elle n'avait pas le droit d'être parmi eux' (*R*, p.241). The only solution the text can offer is solitude: 'Avoir le courage de faire sa vie seule. Avoir le courage de vouloir sa vie, toute sa vie et rien qu'elle' (*R*, p.205).<sup>69</sup> Here traces of *Le Témoin compromis* are perceptible:

La solitude ne m'a jamais fait peur. C'est une vieille compagne à laquelle je suis habituée. Au milieu des groupes auxquels j'ai cru appartenir, elle ne m'a jamais quittée. Je peux regarder en face la solitude. (*TC*, p.211)

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<sup>69</sup> Kaufmann, in her 'Uncovering a Woman's Life', points to the prevalence of the theme of female solitude in Thomas's fiction.

For Thomas, solitude necessarily results from the singular situation of the politicized female subject, rejected both by those she rejects and by those she hopes to join. Solitude is however also the ultimate route to the achievement of female commitment. Thus Brigitte embraces solitude, departing for England alone, and leaving the reader convinced that real communist commitment is within her grasp.

*Le Refus* testifies to an acceptance that the politicized female subject is to be impoverished in her relationships, both sexual and social, to other subjects, both male and female, because her own 'female experience' is matched by few. In the light of recent theory, Thomas seems to be ahead of her time. Anne Phillips notes that New Wave feminism tended to assume a coherence of female experience, citing as a relatively recent occurrence a productive engagement with the idea that '[s]exual inequality might be a universal phenomenon, but that does not mean women are universally the same'.<sup>70</sup> Thomas perceives no coincidence between her experience of politicized female subjectivity and the vast majority of women's subjectivities, or indeed the experiences of the small minority of women engaged in political action through 'female' organizations. The necessary female solitude to which Thomas is resigned is a far cry from the work of Nizan where commitment unites men with other men in a politically productive collectivity. Jean Bethke Elshtain argues that since participation in action reveals the individual to others, to bar the individual from a certain sort of action, such as political action, is to limit their individuality, to impoverish them.<sup>71</sup> But Thomas

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<sup>70</sup> Phillips, *Engendering Democracy*, p.72.

<sup>71</sup> Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1981), pp.53-54. B. Honig makes a similar point in her essay 'Toward an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Identity', in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. by Butler and Scott, pp.215-35 (p.219).

reveals a double bind when she shows that, for a woman, to attempt political action is also to risk impoverishment.

Political commitment has not conventionally been considered to form part of female experience. Thomas frequently formulates the problem of female commitment in terms of the relationship between thought and action, focusing in particular on the difficulty of finding a possible form for female action. *Le Témoin compromis* testifies to Thomas's own difficulties in this respect: 'je me sentais mauvaise conscience, incapable que j'étais de faire l'accord entre mes convictions et ma vie' (TC, p.56). She demonstrates that expectations about what should constitute female experience represent a real hurdle. The relationship between war and commitment is one obviously sex-specific constraint. Elshtain notes:

Meditating upon modern Western political thought, the contemporary analyst, particularly if she is sensitive to feminist questions and female-shaped concerns, is struck by the pervasive nexus forged between war and politics, on the level of action and of thought.<sup>72</sup>

Thomas, it seems, was also thus struck. 'Ce que je pensais, à vrai dire, n'avait aucune importance. J'étais une femme. Je n'étais pas mobilisable' (TC, p.81). Military incapacity is supposed to imply incapacity in terms of political belief. The question then remains as to the precise form of female action, of her passing from belief to commitment. 'Si j'avais été un homme, je me serais engagée dans les rangs des républicains espagnols. Mais j'étais une femme, et boiteuse, comment être utile?' (TC, p.59). It is significant that the moment of closest accord between belief and action

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<sup>72</sup> Elshtain, *Meditations on Modern Political Thought: Masculine/Feminine Themes from Luther to Arendt* (New York: Praeger, 1986), p.103.

occurs in *Le Témoin compromis* when Thomas is working in her capacity as a journalist with refugees crossing the Pyrenees into France to flee Franco's troops. Although not actually on the Spanish front, Thomas finds herself in the thick of the action: 'Je retrouvais un accord entre le monde et moi. Il n'y avait plus de faille entre ce que je faisais et ce que je pensais, ni de réserve' (*TC*, p.67). Commitment is achieved when thought and action are allowed to coincide, but for a woman, such coincidence is frequently inhibited. Elshtain notes: 'War is the means to attain recognition, to pass, in a sense, the definitive test of political manhood'.<sup>73</sup> Unfortunately there is no established 'political womanhood' and no established female rites of passage.

Excluded from military participation in Spain, Thomas's only remaining option is journalism. Thomas aligns writing very clearly with commitment throughout *Le Témoin compromis*: 'la littérature se situait pour moi dans un courant historique et [...] j'y attachais trop d'importance pour la considérer comme un jeu' (*TC*, p.49); 'la littérature me permettrait peut-être de faire l'accord entre ce que je pensais et ce que je ne vivais point' (*TC*, p.57); 'Je ne concevais la littérature que comme une forme d'engagement' (*TC*, p.58). However, writing is for her an inferior form of commitment: 'C'était, me semblait-il, la seule manière dont je pouvais servir une cause pour laquelle j'aurais donné facilement ma vie' (*TC*, p.61). Women's exclusion from active service renders the giving of one's life for a cherished cause a male privilege. Female political martyrdom is unacceptable: Schalk, discussing the *épuration*, notes that de Gaulle granted clemency to all women condemned for

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<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*, p.75.

collaboration, along with minors and those acting upon formal orders.<sup>74</sup> The female subject is prohibited from taking the ultimate responsibility for her commitment. She may not take her commitment as far as death.<sup>75</sup> Thomas notes, concerning her Resistance activities: 'Chacun a son revolver (sauf moi: je ne saurais d'ailleurs m'en servir et ne ferai jamais que mon métier de témoin)' (*TC*, p.133). The *que* indicates that for Thomas, the prohibition on killing, as well as dying, forces the female into inferior commitment. The writing project is inferior in other ways too. Concerning her journalism, Thomas is ashamed of her inability to support herself financially by writing (*TC*, p.74). Concerning the writing of her memoirs, she is troubled by the subjectivity of the writing project (*TC*, p.34-35): perhaps here she again fears a descent into conventional femininity.

The capacity to use literature as a form of commitment does not eradicate the desire for direct action. The male subject may choose the form of his action for himself, whereas the female subject is confined and limited in that choice. The example of writing then illustrates the ways in which gender plays a central role in the relationship of the female subject to her own commitment. As a woman some forms of political action are barred; those that remain may be insufficient but must nonetheless be pursued if the politicized female subject is to align belief with action. She is caught between the Scylla and Charybdis of a failure to attempt to align belief with action, and a commitment that is in some way inadequate.

The complex relationships between writing, gender and politics are brought to the fore by the presence of an anonymous narratee in *Le Témoin compromis*. The narratee is

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<sup>74</sup> Schalk, *The Spectrum of Political Engagement*, p.86.

<sup>75</sup> See also Chapter 4, pp.245-47 on this question.

to provide justification for the writing of the text:

Je commence donc aujourd'hui ce récit pour m'expliquer et me justifier à tes yeux et aux miens, pour que tu saches qui je suis et pour que tu m'aimes, malgré tout, car j'ai besoin d'être aimée telle qu'en moi-même et non par des subterfuges ou sous des apparences. Et puisque je ne puis plus exister en Dieu, pour que je puisse du moins exister en toi. (TC, p.30)

In her preface to the work, Kaufmann suggests that this narratee is male, a fantasized ideal militant communist lover (TC, p.11). The implication of this argument is that we are dealing here with a masculinization of a political narrative which mirrors the gender transformation which takes place when Nizan re-narrates the material from his Aden correspondence in *Aden Arabie*. Unfortunately for Kaufmann's tempting hypothesis however, the text never signs the narratee as specifically male. On the contrary, Thomas carefully maintains complete neutrality as regards the gender of the narratee. She maintains that the narrative is not addressed to a specific individual:

Je n'écris que pour ceux qui me ressemblent. Or, personne ne ressemble à personne. Je n'écris donc que pour toi, qui restes imaginaire. (TC, p.57)

Peut-être aussi ai-je écrit ces pages pour avoir ta réponse, qui que tu sois. (TC, p.228)

The logic of this textual explanation - no two individuals are alike, and the narratee resembles the narrator - points to an interpretation of the narratee as an 'other self'. *Le Témoin compromis* is a study in solitude, written by the self, about the self and for the self. What is interesting is that this imaginary ideal projection of narratorial subjectivity is precisely genderless, and therefore unfettered by femininity.

Thomas's political *œuvre* tells the story of women's attempts to align thought

with action. At the beginning of *Aden Arabie*, Nizan asserts that '[i]l est dur à apprendre sa partie dans le monde' (AA, p.53). This is no doubt true, yet the male subject need never question whether or not there is a place for him in the world in political terms. Thomas's work shows that, for the female subject, not even this much is given. Thus Thomas's 'ideal self' is without gender. Rejecting sexual difference as a constraint as regards politicization, Thomas aligns herself with the 'equality' side of the dichotomy between a gender-conscious politics which favours the erasure of sexual specificity altogether to assert that all are equal, and one which attempts to remove discrimination whilst maintaining that difference exists and must therefore positively be taken account of.<sup>76</sup> Phillips notes that '[f]eminism has been endlessly locked into this equality/difference dichotomy - they are the only choices on offer and yet neither will do'.<sup>77</sup> Thomas's work investigates some of the problems with the former; the work of Louise Weiss investigates the latter.

### *Être une femme*

A commentator writing in *Le Figaro* of 16th February 1936 remarks on the choice of the Salon des Arts Ménagers as the venue for the inaugural dinner of the electoral campaign of Louise Weiss's feminist group La Femme nouvelle:

Le choix du lieu n'était pas vain. Il fallait, en effet, convaincre le public que l'on peut être à la fois bonne féministe et bonne ménagère [...] On avait photographié et filmé Mlle Weiss en train de vider un poulet et de

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<sup>76</sup> On the emergence of this distinction as pertinent to debates in recent and contemporary feminism, see Phillips, *Engendering Democracy*, pp.5-6, pp.36-38.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*, p.37.

le préparer pour la cuisson.<sup>78</sup>

It is clear that Weiss's conception of the relationship between femininity and commitment differs radically from that of Edith Thomas. The two volumes of Weiss's *Mémoires d'une Européenne* which cover the inter-war period testify to a desire to integrate conventional femininity with politics.<sup>79</sup> We have seen already how Weiss's suffrage campaigns can be seen to exemplify an attempt to achieve female commitment via the manipulation of conventional constructions of femininity. A closer examination of her memoirs and her fiction will permit a more detailed analysis of the role of femininity in Weiss's politics.

Weiss's politics appears in *Combats pour L'Europe* as a politics of compassion, and the injustices which motivate the latter are often formulated in terms of femininity. The 'problème russe' is exemplified by the 'gare de triage' which takes delivery of thousands of refugees:

Elles n'avaient plus de seins, ces femmes, plus de ventre, plus de cheveux, plus de genoux. Elles n'étaient que chairs meurtries, poils clairsemés, os tordus, aisselles grattées, escarres. Marx pouvait vaticiner. Lénine finasser. Trotsky maudire. Telle se révélait la réalité fondamentale: la Russie était atteinte dans sa maternité. (*CE*, p.119)

Weiss had incorporated the same incident nearly word for word in her 1936 novel *Délivrance* where it forms part of the political testimony of the semi-autobiographical

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<sup>78</sup> *Dossier Louise Weiss*, BMD.

<sup>79</sup> *Combats pour l'Europe, 1919-1934*, 2nd edn (Paris: Albin Michel, 1979) traces Weiss's pacifist activities with the League of Nations and *Combats pour les femmes* recounts her feminist activities. Further references to the Albin Michel editions of these works are given after quotations in the text.



protagonist, Noémi.<sup>80</sup> In the ‘gare de triage’ example, women’s physical suffering is chosen to illustrate the suffering of a nation.<sup>81</sup> The plight of children is also often singled out as an index of poverty and injustice, for example the ones forced to make their home in ‘une marmite à cuire l’asphalte’ in Moscow, whose story also appears in *Délivrance* (*CE*, p.107 and *D*, p.225). Weiss’s own commitment, which manifested itself in pacifist and pro-European activities with the League of Nations and L’Europe nouvelle, appears as a response to such misery, a response which stems at the same time from what is presented as a very ‘feminine’ compassion.

Coincidence between *Délivrance* and the memoirs is not surprising, since the political career of its central protagonist seems to be based closely on Weiss’s own. That the novel precedes the autobiography might of course call into question the veracity of the autobiography: the fluidity of the boundaries between fact and fiction in Weiss’s *œuvre* is a fascinating question into which I cannot digress here. *Délivrance* recounts the meeting between the text’s first person narrator, Marie, and Noémi. The text traces Marie’s existential pilgrimage to Geneva which constitutes an attempt firstly to redefine her shattered identity following the death of her fiancé in the war and her abandonment by her lover, and secondly to decide whether or not to have an abortion. The action takes place around the time of the 1932 Geneva Disarmament Conference.<sup>82</sup> Noémi is working with the League of Nations for the pacifist cause. Marie intends to confess her life story to Noémi in the hope of thus discovering a new definition of her self. Marie does not in

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<sup>80</sup> Louise Weiss, *Délivrance* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1936), p.228. Further references to this work are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>81</sup> See also Chapter 4, pp.236-39 where I examine Weiss’s politicization of maternity in more detail.

<sup>82</sup> According to a review of the novel in *La Française*, 6 July 1937, *Dossier Louise Weiss*, BMD. Weiss followed the activities of the League of Nations closely as a journalist.

fact divulge her own story to Noémi: instead, Noémi recounts the death of her child and her subsequent involvement in pacifist politics. Educated in politics at the expense of femininity by her father and his secretary, her *institutrice*, Noémi is well placed to pursue a political career, but feels resentment at the sacrifices this path obliges her to make in gender terms. Weiss's ideal of a coincidence between femininity and politics has eluded Noémi but is presented as a possibility for the future.

In *Délivrance*, the complete imbrication of femininity and politics appears as an ideal:

Je percevais qu'en dehors de la salle, flottait éparse une sensibilité féminine encore non affectée dont l'Enchanteur avait découvert certaines lois et qui pourrait, liée à une cause, se transformer en une mystique inspiratrice d'agissante solidarité. (*D*, p.61)

Weiss's view of the suffrage question further articulates her conception of the relationship between gender and commitment:

Je voyais ce droit sous un double aspect. En modifiant les coutumes, il donnerait aux femmes toutes leurs chances dans leurs activités civiles et, en modifiant la politique, toutes ses chances de survivre à une humanité trop encline aux conflits. (*CF*, p.18)

Weiss here advocates a feminization of politics in order to orient humanity towards peace rather than war, and expresses a belief in the acquisition of rights as a route to female power. Ellen Kennedy and Susan Mendus, in their introduction to *Women in Western Political Philosophy*, suggest three possible stances regarding women's attempt to gain access to the political realm.<sup>83</sup> Firstly they describe the possible transformation of politics

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<sup>83</sup> *Women in Western Political Philosophy*, ed. by Ellen Kennedy and Susan Mendus (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1987), pp.16-18.

by an attempt to 'feminize' it, which involves undermining the traditional public/private distinction. Secondly, politics might be rejected completely, which amounts to a valorization of the private over the public. Thirdly, women might demand access to the existing political system, thus accepting the established view that the public realm is superior to the private. Louise Weiss exemplifies the first of these: her attempt to find a 'feminine' mode of action in the peace movement and in the suffrage movement through which to express her political belief is in turn to have a transformative effect on politics itself. As Phillips points out, this is a conventional argument for the inclusion of women (or indeed any excluded group) in the polity - that they will change politics for the better.<sup>84</sup> Thomas, in her rejection of femininity as politically useful, is more closely aligned with Kennedy and Mendus's third approach. Weiss also differs from Thomas in her advocacy of separatism. The briefest of comparisons between their respective Resistance activities provides adequate illustration. For Thomas, '[u]n groupement de femmes, dans la Résistance, me paraissait inutile et périmé'; Weiss on the other hand established a Centre de propagande pour le volontariat féminin dans le service de la défense.<sup>85</sup> Weiss displays no reticence concerning the use of 'identity politics' in the fight for female politicization, as her suffrage campaigns with *La Femme nouvelle* amply demonstrate.

Paradoxically, the attempt to achieve female commitment through a feminized politics seems to present the individual female subject with difficulties concerning her

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<sup>84</sup> Phillips, *Engendering Democracy*, p.49, p.63. Phillips remarks: 'From the suffrage movement onwards, women have frequently seen themselves as bringing a greater generosity to politics, so that even pressing for the interests of women, they would be subverting the assumption that politics is about looking after yourself. The recurrent equation woman have made between their 'interests' and those of children is one example of this; the links some now see between feminism and the defence of the environment is another' (p.49).

<sup>85</sup> *Louise L'Européenne - Hommage à Louise Weiss 1893-1983. Exposition au palais de Luxembourg sous le haut patronnage de monsieur Alain Poher, Président du Sénat, 1985*, p.9.

own access to conventional femininity. From Weiss's work there emerges a strong desire for conventional femininity in the form of marriage and children, which is thwarted by commitment. Her response to being proposed for the *Légion d'Honneur* is a clear example: 'Déjà *L'Europe nouvelle* m'empêche de me marier. Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur! Il ne se trouvera plus qu'un pédéraste pour m'épouser!' (CE, p.242). The disintegration of the League of Nations in the 1930s provides another: 'je me demandais, amère, si le sacrifice des joies normales d'une femme - sacrifice auquel j'avais passionnément consenti - valait cette défaite' (CE, p.304). A very normative and conservative view of femininity is in evidence and Weiss regrets her failure to accede to this vision of womanhood, in sharp contrast to Thomas for whom conventional femininity is politically negative.<sup>86</sup> Weiss regrets that in the inter-war period, conventional femininity and commitment were not compatible for the individual woman; her solution is a rethinking of politics rather than of femininity.

*Délivrance* turns around similar issues. On the one hand, Noémi, the end of whose political career in the League of Nations the novel charts, is often aligned with virility. 'Elle parlait [...] en homme' (D, p.52), she shows 'une extraordinaire virilité d'esprit' (D, p.68). However, the narrator also notices 'son visage [...] entièrement féminin' (D, p.91) and wants Noémi to reveal 'la femme qui frémissait dans ses discours' (D, p.205). Both Noémi and the narrator are aware of the contradictory nature of the gender identifications of the politicized female subject:

Quand vint le succès professionnel, le métier me parut plus âpre encore.  
On me critiquait comme un homme que je n'étais pas et comme une

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<sup>86</sup> In an interview in *Echo de notre temps*, 93 (1974), 32-33 Weiss clearly presents women very much in terms of the home, the family, motherhood, although this no doubt also reflects the concerns of the magazine. *Dossier Louise Weiss*, BMD.

femme que je n'étais plus; on applaudissait en moi le monstre d'un genre inconnu qu'il serait bien intéressant de voir tomber dans l'arène ou, pourquoi pas?...réussir [...] Réussir à quoi? L'indépendance féminine n'est pas encore acceptée. Les hommes la jalourent; les femmes se méfient; les couples la détestent. (*D*, p.216)

La solitude déforme les femmes en hermaphrodites qui croient au raisonnement et ne peuvent pas en user sans hurler de souffrance. (*D*, p.288)

In Noémi's experience commitment leads to a hybrid female identity, which for Weiss is necessarily inadequate, because in the contemporary socio-political climate politics is an exclusively male preserve. More recent feminist theory might ascribe a positive value to such ambiguity. Weiss points out rather that politics, conceived of as a male position, is accessible to the female subject only at the cost of great pain. As a transitional figure, Noémi must then suffer a degree of separation between politics and femininity. For example, for Noémi to care for the narrator in a moment of physical distress demands a transformation from one identity to another: 'Elle s'était dévêtue de sa tenue politique et, simplement, se préparait à me donner des soins' (*D*, p.88). Removing the trappings of politics, she reveals the compassionate woman underneath. Also, politics has deprived Noémi of love, which seems to be a defining element of femininity: 'Les femmes qui m'ont été secourables, continua-t-elle, sont celles qui m'ont donné le sentiment que, malgré ma dure carrière, j'étais faite, comme elles, pour être aimée' (*D*, p.94).

Weiss, like Thomas, notes the solitude which accompanies female commitment. However, unlike Thomas, she represents solitude in *Délivrance* in negative terms; solitude represents the absence of the more conventional aspects of being a woman, which are valorized. The war losses are blamed for female solitude, historicizing this element of female identity: 'Avec les femmes de ma génération j'ai parcouru une route jonchée de blessés, obstruée de morts. Notre solitude peu à peu s'est précisée' (*D*, p.6).

Noémi's solitude is blamed partly on her childhood *institutrice*, a monstrous and deceitful 'vieille fille' opposed to marriage as a distraction from her charge's political calling, who is condemned as responsible for the breaking down of Noémi's first love affair (*D*, pp.209-10). The 'bluestocking' who opposes conventional femininity and thereby ushers in solitude does not receive a sympathetic portrayal.

The question of the imbrication of femininity and politics crystallizes in *Délivrance* in its representation of maternity. Politics and maternity symbolize each other:

En me comparant à elle [Noémi], je me disais que toutes deux, femmes génératrices de vie, nous avons été mises à la torture pendant ces interminables années d'après-guerre. Nous avons œuvré: l'enfant de son esprit avait avorté; l'enfant de ma chair pourrait vivre peut-être. (*D*, p.109)

It is the death of Noémi's child, André, which precipitates her entry into politics: 'En souvenir du bébé que j'avais totalement chéri, j'entrepris de plaider à travers le monde sa cause, celle des innocents, la paix' (*D*, p. 215). Here the linking of women with the peace movement because of their role as life-givers is in evidence. Women are to identify with 'la génération des mères des soldats tombés au front' (*D*, p.223), with 'l'enfance martyrisée par la vindicte des hommes' (*D*, p.229). It is noteworthy that it is the mother-son relationship which is significant in this context. Noémi, much of whose political work is oriented around mothers and children, appears in the text as a sort of arch-mother. 'Mon amie incarnait toute la maternité, toute l'enfance du monde' (*D*, p.229), she is a 'mère exemplaire' (*D*, p.248), 'la grande et maternelle Noémi' (*D*, p.312), characterized in terms of 'sa souveraineté maternelle' (*D*, p.258). For the modern reader, Weiss's prevailing definition of femininity in terms of maternity is rather problematic. Phillips,

who argues ultimately for a politics which takes sexual difference into account to some degree, points out the danger inherent in this path of slipping into essentialism:

We have to find a political language that can recognize heterogeneity and difference, but does not thereby capitulate to an essentialism that defines each of us by one aspect alone.<sup>87</sup>

Heterogeneity is not on Weiss's agenda.

The representation of Marie, the text's first person narrator, offers an important caveat to Weiss's valorization of women's desire for conventional femininity. Marie has effected such a complete internalization of the wife/lover role that the self is completely absorbed, and she progresses little from this position. She is incapable of ontological autonomy: 'Privée d'âme ou parfois tellement habitée par la tienne que je n'existais plus' (*D*, p.16). The solution offered to her by the text, via the example of Noémi, is maternity: if she embraces 'maternité libre', then a successful female identity will be within her grasp. She fails to embrace it, opting instead for the abortion demanded of her by her ex-lover and thus proving that she has learnt nothing from Noémi.

The text's recommendation of 'la maternité libre' is an attempt to permit maternity to be celebrated as a specifically and exclusively female experience, diminishing the role of the father as much as possible. It is noteworthy however that female separatism in the form of lesbianism is rejected. The narrator's desire for Noémi appears here, as in *Le Refus*, as the possibility for female inauthenticity, the same definition of the self by another which Marie has attempted to achieve through her heterosexual relationships. According to Noémi, '[I]es lesbiennes sont des impuissantes' (*D*, p.94). The idea is not developed, but it seems plausible to hypothesize, in the context

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<sup>87</sup> Phillips, *Engendering Democracy*, p.168.

of the text's representation of maternity, that the supposed powerlessness of the lesbian has its source in her exclusion from the maternal role.

Individually, neither Marie nor Noémi ultimately achieves the combination of femininity and freedom that is Weiss's ideal. Marie's abortion parallels Noémi's abortive attempt to achieve world peace through the League of Nations. It seems appropriate to import from *Combats pour les femmes* a conclusion to this novel: 'S'il fallait libérer les femmes d'un lourd passé de préjugés et réviser les lois, il fallait aussi et surtout les affranchir d'elles-mêmes' (*CF*, p.27). There is in Weiss's work a constant tension between alignment and separation of conventional femininity and politics, alignment being a political ideal but separation being the cruel reality for the female subject. 'Être une femme' is a political position of the future.

A political ideal is present in *Délivrance* in the figure of L'Enchanteur, the president of the League of Nations.<sup>88</sup> To propose male commitment as a political ideal may seem contradictory in a text which advocates the coming together of femininity and politics. However the paradigmatic status of L'Enchanteur stems from his transitional function in political terms. Stepping out of the male world of politics, he is to act as a gateway, ushering in feminized politics in the form of pacifism. He is the voice of all victims, women as well as men: 'Les lamentations des femmes auxquelles on arrache leurs enfants, les clameurs des blessés et des mourants, les vociferations des sans-travail se brisaient dans sa gorge' (*D*, p.178). Though male, he is the incarnation of peace and as such represents the only hope for women: 'Notre destinée, la destinée des femmes dépendait de la réussite de l'Enchanteur' (*D*, p.181). However

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<sup>88</sup> It is clear from comparison with *Combats pour L'Europe* that L'Enchanteur is a fictional representation of Aristide Briand.



L'Enchanteur is dying, and his successor, the text suggests, must be *L'Enchanteuse* if the cause of world peace is to move successfully forward. Papalin (*D*, p.76), the symbolic father, must be replaced by an arch-mother. But Noémi shows that much will have to change in terms both of social constructions of gender and of women's own relationship to their femininity before this is realizable. Her quest to be his successor is abortive because of both of these factors. *Délivrance* presents an optimistic view of politics in flux, moving towards the peace which the feminization of politics will bring. The failures of the female characters are very much related to their transitional socio-political environment. Female commitment is part of a larger vision of politics moving ever forwards through the benign influence of femininity.

### *A Utopian erasure of difference*

Such a view of femininity and politics could hardly be more antipathetic to the work of Madeleine Pelletier, who advocates a complete rejection of the feminine, a rejection which appears not to be problematic in the least for the female subject. In Pelletier's texts, the complete eradication of gender differences constitutes a political Utopia in which the female subject is unequivocally empowered by cutting herself off completely from femininity.

Pelletier's 1932 novel, *Une Vie nouvelle*, is a leftist Utopian text which describes the establishment and functioning of a post-revolutionary political regime in France.<sup>89</sup> Naturally, in this Utopia Pelletier's gender ideal has been achieved. Gender distinctions

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<sup>89</sup> Madeleine Pelletier, *Une Vie nouvelle* (Paris: Eugène Figuière, 1932). Further references to this work are given after quotations in the text.

are no longer pertinent: everyone wears similar clothes in similarly bright colours, everyone has their own flat, and domestic tasks are completely industrialized. Women's subordination is a thing of the past since the family has been abolished, maternity and child care are taken care of by the state, and sexual expression is completely free. Pelletier's Utopia constitutes an erasure of gender difference:

Plus originel est le fait que la société nouvelle tend à la suppression de la différence sexuelle et à la neutralité du point de vue des catégories de sexe.<sup>90</sup>

Sameness is Pelletier's aim. *La Femme vierge*, by contrast, which is set in pre-revolutionary Paris, is concerned with a woman's attempt to achieve this ideal in an imperfect world.<sup>91</sup> The 'femme vierge' of the title is Marie Pierrot, a woman who commits her life to feminism and socialism after having escaped the proletarian poverty of her childhood by pursuing her education and becoming a teacher. Marie is disappointed by the disorganization and inefficiency of contemporary feminist groups, a situation she finds replicated within French socialism. Marie's engagement only finds an effective outlet when she emigrates to Germany and is elected as a minister, a role which inter-war France could not offer her. However, Marie's political career is cut short when she dies the victim of a random bullet during a demonstration.

In *La Femme vierge*, the hoped-for erasure of sex specificity is located in the Utopian childhood ignorance of gender difference of the young Marie, who fails to

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<sup>90</sup> Claudie Lesselier, 'L'Utopie des années trente: *Une Vie nouvelle*, un roman de Madeleine Pelletier', in *Logique et infortunes d'un combat pour l'égalité*, ed. by Bard, pp.167-74 (p.169). See also Lesselier, 'Madeleine Pelletier: Une Utopie féministe?', *Archives, Recherches et Cultures Lesbiennes*, 5 (1987), 27-28.

<sup>91</sup> Madeleine Pelletier, *La Femme vierge*, (Paris: Valentin Bresle, 1933), p.29. Further references to this work are given after quotations in the text.

understand why she should not fasten her suspender in front of a man (*FV*, p.29). As she grows up and leaves her naivety behind, she is forced to take account of a world in which one's female sex constitutes a limitation on a whole gamut of activities, and in particular, political commitment. This is articulated through the attitude of her fellow *institutrices*:

Marie avait encouru la désapprobation parce que, son repas expédié, elle lisait *L'Aurore*. Aucune institutrice ne lisait les journaux. La plupart, dans leurs moments de repos, faisait au crochet d'interminables dentelles, les plus affranchies lisaient un roman-feuilleton. N'osant interpeller directement Marie, on échangeait à son propos et sans la nommer des généralités.

- Une femme n'a pas à lire les journaux; la politique doit être réservée aux hommes. La femme, d'ailleurs, a assez à faire dans son ménage sans aller s'occuper de politique. Une dame d'âge mûr qui était mariée disait que, le soir, elle prenait bien le journal de son mari, mais c'était uniquement pour lire le feuilleton et les faits divers, le reste ne l'intéressait pas. (*FV*, p.82)

Marie, like Pelletier, is brought up against the fact that the social structures of her cultural environment are opposed to the gender sameness she desires. Culture states that a woman should keep out of the male domain of politics; women's own internalization of such an injunction often renders them disinterested in the sources of information through which they might be led to oppose it.

*La Femme vierge* suggests that the precise nature of this sameness is not in fact the gender neutrality of which Thomas's narratee is an ideal, but rather the alignment of the female subject with masculinity. The committed female subject is obliged to reject conventional social definitions of woman, since politicization is not part of the conventional stereotype of femininity. The replacement Pelletier proposes is the *virilisation* Arria Ly was swift to criticise her for recommending. Marie Pierrot is the epitome of *virilisation*: 'Décidément elle aurait dû être un homme' (*FV*, p.171). She

wears masculine clothing and is ‘trop virile’ according to the very feminine Catherine (*FV*, p.130). As a child, a dream which can very obviously be interpreted within a Freudian framework situates Marie on the masculine side of the Oedipal triangle: ‘Cependant l’enfant s’endort, mais son sommeil est hanté de cauchemars, elle rêve d’un homme qui court après lui pour lui couper le pouce’ (*FV*, p.12). Marie appears to experience a male castration complex, believing herself to be in possession of the phallic thumb and fearing castration by the Father rather than recognising the absence of the penis and desiring to obtain it.<sup>92</sup> In psychoanalytic terms, from early childhood, Marie is shown to adopt the male position.

*Virilisation* was Pelletier’s response to a society in which the prevailing feeling was that ‘la politique doit être réservée aux hommes’. Her solution is neither a transformation of politics itself, nor a transformation of woman *qua* woman, but her closest possible alignment with the male, powerful norm:

Chez Madeleine Pelletier le masculin devient en principe la norme commune puisque les oppresseurs se sont octroyé la plupart des bonnes choses de ce monde: la liberté, les meilleurs salaires, les vêtements les plus pratiques...<sup>93</sup>

One external manifestation of Pelletier’s desire for alignment with the male was her now much-celebrated habit of dressing as a man. Marie similarly cuts her hair and always appears ‘en costume tailleur’ (*FV*, p.135). Transgression of conventional dress codes is

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<sup>92</sup> Pelletier was familiar with Freudian psychoanalysis, which began to appear in French from around 1922. Her 1935 essay ‘La Rationalisation sexuelle’ represents a close engagement with Freudian theory. See Felicia Gordon, *The Integral Feminist*, pp.182-87 for an account of Pelletier’s interest in Freud.

<sup>93</sup> Christine Bard, ‘La virilisation des femmes et l’égalité des sexes’, in *Logique et infortunes d’un combat pour l’égalité*, ed. by Bard, pp.91-108 (p.92). On the question of *virilisation* see also Michelle Perrot, ‘Madeleine Pelletier ou le refus du “devenir femme” ’ in the same volume, pp.185-92.

a deliberate and political attack on female oppression:

Je ne tiens pas à être charmante, je pense qu'il est honteux pour les femmes de montrer nu ce que les hommes tiennent couvert. Les soirées mondaines me font l'effet de marchés à la chair esclave (*FV*, p.135)

For Bard, 'la puissance symbolique du travestissement' is:

la transgression, vécue en pleine conscience politique, d'un code, le code vestimentaire, qui met en scène la différence des sexes, leurs rôles respectifs et hiérarchisés.<sup>94</sup>

Socialism is as hostile to Marie's male attire as is the feminist Caroline Kauffmann: at the socialist congress at which Marie is a delegate, Lafargue complains:

Il y a votre allure, elle ne convient pas. Vous avez coupé vos cheveux; il faut les laisser pousser et enlever ce col blanc qui vous masculinise. (*FV*, p.186)

Neither socialism nor feminism was sympathetic to such transgression.

When she becomes involved with the mainstream feminist movement, Marie scorns the attitude of other feminists to femininity which manifests itself when a 'conseil de chefs de groupe' attempts to organize a demonstration:

L'une voulait que, pour donner à la manifestation un caractère bien féminin, on couvrît de fleurs les voitures. Une autre voulait absolument y faire figurer une jeune mère qui porterait dans ses bras un bébé. De cette façon on verrait que les féministes ne renoncent pas à la maternité. Marie avait honte d'être femme! C'étaient cela des affranchies? Toutes ces féministes étaient tellement ancrées dans leur esclavage qu'elles le voulaient afficher dans les rues. (*FV*, pp.108-09)

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<sup>94</sup> Bard, 'La virilisation des femmes et l'égalité des sexes', p.98.

This passage constitutes a direct attack on the sort of feminism in which Weiss was engaged.<sup>95</sup> Pelletier may to some extent be justified in viewing a politicization focused on conventional femininity as a descent into essentialism, but her own inversion of the equation which valorizes the ‘masculine’ as the unique site of strength and commitment could also be read as essentialist. As Arria Ly pointed out: ‘Pourquoi fait-elle de viril un synonyme de fermeté et de féminité un synonyme de faiblesse?’. Pelletier does not consider that to ignore femininity completely might be firstly impossible, secondly painful for the individual female subject and thirdly undesirable for women and feminism alike.

Taken together, Pelletier and Weiss exemplify the two horns of what Carole Pateman terms the ‘Wollstonecraft dilemma’:

The two horns of Wollstonecraft’s dilemma [...] are, first, that within the contemporary patriarchal order, and within the confines of the ostensibly universal categories of democratic theory, it is taken for granted that for women to be active, full citizens, they must become (like) men. Second, although women have demanded for two centuries that their distinctive qualities and tasks should become part of citizenship - that is, that they should be citizens as women - their demand cannot be met when it is precisely these marks of womanhood that place women in opposition to, or, at best, in a paradoxical relation to, citizenship.<sup>96</sup>

Pelletier is happy for women to become men, whilst Weiss’s is the demand that cannot be met: her novel explores the difficulties of incorporating female specificity into

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<sup>95</sup> Pelletier might even read such feminism as an example of female masochism, which she saw as a source of women’s desire for what were, for Pelletier, oppressive modes of femininity. See Gordon, *The Integral Feminist*, p.183.

<sup>96</sup> Carole Pateman, *The Disorder of Women* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p.14. See also Mouffe’s engagement with Pateman in her ‘Feminism, Citizenship and Radical Democratic Politics’ in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. by Butler and Scott, pp.374-77.

citizenship, the latter representing a patriarchal construction that excludes difference such as femininity. For the committed female subject, 'être un homme' and 'être une femme' both constitute problematic subjectivities. Thomas is not prepared to identify herself with the extreme positions of either Pelletier or Weiss. She is clearly aware that a gender dilemma exists for the female politicized subject but she cannot resolve it. Pelletier's problem is that inter-war France would not easily accept the idea of women acceding to male privileges such as citizenship. Marie Pierrot eventually renounces France in favour of Germany where she can enjoy full political participation: 'comment peux-tu admettre que j'aie des devoirs envers la France, alors que la France ne me reconnaît pas comme citoyenne' (*FV*, p.221).<sup>97</sup> Pelletier does not engage in any debate concerning the 'maleness' of the concept of citizenship, she envisages no contradictions arising from the occupation of this role by a woman. Pelletier does not successfully counter the accusation made against feminism, which is voiced in *La Femme vierge*, that 'Il y a des femmes qui veulent être des hommes' (*FV*, p.139).

If Pelletier does not envisage problems for the female subject in identifying completely with the male role in order to achieve commitment, she does acknowledge social barriers. In Germany, Marie Pierrot is persuaded by her friend and political mentor Saladier that it is pragmatically necessary, even if not ideologically desirable, to work initially within conventional structures of femininity if female commitment is to achieve tangible results:

Appliquez-vous aux questions d'assistance: filles-mères, enfants

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<sup>97</sup> In Germany, Marie would indeed have been recognized as a citizen. Women had voted for the first time in Germany in 1919, and sexual equality was recognized as a basic right by the Weimar constitution. On the contemporary political situation of German women see Ute Frevert, *Women in German History: From Bourgeois Emancipation to Sexual Liberation*, trans. by Stuart McKinnon-Evans in association with Terry Bond and Barbara Norden (Oxford: Berg, 1989), pp.151-204.

abandonnés, etc. Ainsi vous ne choquerez personne et si vous réussissez à faire voter des lois de protection, tout le monde vous bénira.  
 -J'aurais préféré la grande politique, je me sens de l'ambition.  
 -Patience... Vous avez l'avenir devant vous, ce n'est pas comme moi, hélas! La grande politique viendra à son heure; pour le moment, elle ne vous ferait que du tort. (*FV*, p.239)

Saladier's tactics are successful. Furthermore '[e]lle finit d'ailleurs par prendre goût à ces questions féminines qu'elle considérait comme secondaires' (*FV*, p.243): Marie completely reforms the German education system, work which renders her 'pleinement heureuse' (*FV*, p.246). The text ultimately acknowledges a need to work within society's expectations of a woman, at least in the initial stages, in historical terms, of female commitment. This is something Pelletier herself refused to do, the reward for which was, it seems, rejection. According to Charles Sowerwine, for example, Pelletier's uncompromising extremism was not ultimately politically productive:

Malgré ses réussites, M. Pelletier restait en marge de la vie active qu'elle convoitait. Le même refus de l'identité sexuelle courante, la même dynamique de personnalité qui lui avait permis de dépasser ses origines de classe et de sexe lui interdisait l'accès à la vie active et surtout les rapports affectifs dont elle avait besoin.<sup>98</sup>

In acknowledging the pragmatic necessity of working with rather than against conventional constructions of femininity, the text resolves something Pelletier herself could not resolve in her own life concerning the translation of belief into action. In the text, Pelletier concedes that the reality of gender inequality necessitates behaviour which

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<sup>98</sup> Charles Sowerwine, 'Militantisme et identité sexuelle: la carrière politique et l'œuvre théorique de Madeleine Pelletier (1874-1939)', *Le Mouvement social*, 157 (October-December 1991), 9-32 (p.27). Marilyn J. Boxer makes a similar point in her essay 'When Radical and Socialist Feminism Were Joined: The Extraordinary Failure of Madeleine Pelletier', in *European Women on the Left: Socialism, Feminism and the Problems Faced by Political Women, 1880 to the Present*, ed. by Jane Slaughter and Robert Kern (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981), pp.51-73.



appears to uphold values to which she does not subscribe. Marie then goes further than Pelletier herself in terms of a resolution of the question of female commitment. Which shows, of course, the danger of reading *La Femme vierge* as an autobiography.

Marie Pierrot's acceptance of the need to work within social definitions of woman is a far cry from Weiss's celebrations of femininity and female specificity. There is nothing separatist in Pelletier's programme for female commitment - just as she advocates the alignment of the female with the male norm, she is also prepared to grant sympathetic men a role in female politicization. This is exemplified in *La Femme vierge* in the character of Saladier. He plays a vital role in Marie's socialist career. He saves her from exclusion from her socialist cell and obtains her mandate to speak at a socialist congress. His support in Germany proves definitive: 'Saladier exultait aussi, Marie était son œuvre; sans lui jamais elle n'aurait réussi en politique' (*FV*, p.238). Here is a tension point in Pelletier's politics which the text cannot resolve. 'Marie était son œuvre': female autonomy is necessarily threatened when the masculine is exclusively valorized. This problem permeates Pelletier's model of female commitment to a much greater extent than the simple participation of an individual man in Marie Pierrot's political career.

### III

#### *Aragon's answer, or, idealism is no solution*

I draw this analysis to a close with an examination of Louis Aragon's *Les Cloches de Bâle*, because this text purports to resolve many of the themes arising from the novels

I have considered.<sup>99</sup> In 1949, Aragon said of *Les Cloches de Bâle*:

j'ai désiré que les héros de ces livres fussent des femmes parce que je pensais que les femmes se trouvent dans notre société, et se trouvaient encore plus en 1933, dans une situation particulière où les contradictions de cette société sont plus évidentes que chez les hommes.<sup>100</sup>

Like Mary Louise Roberts, writing in 1994, Aragon suggests that femininity was a privileged focus for social upheaval in inter-war France. Furthermore, his 1964 preface to *Les Cloches de Bâle* entitled 'C'est là que tout a commencé...' (CB, pp.9-14) describes how everything began with a female reader, Elsa Triolet, to whom the text is dedicated: 'à Elsa Triolet, sans qui je me serais tu'. The text then has its source in femininity, the male 'voice' being dependent on a woman: quite the reverse of Nizan's *Aden Arabie*. The text also concludes with femininity, and, more importantly for the present study, with politicized femininity. Aragon's fictional investigation of commitment culminates in the epilogue where Clara Zetkin appears at the 1912 socialist congress at Bâle. Through Clara Zetkin, Aragon offers an idealized resolution of the problem of female commitment.

The example of Clara Zetkin occupies a little over twenty pages of a novel that runs in total to over four hundred. Aragon acknowledges that Zetkin's role is quantitatively small when he describes the text as 'un livre où c'est à désespérer de voir soudain surgir, si tardivement, cette image de femme qui aurait pu en être le centre, mais qui ne saurait venir y jouer un rôle de comparse' (CB, p.426). However he asserts her

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<sup>99</sup> Louis Aragon, *Les Cloches de Bâle*, 3rd edn (Paris: Gallimard, 1972; first published Paris: Denoël, 1934). Further references to the Gallimard edition of this work are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>100</sup> Louis Aragon, 'Aragon répond à ses témoins', *La Nouvelle Critique*, 8 (1949), 75-87 (p.82).

qualitative significance: 'tout me ramènerait invinciblement à elle' (CB, p.425). Zetkin is to resolve the questions about female commitment the text attempts to pose through the political apprenticeship of Catherine Simonidzé, whose story occupies a much greater number of pages. Such disparity of textual space need not be read as an aesthetic flaw.<sup>101</sup> As Aragon's own 1949 interpretation of the text implies, *Les Cloches de Bâle* is focused in large measure on the dynamics of social upheaval: posing the questions, not surprisingly, occupies more textual space than suggesting an answer. Both the world and the novel of which a Clara Zetkin could be the focus will only be possible in the future: 'Oui, il faut refaire l'un et l'autre, avec pour héroïne une Clara' (CB, p.426).

Catherine Simonidzé is, according to Angela Kimyongür, a 'transitional figure', in that she is aware of the problem of gender and class inequality but unable ultimately to resolve it.<sup>102</sup> Of wealthy Russian, specifically Georgian, bourgeois origins, she shows progression from an initially naive political awareness - 'dans la société actuelle toutes les femmes sont des esclaves, et il faut prendre leur partie à toutes les occasions' - to a more refined revolutionary perspective (CB, p.142). She firmly rejects the conventional definition of woman as wife and chattel, a role exemplified in the text by Diane de Nettencourt. Gradually, Catherine's instinctive awareness of gender inequality brings her to a more reasoned ideological stance in which gender and politics coalesce:

Le tzar dont la figure dominait les haines de son enfance, ce qu'il maintenait en Russie, c'était avant tout ce servage des femmes, que sa

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<sup>101</sup> See for example Angela Kimyongür's interpretation: 'It is almost as though Aragon had grown tired of the novel and decided to bring it rapidly to an appropriate conclusion; or perhaps he was aware that an ideal character such as Clara would be fictionally much less interesting than one such as Catherine whose dilemmas remain unsolved.' Angela Kimyongür, *Socialist Realism in Louis Aragon's Le Monde Réel* (Hull: University of Hull Press, 1995), p.105.

<sup>102</sup> Kimyongür, 'The representation of women in Louis Aragon's *Le Monde réel*', *French Studies Bulletin*, 57 (1995), 2-6 (p.5).

mère avait fui [...] La révolution, c'était sa place enfin faite à la femme.  
(*CB*, pp.178-79)

dans le système de Catherine les travailleurs étaient du côté des femmes.  
(*CB*, p.179)

Oui, elle était anarchiste, parce que toute autorité, tout gouvernement, tout droit, tout état, c'était toujours le pouvoir de l'homme sur la femme. (*CB*, p.257)

Catherine's political awareness becomes more closely focused on the proletariat when the violent repression of industrial workers by wealthy industrialists is dramatically demonstrated by the shooting of a young striker in Cluses by the sons of the factory-owner, which Catherine witnesses by accident (*CB*, p.205). The image of his corpse returns constantly as a leitmotif of her growing commitment to revolutionary politics.<sup>103</sup>

Death then has a role to play in female commitment. It is because Victor rescues Catherine from the Pont Mirabeau as she is about to commit suicide that she makes his acquaintance and is introduced to the political world of the striking taxi drivers of which he is part. Her suicide attempt is politically ambiguous. Indirectly it opens up an avenue for political action via Victor, but it also marks Catherine as a member of the bourgeoisie, by association with the large number of bourgeois suicides the reader witnesses.<sup>104</sup> Catherine, already marked by death in that she has contracted fatal tuberculosis, is located in opposition to Victor's point of view: 'tout en elle était respect du suicide' (*CB*, p.287). Significantly, no working-class suicides appear in the novel. Death for the proletariat is

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<sup>103</sup> See Chapter 4, pp.246-7.

<sup>104</sup> Pierre de Sabran and Blaise Jonghens take their own lives as a result of financial scandal; Solange and Pierre Lefrançois-Heuzé's joint suicides mirror those of Paul and Laura Lafargue which Victor condemns as class betrayal (*CB*, p.229-301). This criticism of Paul and Laura Lafargue is developed into a wider analysis of the *embourgeoisement* of socialism via the representation of the Lafargue funeral (*CB*, pp.320-28).

the result of bourgeois oppression, which, it seems, is also ultimately self-destructive.

Catherine's association with suicide suggests a point of comparison with *La Conspiration*, whose bourgeois political apprentice actually does kill himself, achieving nothing more than reassimilation into the class he professes to detest. Catherine might be read as a female Rosenthal: although she is reprieved from the death which he can only regret in the moments which precede it, that reprieve does not lead to the hoped-for *déclassement* and subsequent positive revolutionary politicization. Rosenthal allows the victory, as he perceives it, of the bourgeoisie over his revolutionary incest to become a reality because '[i]l ne se doute pas une seconde que cette solution désastreuse sera pour les siens un dénouement excellent' (*C*, p.236). He is too entrenched in his own neurotic attachment to another Catherine to realise that death is the way of the bourgeoisie whilst life is that of the revolution. Catherine Simonidzé has life chosen for her, but ultimately cannot escape bourgeois death. That death is always within her, symbolized by her tuberculosis.<sup>105</sup> She remains caught between her political beliefs and her class roots. Like Rosenthal, she has broken intellectually with bourgeois ideology but cannot follow this through to achieve commitment in the form of action:

Elle avait été retranchée des siens, elle pensait même fortement, elle *voulait* penser de sa classe. Mais elle n'avait pas su prendre son parti de cette rupture, elle ne s'était pas attachée ailleurs [...] Jamais elle n'avait pu se lier avec les autres, avec *l'ennemi* des siens, de ceux qu'elle avait l'horreur aujourd'hui encore de reconnaître comme les siens. C'est qu'elle avait gardé de sa vie passée les commodités, même dérisoires. (*CB*, p.293)

The text blames Catherine's ignorance of work for her failure to translate political belief into action:

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<sup>105</sup> See Chapter 4, pp.250-54 on the motif of tuberculosis.

Mais le travail, c'était cela qui séparait Catherine des ouvriers et des ouvrières. Tant qu'elle n'aurait pas accepté sa part de travail commun, elle ne pouvait qu'être une étrangère dans le monde où chacun gagne sa vie. (*CB*, p.383)

Brigitte, in Thomas's *Le Refus*, progresses much further than Catherine along her political journey because she achieves a complete rupture with the bourgeoisie, accepting 'sa part du travail commun' as a domestic servant in England before progressing to full politicization. The text's final judgement of Catherine's commitment is ambivalent: 'Hésitante, vacillante Catherine, comme elle s'approche lentement de la lumière' (*CB*, p.425). She is not a lost cause but neither is she a guiding light.

Ultimately, Catherine does not differ significantly from Rosenthal in that her failed political apprenticeship is that of a bourgeois and not specifically that of a woman. The reasons for her failure to achieve full commitment are class- rather than gender-defined. Aragon's is an idealistic world where women have access to politics on the same terms as men: there is no analysis of obstacles to commitment, either external or internal, which the female subject would seem historically to have encountered, if we accept the testimony of writers such as Weiss and Thomas. Aragon's idealism obscures that which initially suggests itself to be fertile ground for gender analysis. Catherine, despite raising the question of female commitment, does not in any meaningful way provide the text with a vehicle to examine social contradictions through femininity. The example of female commitment provided by the Epilogue does however engage with the sorts of questions posed by Thomas, Weiss and Pelletier. Clara Zetkin represents an idealized resolution of the combination of female subjectivity and politics, offering a Utopian vision of female commitment.

Clara Zetkin has overcome male stereotypical perceptions of the politicized

female subject, exemplified in the text by Brunel/Brunelli: 'C'est un homme pour qui les femmes qui s'occupent de politique ont toujours quelque chose de ridicule, mais il vient un instant de l'oublier' (*CB*, pp.424-25). She has also gone beyond conventional constructions of femininity:

Elle est simplement à un haut degré d'achèvement le nouveau type de femme qui n'a plus rien à voir avec cette poupée, dont l'asservissement, la prostitution et l'oisiveté ont fait la base des chansons et des poèmes à travers toutes les sociétés humaines, jusqu'aujourd'hui. (*CB*, p.437)

Diane de Nettencourt is just such a 'poupée'.<sup>106</sup> Catherine does not achieve the status of 'le nouveau type de femme' either, despite her rejection of marriage and conventional feminine dependence, silence and subservience. Zetkin is diametrically opposed to Diane, and represents the successful completion of the political apprenticeship Catherine fails to accomplish.

Conventional femininity is however not banished from Clara Zetkin's politics. She transmits a message of feminized pacifism which is comparable to Weiss's political stance. Zetkin refers to herself and to other women collectively as 'nous, les femmes et les mères', proposing that women imbue their children with the spirit of peace in the form of 'la fraternité socialiste' (*CB*, p.436). The feminized image of peace provided by the description of the procession is also noteworthy: 'Sur un char décoré comme pour une bataille de fleurs, entièrement de fleurs blanches, une reine de la Paix, entourée de ses dames d'honneur, soufflait dans une trompette d'argent' (*CB*, pp.429-30). This image is

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<sup>106</sup> Diane is a typically idle, sexually promiscuous bourgeoisie who seems content to function as a commodity of exchange between various men. Brunel offers his wife to Wisner in the following terms: 'Sans plaisanterie, reprit Brunel, avec Diane, tu gardes Nettencourt, la rue d'Offément, les bijoux et quelques brouilles...' (*CB*, p.133). Pierre de Sabran's judgement is pertinent: 'Quand on est putain, j'aime mieux qu'on le dise!' (*CB*, p.91).

reminiscent of the proposed feminist demonstration which Pelletier ridicules in *La Femme vierge*. Aragon writes with an awareness of the forthcoming war which is to transform 'fleurs blanches' into 'fleurs meurtrières':

Pourtant dans cette fête, où s'élève un double parfum d'encens et de pourriture, présages des terribles charniers du Masurenland ou de Verdun, je ne ris pas du geste des enfants qui sèment des fleurs. Que seront-ils un jour, ces jeunes coryphées de 1912? Leurs mains apprendront à tenir des fusils. Il [sic] jeteront un jour des fleurs meurtrières, des grenades, avec ces mêmes mains. (*CB*, p.432)

Through the retrospective narration, the message is conveyed to the reader that these mothers' sons will be the victims of the triumph of violence over feminized peace. The text draws from this defeat, which is both future and past, the hope for a new world in which women like Clara Zetkin will assure the triumph of peace.

In Zetkin, the sexual aspect of the relationship of the committed female subject to femininity appears also to be resolved:

Ici pour la première fois dans le monde la place est faite au véritable amour. Celui qui n'est pas souillé par la hiérarchie de l'homme et de la femme, par la sordide histoire des robes et des baisers, par la domination d'argent de l'homme sur la femme ou de la femme sur l'homme. (*CB*, p.438)

It seems that Zetkin offers the combination of fulfilling sexuality and political and personal liberation. However there is a strong sense in which Aragon avoids the issue of female sexuality by situating Zetkin safely beyond sexuality: 'Clara Zetkin à Bâle a déjà passé la cinquantaine' (*CB*, p.423). The lyrical passage concerning 'des yeux de Clara' which the narrator wishes ceaselessly to describe reads as an example of a conventional romantic discourse which is subsequently transformed into a political one (*CB*, p.426).



The radical potential of this combination is however diffused because Zetkin is now 'cette vieille femme', which conveniently removes the necessity for an examination of the role of active sexuality in the life of a committed woman whose sociopolitical environment only offers sexuality within a framework of oppression.

Zetkin also appears to have overcome the contradictions between conventional femininity and commitment which in other texts bar the politicized female subject from female solidarity:

Elle parle au contraire comme une femme, pour les autres femmes, pour exprimer ce que pensent toutes les femmes d'une classe [...] Elle n'est pas une exception. Ce qu'elle dit vaut parce que des milliers, des millions de femmes le disent avec elle. (CB, p.437)

How exactly this has been achieved is not described. The subsuming of differences between women which blights 'identity politics' is perceptible here. It seems then that Aragon's apparent resolution of the female subject's relationship to gender and commitment does no more than paper over the cracks with hopeful idealism. Aragon has not solved the Wollstonecraft dilemma either. His ideal of female political commitment must be recognizably a woman ('elle parle [...] comme une femme', 'nous, les femmes et les mères') but not stereotypically female ('n'a plus rien à voir avec cette poupée'). At the same time she is to adopt the male position: 'Le problème social de la femme avec elle ne se pose plus différemment de celui de l'homme' (CB, p.437). There is then in Aragon's vision of female commitment an eradication of female specificity and simultaneously a reliance on identity politics, with no satisfactory resolution of the paradox. Aragon offers the reader an *Enchanteuse* without demolishing the social, political and personal barriers which stand in the way of her genesis.



Aragon places his hopes for the future in a rethinking of politics. His idealism is located firstly in his belief that such a transformation is possible, and secondly, in his conception of woman's place in this new politics. Weiss too hopes for a transformation of politics: in this she shares Aragon's idealism, however she also examines various problems associated with woman's role in the new politics for the female subject. She recognizes that the world will not easily accept *L'Enchanteuse*, and that her coming into existence depends also on the transformation of women themselves. The tension between conventional femininity and an unconventional desire for political participation is summed up in Weiss's 1935 electoral slogan: 'La Française désire administrer les intérêts de la cité comme elle administre les intérêts de son foyer' (*CF*, p.83). Conventional femininity plays the title role in Weiss's political drama: it is to be reconciled with commitment, and combined with an independence and an autonomy which Weiss recognizes as being conspicuously absent in many women. Pelletier and Thomas on the other hand suggest a rethinking of femininity rather than of politics to enable female commitment. Pelletier's refusal to recognize any internal obstacles to the masculinization of women recalls Aragon's idealism. She is not troubled by the sacrificing of female specificity which female commitment seems necessarily to imply. Thomas's rejection of femininity in favour of commitment acknowledges that a certain impoverishment results for the female subject, but this is seen to be the lesser of two evils.

The problem to which all of these texts testify is that of finding a way of living femininity which can incorporate politics, which conventionally is a masculine activity. To achieve this demands the creation of new forms of gendered subjectivity, in Bordo's

words, which move between stereotypical gender identifications. Political commitment demands of the male subject compliance with the status quo, but of the female subject, some degree of opposition and resistance are required. The foregoing analysis of literary representations of political commitment strongly suggests then that men and women between the wars experienced different relationships to the prevailing norms of the political environment, relationships which can be formulated in terms of acceptance/rejection. Nizan provides ample evidence to show how existing modes of masculinity easily incorporate commitment: the achievement of male maturity 'naturally' (culturally) coincides with the achievement of political maturity. 'Être un homme' may not always be straightforward, but it very easily incorporates politics. For the male subject commitment is an act of assent; for the female subject, an act of dissent.

## CHAPTER TWO

### PLEASURE DISPLACED: POLITICS AND FEMALE SEXUALITY.

The storm which greeted the publication of Victor Margueritte's novel *La Garçonne* in 1922 suggests that women's sexual identity was, for the inter-war French reading public, a sensitive topic.<sup>1</sup> A fear that the 'femme nouvelle' would throw morality to the winds and indulge in a new sexual freedom was perhaps more disturbing than her short hair and skirts. Margueritte's denunciation of the sexual double standard was deemed immoral, and earned his novel a place on the Vatican index, as well as stripping its author of the *Légion d'Honneur*.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Margueritte's ideas on sexual morality were not those of the mainstream feminist movement. Reluctant to become involved in debates about female sexuality, many feminist groups maintained a broadly conservative stance which supported marriage and the family and opposed 'l'union libre'.<sup>3</sup> The drive for free expression of female sexuality which characterized aspects of New Wave feminism from the 1960s was quite alien to the campaigns of their predecessors, who were often more concerned with the demography question. Smith identifies two periods of active pro-natalist campaigning in inter-war France: 1919-1923, and 1934-1940.<sup>4</sup> Only a handful of extremists opposed the pro-natalist drive in order to call for sexual liberation.

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<sup>1</sup> On the reception of Margueritte's novel, see Nicholas Hewitt, 'Victor Margueritte and the Reception of *La Garçonne*: Naturalism, the Family and the "ordre moral"', *Nottingham French Studies*, 23 (May 1984), 37-50.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, pp.42-43 and Bard, *Les Filles de Marianne*, p.188.

<sup>3</sup> Bard, *Les Filles de Marianne*, p.211, pp.226-34.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, *Feminism and the Third Republic*, p.213.

France's perceived demographic crisis, a focus of public neurosis since the Franco-Prussian war, rendered female sexuality relevant to the political debates of the years following the First World War.<sup>5</sup> The argument was between those who supported the laws of 1920 and 1923, which outlawed contraception and abortion in a fairly unsuccessful attempt to increase France's birth rate, and those who supported a neo-Malthusian approach which promoted contraception and tended to dissociate sexuality from its reproductive aspect.<sup>6</sup> The nation's sensitivity to these issues was highlighted in 1927 when the 'Affaire Alquier' hit the headlines: schoolteacher Henriette Alquier was brought to trial over a report said to promote an anti-natalist ideology.<sup>7</sup> In 1933, proposed amendments to the laws to grant amnesty to those who had either had abortions or recommended them were rejected. In the same year, Madeleine Pelletier was accused of the crime of abortion, and in 1939, at the age of 64, she was eventually incarcerated in the asylum of Perray-Vaucluse as a direct result of her supposedly suspect medical practice.<sup>8</sup> Female sexuality then had a place in the public consciousness throughout the inter-war period.

Mary Louise Roberts, in her study of the decade immediately following the Great War, argues persuasively that the concept of gender, particularly changing gender roles, provided a framework through which the traumatic changes and upheavals wrought by the war could be understood.<sup>9</sup> She reads debates concerning female identity during the

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<sup>5</sup> Reynolds, *France Between the Wars*, pp.18-37 offers an insightful analysis of debates around the issue of demography in inter-war France, as well as of the representation of those issues by historians.

<sup>6</sup> See Bard, *Les Filles de Marianne*, pp.209-217 for an outline of neo-Malthusianism in France between the wars.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, *Feminism and the Third Republic*, p.224.

<sup>8</sup> For a full account of Pelletier's demise, see Gordon, *The Integral Feminist*, pp.213-35.

<sup>9</sup> Roberts, *Civilization Without Sexes*, pp.1-16.

post-war period as a means of articulating anxieties about the transformation of the whole of civilization as it had hitherto been known and comprehended. Roberts suggests that the opposing images of 'la femme moderne' and 'la mère' structured the debate, the former representing the disruption and discontinuity of the new world, and the latter representing stability and the continuation of the old. Both these images are founded in concepts of what female sexuality is, or should be: the sexually liberated *garçonne* is opposed to the respectable procreating wife. Female sexuality then was experienced as a problem - a problem in terms of the way real women lived their lives, and a symbolic focus for the traumatic transformation of the *après-guerre* into the *entre-deux-guerres*.

It is precisely through its opposition of the respectable wife to the *garçonne* that Colette Yver's 1932 novel, *Le Vote des femmes*, studies the problem of female sexuality.<sup>10</sup> Her text, certainly a *roman à thèse* although arguably not a political novel in the same way as the other texts on which my study is focused, will serve very well to introduce the issues with which this chapter is concerned. The novel traces the transformation of its 'heroine', Odile, from a respectable Catholic virgin who rejects the frivolities of modern female fashion, into a divorced, flirtatious 'femme moderne' who wreaks havoc on the emotional lives of three very different brothers. Her *vote* is her choice of one of the three as a husband. Hubert is the archetypal wealthy, authoritarian, powerful capitalist, paternalist in relation to his workers but respected by them for his generosity. Like his brother Bernard, he is a veteran of the First World War. Bernard's identity is defined in terms of Catholic spirituality. Like Hubert, his occupation is made emblematic of his world view - he is a Christian archaeologist in Rome. Ignace is the black sheep of the Pancé family. An ex-cocaine addict who has lead a life of degeneracy

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<sup>10</sup> Colette Yver, *Le Vote des femmes* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1932). Further references to this work are given after quotations in the text.

abroad, he danced with the avant-garde *ballets suédois* during the 1920s, financed by an English night club dancer. His tardy military service culminated in a *conseil de guerre*. He is a nervous, hypersensitive individual, a social misfit, a pariah, the very antithesis of Hubert's incarnation of a capitalist ideal and Bernard's incarnation of a religious one.

Some account must be taken of Yver's own political opinions if the text is to be adequately deciphered. It is clear from numerous contemporary press articles by Yver that the values ascribed to Bernard and Hubert are positive values in relation to her own world view. Catholicism was a central tenet of her life - she is frequently pictured wearing a wimple, and much of her writing has a religious flavour. Her attitude to the class divide can at best be described as conservative: articles such as 'La femme du peuple' and 'Filles et garçons' attempt to express admiration for the proletarian struggle and concern for their difficulties, but tacitly accept the class divide and represent the working class as a different species.<sup>11</sup> Yver can be located then within a tradition of conservative Catholicism.

I use the term 'deciphering', because reading this *roman à thèse* is rather like an exercise in code-breaking. *Le Vote des femmes* is an allegory in the traditional sense, whereby each character is a static, iconic representation of a given idea. There is no direct discussion of the question of female suffrage whatever - its misogynist message is to be inferred from Odile's allegorical choice of a sexual partner. Briefly, the plot unfolds as follows. Odile was the saintly, devoted but old-fashioned bride of the libertine Marc Dauxerre who was incapable of appreciating her respectable charms. Out of love, and against her better judgement, Odile transformed her appearance into that of a 'femme

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<sup>11</sup> Articles dated 1 August 1912 and 13 November 1926 respectively, *Dossier Colette Yver*, BMD. Examples of Yver's specifically religious writing include *Le Mystère des béatitudes* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1918), *L'Homme et le Dieu* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1923), *Saint-Pierre* (Paris: Flammarion, 1927), *Roger Shepereel 1914-1935* (Toulouse: Apostolat de la Prière, 1937).

moderne', but nonetheless could not avoid divorce. Sartorial conversion ushers in moral conversion and the text blames Marc for creating the *garçonne* which Hubert, Bernard and Ignace meet at the home of Madame Legrand-Maillard, their sentimental benefactor whose aim is to chain (*mailler*) the brothers into matrimony. After dallying with all three of them, Odile's fickle fancy alights on Ignace, her relations with whom are characterized repeatedly in terms of sensuality, physicality and sexual charge. She attempts to justify her privileging of Desire (Ignace) over Reason (Hubert) and Religion (Bernard) through a quasi-Christian discourse about saving the soul of a sinner with womanly kindness, but everyone remains unconvinced.

Allegory is suggested at the conclusion of the *Première partie*:

- Dites-moi donc, chère amie, demanda à cet endroit Hubert, ce qui motive le choix des femmes dans l'amour?
- Ah! répondit la vieille dame, bien malin qui le pourrait. J'ai vu des motifs invraisemblables. Souvent je n'en ai pas vu du tout. (*VF*, p.67)

For 'le choix des femmes', we are invited to read 'le vote des femmes'. The stupidity of Odile's *choix/vote* is signposted by an anonymous narrative voice during the episode when she gives herself symbolically to Ignace, by night, against a backdrop of Romanesque ruins - a parody of the real Rome with which the text would rather she aligned herself?: 'Le plus extraordinaire pouvait paraître justement qu'Odile se fiât à Ignace' (*VF*, p.152); 'Et elle fit en lui l'acte de foi le plus gratuit, le plus dépourvu de raison, le plus absurde' (*VF*, p.154). The text tells us simply then that Odile, like Odette-Odile of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, is duplicitous. Odile, who always appears wearing black and white and is repeatedly likened to a bird and to a swan, incorporates two archetypal female identities: at the outset she is Odette, the white swan, pure and



virtuous, but is transformed into Odile, the black swan, seducing and dangerous. The copy of the text held in the Taylor Institution Library, Oxford, is dedicated by the author with the inscription 'une étude sur "Le Vote des femmes" qui ne le fera pas bondir': the novel indeed does not advance the cause by suggesting that women are prey to fickle and illogical desires on which they base their choices. They are not then fit to vote.<sup>12</sup> The problem of the female sexual identity is, according to Yver, that it is unreliable and furthermore, that woman's sexual idiocy extends more generally to her decision-making capacities.

An anonymous critic writing shortly after the text's publication attempted optimistically to reject an allegorical reading:

Colette Yver ayant écrit de nombreux romans ayant trait à l'activité nouvelle des femmes et aux problèmes sociaux et sentimentaux qu'elle soulève, on s'attendrait qu'un livre intitulé *Le Vote des femmes* eût trait au féminisme et à ses revendications politiques. Il n'en est rien. *Le Vote des femmes*, en l'occurrence, c'est leur choix amoureux, la raison, la mobile de leurs décisions sentimentales et matrimoniales. Espérons qu'il n'y a aucune corrélation entre les deux votes, dans l'esprit de l'auteur, car elle attaquerait bien cruellement une cause juste.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately for those wanting to recuperate Yver for the feminist cause, various textual signposts indicate, as we have seen, that *Le Vote des femmes* is precisely about the political demands of feminism. Echoing as it does in thematic terms debates around the

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<sup>12</sup> This concurs with views expressed elsewhere by Yver on the topic. In 1931 Yver gave the following response to the question 'Voterez-vous, Madame?': 'Je ne pense pas [...] que le suffrage des femmes soit voté avant une ou plusieurs législatives. La principale raison de ce délai, et celle qui me semble le plus fondée en sagesse, c'est la crainte qu'inspire à juste titre le dérèglement d'esprit où se laissent aller les femmes prises collectivement. Dans tous les grands mouvements populaires, les masses de femmes ont toujours dépassée en désordre l'attitude des masses masculines', *Comœdia*, 9 November 1931, *Dossier Colette Yver*, BMD. Roberts, in *Civilization Without Sexes*, acknowledges Yver's conservatism, whilst Waelti-Walters on the other hand optimistically attempts to recuperate her back for feminism in *Feminist Novelists of the Belle Epoque*. See also Waelti-Walters with Hause, *Feminisms of the Belle Epoque*.

<sup>13</sup> Unattributed article dated 20 March 1932, *Dossier Colette Yver*, BMD.

problem of female sexuality which occupied French minds between the wars, the text can also tell us something about the relationship between female sexuality and politics through its allegorical form. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has defined allegory as ‘the setting up of a double structure, one component of which is a metasemantic system of significance corresponding to the other component - a system of signs present in the text itself’.<sup>14</sup> In the case of *Yver*, the question of female suffrage is a ‘metasemantic system of significance’ which corresponds to the story of Odile’s choice. Spivak uses the term ‘metasemantic’ to mean ‘over and above the lexographical relationship between word and meaning’.<sup>15</sup> The lexographical relationships between words and meanings in the two phrases ‘le vote des femmes’ and ‘le choix des femmes dans l’amour’ is clear enough; reading on the allegorical level, there is also a relationship of meaning between these two phrases which takes place beyond the lexographical in the realm of the ‘metasemantic’. There is then, in linguistic terms, no ‘necessary’ or ‘motivated’ relationship between the two levels of the allegory. Gay Clifford notes that whilst symbols are focused on themselves, the allegorical text is necessarily focused on something other.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, for Lynette Hunter, allegories are ‘texts of displacement’: *Le Vote des femmes* displaces politics, its eponymous heroine, which is discussed *in absentia* via female sexuality. Hunter tells us that the term ‘allegory’ is derived in part from the Greek ‘allos’ meaning ‘other’.<sup>17</sup> In the early Middle Ages Isidore of Seville defined allegory as *alieniloquium*,

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<sup>14</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Thoughts on the Principle of Allegory’, *Genre*, 4 (1972), 327-52, (p.328).

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p.331, note 9.

<sup>16</sup> Gay Clifford, *The Transformations of Allegory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), pp.10-14.

<sup>17</sup> Lynette Hunter, *Modern Allegory and Fantasy* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p.146, p.152.

or speaking other.<sup>18</sup> On one level then, a separation can be said to occur between politics and female sexuality in Yver's text: politics is only addressed via that which it is not, that which is alien or other in relation to it.

Through its manipulation of the structure of allegory, Yver's *Le Vote des femmes* foregrounds the issues which are central to the following consideration of fictional representations of female sexuality and politics. Firstly, Yver sets up female sexuality as a problem, as indeed a historical or sociological analysis of the cultural context of its composition would also suggest it to be. Secondly, the allegorical form of the novel dramatizes in structural terms the separation between female sexuality and politics which manifests itself in various ways in the novels in question.

## I

### *A radical refusal*

Edith Thomas's *Le Refus* also presents a woman's political choice in terms of a sexual choice, although not via the allegorical mode. Rather, female sexuality represents politics in a single structure: an explicit political affiliation is the fundamental element of characterization which determines the reactions of characters to one another. Thus Brigitte Chevance's rejection of Pierre de Métrange as a husband is represented as a conscious political choice on her part, based on an incompatibility between his bourgeois ideology and her communist sympathies.<sup>19</sup> If she is to achieve mature communist

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<sup>18</sup> *Allegory, Myth and Symbol*, ed. by Morton. W. Bloomfield (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), p.63, p.130.

<sup>19</sup> A close similarity is discernable between Brigitte's relationship with Pierre and Catherine Simonidzé's relationship with Jean Thiébault in Aragon's *Les Cloches de Bâle*. Holidaying illicitly together in the Savoy mountains, the pair witness a strike which ends in bloodshed when the sons of the factory owner open fire on the demonstrating workers. Jean attempts to save the lives of the bourgeois

commitment, a sexual relationship with Pierre must be sacrificed.

Paul Nizan, in a review of *Le Refus* for *L'Humanité*, sees the text as a new and positive departure as regards 'la littérature féminine', inserting it into a nascent tradition of a 'littérature d'Étape' which is concerned with revolutionary social mobility. However he accuses the text of over-simplification, suggesting that it displays 'une certaine facilité excessive': he explains, 'je ne crois pas que la découverte d'un meeting ouvrier puisse être, pour un jeune homme ou une jeune fille qui cherche les clefs de son avenir, une révélation absolument décisive'.<sup>20</sup> Had Nizan focused on female sexuality, an element of the text at which he hints when he comments that '[t]out le roman est le récit d'une rupture et d'un détachement progressifs qui ne laissent debout ni l'amour familial, ni l'amour tout court', he might have come to the conclusion that Brigitte's decisive revelation is in fact foregrounded with more complexity than he implies. I suggest that the meeting episode is the logical culmination of the political *Bildung* which is explored via female sexuality; it is not an unforeseen conversion on the road to Damascus.<sup>21</sup>

Political discord between revolutionary and bourgeois ideology is dramatized via emotional discord between Pierre and Brigitte: her quarrel with her own social milieu is mapped in narrative terms onto quarrels with her lover. In both instances where a quarrel is presented, the dispute is politically motivated and it ruptures a romantic idyll. In the first instance, Brigitte and Pierre are walking by the Seine; Brigitte muses to herself, 'Qu'il ne dise rien et que l'enchantement reste' (*R*, p.161). He does speak and the

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assassins whilst Catherine identifies with the proletarian victims. Catherine's consequent rejection of Jean represents the next stage of her rejection of her bourgeois milieu. See Chapter 4, pp.246-7 below for a more detailed analysis of this episode in terms of its relevance to Catherine's commitment.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Nizan, 'Littérature féminine', *L'Humanité*, 20 March 1937, p.8.

<sup>21</sup> See Suleiman, 'Pour une poétique du roman à thèse' and *Authoritarian Fictions* for a discussion of the apprenticeship structure in political literature.

enchantment is broken when he carelessly throws money to a beggar, provoking Brigitte's searing irony about bourgeois charity:<sup>22</sup>

Il vit qu'elle se moquait durement.

- Bien sûr, il devrait y avoir assez d'établissements charitables pour...  
 - ...pour que nos yeux ne soient plus offusqués par la misère, et que nos âmes délicates ne risquent pas de souffrir, quand nous nous promenons comme ce soir, innocemment, par les rues. (*R*, p.163)

Pierre asks 'Pourquoi nous disputer'; the answer is a political one. The second instance follows exactly the same structure. Here their closeness is symbolized by the cigarettes they are smoking together outside the Sorbonne:

Il fumait. Elle fumait, parce que ses cigarettes s'étaient comme chargées à son contact de quelque pouvoir inconnu qui émanait de lui, parce que ce geste commun ajoutait encore à l'entente de leurs corps, que la marche côte à côte, déjà rapprochait. (*R*, p.175)

Pierre declines to introduce to Brigitte an old school colleague turned communist. His scorn of 'ces pêcheurs en eau trouble qui ont tout intérêt à la révolution, parce qu'ils jugent que cette société ne leur offre pas les avantages auxquels ils s'imaginent avoir droit' clashes with her scorn of this 'caricature du révolutionnaire' and her more generous description of 'les véritables révolutionnaires', that is, 'ceux chez qui le dégoût est devenu si fort qu'ils n'ont plus d'autre raison de vivre que la transformation du monde et d'eux-mêmes. Ceux qui poussent à la roue et courent devant' (*R*, pp.176-78). Pierre and Brigitte separate, physically, to go to their classes, and also symbolically; '[l]eur cigarettes s'éteignaient' just as once more romance is extinguished by political

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas addresses the issue of bourgeois charity in more detail through Brigitte's brief, exploratory participation in Mme de Métrange's charity visits.

incompatibility. In both instances then sexual possibility is erased because of an opposition between the political affiliations of the protagonists.

Pierre's marriage proposal acts as a catalyst as regards Brigitte's political development: 'Elle se trouvait sur une de ces plaques tournantes qui mènent à son propre destin: tout le choix tenait dans sa main. Non pas les accidents de sa vie, mais sa direction' (*R*, p.215). In order to make the sexual choice Brigitte must delve deep into her political consciousness since the choice is not only for or against Pierre but also for or against bourgeois ideology. The text makes explicit that this is not merely a question of love: '- Vous ne m'aimez pas, dit-il. - S'agit-il vraiment de cela?' (*R*, p.213). Brigitte comes to her decision via three visits: to Chantal, a school friend, to her sister Catherine and to her father's factory. These visits constitute an investigation of a gamut of possible female identities. Chantal embodies the role of the bourgeois wife and mother lacking any autonomous identity and engaged only in advancing her husband's career and bringing up her son. Brigitte realizes that marriage to Pierre would confine her to the same relational identity. Catherine is married but has a successful career as a research scientist. Despite her relative emancipation, she represents the values of her family and recommends the marriage as a solution to Brigitte's existential dilemmas.<sup>23</sup> Brigitte's visit to the factory, where she sees the oppression of the working class at first hand, convinces her that her political ideals are superior to this solution, so she rejects the marriage which would preclude any revolutionary commitment. Her subsequent attendance at the meeting then is a symptom of her commitment, rather than a cause as

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<sup>23</sup> The text has already demonstrated Catherine's bourgeois ideological affiliation. She believes that the class system is justifiable and that hard work is unproblematically rewarded by economic progress: Thomas, *Le Refus*, pp.130-34. In her professional autonomy, Catherine embodies elements of the 'femme moderne', however the combination of these political views with such enfranchisement suggests that the 'femme moderne' is not unproblematically or necessarily a progressive role.

Nizan suggests. Through these visits, Brigitte investigates the three female identities of Mary Louise Roberts's schema: Chantal embodies 'la mère' and Catherine represents 'la femme moderne', an educated woman with an autonomous career. However Brigitte ultimately aligns herself with 'la femme seule', this being the only one compatible with her politics.

Brigitte is obliged to renounce her sexuality because it is inextricably tied up with bourgeois marriage and a consequent identification with a given set of values which contradict her own political orientation. Like Colette Yver, Thomas problematizes female sexuality, and in both texts, to make a choice *for* sexuality (the foolishness of Odile's desire, the possibility of a bourgeois marriage) is to make a choice *against* the ideology recommended by the text. However for Thomas the problem is one of culture rather than of nature. Her text examines the ways in which the female subject's experience of sexuality is mediated by her cultural environment, whilst Yver's suggests that female sexuality is by its very nature folly. The reader is made acutely aware of the cultural resonances of the proposed union: 'Elle écrivit sur un buvard: Brigitte de Métrange. Elle esquissa une signature: Brigitte de M..., tout à fait grande bourgeoise, femme du Premier Président à la Cour de... En blanc'(R, p.183). Brigitte even experiences her body differently after Pierre's proposal:

Elle sécha ses épaules, ses seins, son ventre. Jamais elle ne les avait vus comme ce soir, et ce dos qui filait de biais dans la glace entre deux lumières comme entre deux eaux' (R, p.214)

However attracted to Pierre Brigitte might feel on a sexual level, and however much she might be prepared, on a personal level, to forgive Pierre his reactionary politics, she cannot escape the cultural fact that to adopt the identity of Mme de Métrange junior is to

collude with the very system which oppresses the class with whom she herself is ideologically, if not ethnically, aligned. To marry Pierre is to deny the existence of the proletarian misery Brigitte witnesses when she accompanies Mme de Métrange on her charity visits, a misery which leaves the latter unmoved:

Il faut qu'il [Pierre] vienne. Il faut qu'il entre. Elle tendait son espoir vers lui. Elle se sentait glisser, perdre pied. Sa main, son regard, son corps, sa voix, eux seuls pouvaient dissimuler la vision de l'après-midi et, dans l'égoïsme du bonheur, en atténuer pour elle la virulence.

Pour elle. Mais la boue existait, le cloaque existait, la misère, la faim existaient. Des enfants nés là-bas y vivaient et mouraient. Et on l'acceptait. Et l'on se satisfaisait de se dire impuissant. (R, p.195)

If the imbrication of sexuality and politics is for Brigitte sexually disabling, then to refuse sexuality completely becomes politically enabling, offering Brigitte a concrete means of rejecting the ideology which she despises.

The concept of *refus* is politically resonant for Thomas. Her memoirs contain various references to *refus* as an efficacious political weapon. *Refus* is linked to *révolte*, and is, significantly, the word Thomas uses to describe her Resistance activities (TC, p.41, p.109). The identity of a bourgeois wife is not Brigitte's only *refus* in the sexual domain. Other sexual identities are available to her, but these too must be foregone if she is to achieve the 'correct' political identity. At certain points along her personal and political journey, Brigitte considers adulterous and lesbian desire, two more modes of sexuality which ultimately appear to be incompatible with communist commitment.

Homosexual desire would seem to offer politically transgressive possibilities in that it constitutes an attack on the bourgeois construction of women as a commodity for exchange in the marriage market: precisely the commodification Brigitte risks if she



marries Pierre.<sup>24</sup> Monique Wittig proposes lesbianism as a solution to such a mode of oppression in the following terms:

Lesbianism is the culture through which we can politically question heterosexual society on its sexual categories, on the meaning of its institutions of domination in general, and in particular on the meaning of that institution of personal dependence, marriage, imposed on women.<sup>25</sup>

Brigitte's homosexual desire is initially connoted intertextually by her reading of authors such as Proust, Rimbaud and Baudelaire.<sup>26</sup> The theme is developed through her ambiguous relationship with Anna, a close friend from before the time of Brigitte's illness.<sup>27</sup> Their relationship is presented in covertly sexual terms and as exclusive and extremely close both physically and mentally, and although it is never openly labelled as lesbian, textual indications are fairly clear:

Anna, mon amie. A qui donc rendre grâce de ce don qu'est l'amitié d'Anna, sinon à Anna elle-même.

Elle va dire 'mon amour', car elle n'en a pas d'autre. Elle dit 'mon amie', et c'est beaucoup plus que tout ce que l'on peut dire.

Ah! le coin de la rue! Nous nous étions avancées si lentement l'une vers l'autre, les mains hésitantes et tendues, car nous avons peur de ne rien saisir et d'avoir ensuite à nous retirer, le coeur ardent de

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<sup>24</sup> Christopher Robinson, in his *Scandal in the Ink: Male and Female Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century French Literature* (London: Cassel, 1995), p.15, considers the repression of lesbianism under the Second Empire on these grounds.

<sup>25</sup> Monique Wittig, 'Paradigm', in *Homosexualities and French Literature*, ed. by George Stambolian and Elaine Marks (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp.114-121 (p.118).

<sup>26</sup> See Robinson, *Scandal in the Ink*, p.167-72 for a discussion of intertextuality in homosexual literature.

<sup>27</sup> This relationship is foregrounded by an odd episode concerning Brigitte's sister Annie, the similarity of the names suggesting a common motif: '- Comme tes bras sont froids, Brigitte, laisse-moi me coucher dans ton lit et te rechauffer. Une légère hésitation, un court moment où le coeur de Brigitte semble s'arrêter de battre: le danger rôde encore. - Non, dit-elle, tu vois, je vais me lever. Et elle rejeta ses couvertures et s'assit au bord du lit' (*R*, pp.26-27).

désir, mais toujours vide.

Ce jour-là...Mais quel jour? Il n'y a pas eu de jours saillants dans la suite des jours, car si on déclare son amour, il n'est pas de déclaration d'amitié. (*R*, pp.40-41)

However, this relationship represents a temptation for Brigitte to take refuge in inauthenticity: 'Mais moi, je m'accomplirai bien moi-même. Et seule, s'il le faut. Anna d'ailleurs m'a déjà aidée et m'aidera' (*R*, pp.32-33). There is a degree of *mauvaise foi* in the contradiction - resisting conventional bourgeois self-definition via a husband, Brigitte proposes to substitute a female to fulfil the same function and call this autonomous self-definition. Furthermore, Anna is also tainted by bourgeois values. She silently distances herself from the ambiguous *entente* with Brigitte because it threatens the stability of the bourgeois sociocultural milieu with which Anna allies herself and which she is not prepared to disrupt: 'je tiens surtout à pouvoir vivre tranquille' (*R*, p.91).

Theoretically, Brigitte's lesbian inclination could be read as another manifestation of her revolt against bourgeois ideology. However the text does not grant any political potential to lesbian desire. Rather it is suggested that the development of the Brigitte-Anna relationship would amount to inauthentic self-definition via the lover, which is condemned somewhat existentially as the inevitable position of the female subject in heterosexual relationships in a bourgeois cultural environment, such as that of Brigitte and Pierre. Homosexual desire is not free from the dangers presented by heterosexual desire, and the transgressive potential of a same-sex relationship is far outweighed by the dangers it presents by offering yet another relational sexual identity. For Thomas, it is precisely the refusal of the inauthenticity which seems to characterize all sexuality in *Le Refus* which allows the female subject to come to politics.

Brigitte is also tempted to explore adultery, another sexual identity which opposes bourgeois conventions of female sexual expression. The text is very clear in its presentation of Anna's father's desire for Brigitte as an opportunity for her to achieve political transgression:

Dans ce mélange de désir et de répugnance, n'était-ce pas plutôt le 'tu-ne-commettras-pas-l'adultère' qui réapparaissait, et n'y avait-il pas là un moyen de se libérer une fois pour toutes de la morale qu'ils s'étaient.  
(*R*, p.100)

Here, instead of using the concept of *refus* as a political tool in the sexual domain, Brigitte has the opportunity positively to embrace a transgressive sexual identity in order to achieve political action. However this path is rejected on the grounds of political expediency: anarchy appears in the longer term to be a flawed political methodology:

Elle hésita un moment: peut-être est-il préférable d'agir provisoirement selon les principes mêmes que l'on met en question. Si on les rejette par la suite, on ne peut du moins s'accuser d'y avoir été amené par la faiblesse, parce qu'on n'a pas été capable de les observer personnellement et qu'on se cherche une justification. (*R*, pp.100-01)

Anna's father is unceremoniously shown to the door.

Thomas's *Le Refus* offers three theses about the incompatibility of female sexuality and politics. Firstly, Thomas demonstrates that, for a daughter of the bourgeoisie with revolutionary aspirations, female sexual identity is imbued with the ideology which her developing political consciousness is attempting to reject.<sup>28</sup> Secondly,

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas was acutely aware of the problematic position of the bourgeois who sympathizes with the proletariat. In 1934 she wrote to Vaillant-Couturier on this subject, asking whether those who were drawn to communism by emotion rather than by economic hardship had a place in revolutionary organizations, or whether, during the course of their individual political evolution, they were more of a hindrance than a help. Her letter, 'La position sentimentale' and Vaillant-Couturier's response, appeared in *Commune*, 9 (May 1934), 865-70.

although lesbian desire could be seen to have revolutionary potential as a concrete transgression against bourgeois ideology, homosexual relationships are no less likely to constitute an escape from personal oppression than heterosexual ones. Thirdly, to adopt a transgressive sexual identity is politically dangerous as it threatens to compromise the individual's revolutionary commitment by leaving her open to the charge of not being capable of living up to the 'ideals' of bourgeois culture. If Brigitte wants to embrace an active sexual identity, she has two choices: she must either accept bourgeois marriage, or transgress bourgeois codes and risk the charge of mere self-justification via the oppositional ideology. Thomas proposes a *troisième voie* in the form of celibacy, which represents a radical choice in political terms. Celibacy symbolizes the rejection of bourgeois ideology in its entirety: it is a refusal of its family structures, its social pretensions, its oppression of the working class as well as of its definitions of the role of woman and her circulation in the marital economy.

### *A refusal of the radical*

A parity of literary and political aims is clearly discernable between the work of Paul Nizan and that of Edith Thomas. Both write from a broadly communist perspective, both adopt the form of the *Bildungsroman* in order to investigate the maturing of the political consciousness and the gender identifications of the children of the bourgeoisie who are ideologically in sympathy with the proletariat.<sup>29</sup> Nizan's *La Conspiration* differs

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas and Nizan also have in common a traumatic resignation from the PCF, Nizan in 1939 and Thomas in 1949. Thomas's 'lettre de démission', which appeared in *Combat*, 16 and 17 December 1949 entitled 'Critique et autocritique', is reproduced in its entirety in her memoirs (*TC*, pp.212-17). The PCF's response appeared in *L'Humanité*, 17 December 1949 entitled 'C'est l'avis des travailleurs qui compte'. Nizan's 'lettre de démission' appeared in *L'Œuvre*, 25 September 1939. His resignation in the wake of the Nazi-Soviet Pact and his subsequent denunciation by the PCF are well documented in most literary and biographical studies.

from *Le Refus* in that its plot dynamic is more diffuse, focusing on the relationships between various male characters and on their different political and sexual trajectories: a multiple *Bildung* is on offer here. *La Conspiration* takes as its point of departure similar ideological and aesthetic premises, it offers a complex set of messages about the relationship between female sexuality and politics which permit a fertile comparison with Thomas's text. The important distinction must be made that in Nizan's text, female sexuality is placed as the object rather than the subject of the narrative: it is external to the central male fictional protagonists around whom the *Bildung* is constructed. Thomas's novel provides an investigation of female sexuality in relation to the female subject; Nizan's presents female sexuality in relation to the male subject on whose political and sexual journey the text is focused. In structural terms then, female sexuality occupies an opposite position in relation to the *Bildung* in the two novels. The question of the mapping of male political choices onto male sexuality will occupy Chapter 3.

Yves Stalloni's interpretation of the role of the feminine in *La Conspiration* is apposite:

L'univers féminin semble bel et bien présent dans les romans, même s'il ne constitue souvent qu'un arrière plan, une toile de fond tendue, par concession, sur la trajectoire personnelle du ou des héros masculins.<sup>30</sup>

The personal trajectories of the male 'heroes' provide the novel's political trajectories, whilst female sexuality often appears as something those heroes do in their spare time. Thus Laforgue's conquest in the café (C, pp.14-16) is purely recreational; similarly Pauline functions as a sort of carnal coffee break when she interrupts Laforgue's

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<sup>30</sup> Yves Stalloni, 'L'Image de la femme dans l'œuvre de Nizan', in *Paul Nizan Écrivain: Actes du colloque Paul Nizan des 11 et 12 décembre 1987 organisé par le Centre Roman 20-50 de Lille III*, ed. by Bernard Alluin and Jacques Deguy (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1988), pp.41-58 (p.41).

academic study in the middle of 'un de mes bons jours' (C, pp.36-43). Régnier distinguishes between the sexuality offered by a long-term companion and that which is on sale: 'Les femmes ne donnent jamais de vacances aux hommes qu'elles aiment. Où irions-nous s'il n'y avait pas les maisons de rendez-vous?' (C, p.123). Not all female sexuality is recreational, and non-recreational female sexuality is negatively connoted throughout. For example, Pluvinage's monstrous companion serves only further to belittle this political traitor (C, p.263), and Catherine is subjected to Claude's 'métier de mari en week-end' when he returns to la Vicomté (C, p.184). Female sexuality also functions as a vehicle to develop the characterization of male protagonists: thus Pluvinage's 'conquest' of the inexperienced Jeanne is simply an opportunity for an inferior man to feel superior (C, pp.272-75), and André Simon's seduction by Gladys serves to underline his naïvety (C, pp.106-06). On one level then, *La Conspiration* effects a separation between female sexuality and politics through a simple assertion of irrelevance. 'Quelle place occupe la femme dans la diégèse romanesque? Répondons d'abord rapidement: jamais la première'.<sup>31</sup> In the vast majority of cases, female sexuality appears relationally as an aspect of male experience and politics is associated exclusively with the latter.

Catherine however is exceptional, providing a vehicle for a more nuanced presentation of female sexuality than that which I have briefly surveyed. I have already established that the Rosenthal-Catherine relationship can be read as politically charged.<sup>32</sup> More specifically, Catherine raises the possibility of the achievement of politicization through female sexuality. It is true that Catherine is accorded textual space only as a

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<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p.47.

<sup>32</sup> Chapter 1, pp.43-46.

result of her sexual relationships with male protagonists, firstly as the wife of Claude, Rosenthal's brother, and secondly as Rosenthal's lover, '[t]ouchant la Prohibition de l'Inceste' (C, p.157). However, in the latter capacity, she permits an investigation of autonomous female sexual agency, and also serves to introduce female sexuality directly into the political heart of the novel.

Catherine appears initially as an incarnation of the imbrication of female sexuality and bourgeois culture which Brigitte rejects in *Le Refus*. Catherine is a bourgeois myth. Roland Barthes's discussion of the rhetorical figures of myth offers a useful theoretical filter for an analysis of Catherine. Barthes defines myth in the following terms:

la bourgeoisie se masque comme bourgeoisie et par là même produit le mythe; la révolution s'affiche comme révolution et par là même abolit le mythe.<sup>33</sup>

More than two decades earlier, in 'Littérature révolutionnaire en France', Nizan had asserted:

La propagande bourgeoise est idéaliste, elle cache son jeu, elle dissimule ses fins qu'elle poursuit en secret: ces fins sont inavouables. La propagande révolutionnaire sait qu'elle est propagande, elle publie ses fins avec une franchise complète.<sup>34</sup>

There is then some logic in applying Barthes's analytical categories to Nizan's fiction. The bourgeoisie, according to Barthes, proposes ahistorical fixed entities which permit

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<sup>33</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui', in *Mythologies* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957), pp.191-247, (p.234).

<sup>34</sup> Nizan, 'Littérature révolutionnaire en France', p.34.

the pleasure of consumption without the disquieting need for any consideration of origin. Catherine exemplifies such 'privation de l'Histoire'.<sup>35</sup> She is an eternal, beautiful object which denies the political-cultural development which, for Barthes, should be the object of Marxist analysis.<sup>36</sup>

Pendant longtemps [...] Bernard ne pensa à sa belle-sœur que comme à un bien meuble que sa famille avait acquis au cours d'une vente solennelle (C, p.153)

Catherine n'était encore pour lui qu'une femme de cire (C, p.153)

son corps orné, préparé, qui paraissait soustrait à la maladie et à la vieillesse, sa chair insensible à la fièvre, sa peau incorruptible (C, p.158)

il marcha vers elle comme si sa réapparition était une espèce de miracle, de triomphe sur le temps, la distance, les grands volants sans pitié de la vie (C, pp.201-02)

In Barthes's schema, denial of History is accompanied by a denial of the Other: the bourgeoisie must transform Other into Same if its ideology is to be secure. Thus Rosenthal's revolutionary ideology must be suppressed if family and class cohesion is to be maintained. Mme Rosenthal is optimistically convinced that Catherine is performing this rhetorical operation of 'L'identification':<sup>37</sup> 'Kate apprivoise notre

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<sup>35</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, p.239.

<sup>36</sup> In *Le Cheval de Troie*, the political significance of the 'constructed' bourgeois female body is made even clearer: 'C'est un monde où marchent dans des lieux réservés des femmes presque trop belles qui ont la fortune, le temps d'être attentives à leur corps, de reposer leur visage, de faire masser leur ventre, de courir, de marcher au bord de la mer. Elles paraissent incorruptibles comme des statues, faites d'une chair dont le tissu et le grain rappellent plus l'ivoire, la pierre que la chair mal défendue des femmes épuisées qui lavent des lessives sous le drapeau de fer des lavoirs, qui sont debout derrière les machines et portent des enfants dont elles ne voulaient pas'. Paul Nizan, *Le Cheval de Troie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1935), p.21.

<sup>37</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, pp.239-40.



sauvage, disait Mme Rosenthal' (C, p.154).<sup>38</sup> The text makes this bourgeois ruse explicit when it places the following words in Rosenthal's mouth after the discovery of the incestuous relationship:

Ils ont peur de moi. Ils se demandent encore s'ils vont m'éliminer ou me digérer. Serai-je trop dur pour mes carnivores? (C, p.222)

The family 'eliminate' Rosenthal's Otherness by ceasing meaningful contact with him; Catherine however, also tainted by incest, is 'digested', her Otherness denied: 'Personne ne doit rien savoir de nos drames. Catherine restera avec son mari...' (C, p.226).

This inscription of a bourgeois myth in a 'revolutionary' discourse aims to be 'contre-mythique', to provide 'un mythe expérimental, un mythe au second degré' in Barthes's words.<sup>39</sup> The reader is placed in the position of a decipherer, not a consumer, of myths because she perceives the gaze of Nizan on the myth which the Rosenthal family (a particular example of a general phenomenon) have created for themselves. Thus, on one level, *La Conspiration* could be seen to demythologize bourgeois female sexuality in a similar way to *Le Refus*, female sexuality in both texts coming to connote all that the central protagonists must reject if they are to complete their *Bildung* successfully according to the political criteria set by the text. *La Conspiration* also shares with *Le Refus* a consideration of the possibility of transgressive sexuality functioning politically as a concrete attack on bourgeois culture. Catherine is called upon to 'choisir son lit' (C, p.196): here, as in *Le Refus* and *Le Vote des femmes*, a woman's sexual choice

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<sup>38</sup> The reference is presumably to *The Taming of the Shrew*, although here the female subject is tamer rather than tamed.

<sup>39</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, p.222. Barthes states that '[l]e pouvoir du second mythe, c'est de fonder le premier en naïveté regardée' (p.223). He takes Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet* as his example.

stands for a political choice. If Catherine adopts an incestuous sexual identity by publicly pursuing her relationship with Rosenthal, then the textual tables will be turned and Catherine's sexuality will come to symbolize not bourgeois ideology, but rather its destruction. Thus the text proposes the opposite solution to Thomas's, suggesting that transgressive sexuality might be politically enabling, proposing a productive coincidence between female sexuality and politics. In order to achieve real commitment, the male subject is dependent on the female subject's willingness to embrace a transgressive sexual identity: '[i]l fallait que Catherine s'engageât pour toute sa vie' (C, p.192). The verb *engager* is not accidental. If Rosenthal is to triumph over his class via a triumph over his family, Catherine must be willing to stand as 'le témoin public, rayonnant, scandaleux de son triomphe' (C, p.192). Incest offers the female subject the possibility of coming to politics via her sexuality.

Catherine however is not willing. Instead she returns to the bosom of the Rosenthal family and the ideology of which she initially appeared as a mythical incarnation. This refusal of female sexuality by the female subject then is negative in political terms: Catherine is blamed by the text for failing to align her sexuality with the revolution. Such a negative connotation of *refus*, a direct point of contrast with Thomas's work, is consistent with the representation of *refus* elsewhere in the novel. Both Régnier and Carré reject denial in favour of affirmation:

J'imagine une époque où la grandeur sera moins dans le refus que dans l'adhésion, où il y aura quelque gloire à se sentir conforme. Toutes les grandeurs humaines n'ont été jusqu'à maintenant que négatives. (C, p.127)

Quand cessera-t-on de vivre avec l'idée qu'il n'y a de grandeur que dans le refus, que la négation seule ne déshonore pas? La grandeur n'est pour

moi que dans l'affirmation... (C, p.213)<sup>40</sup>

Youssef Ishaghpour argues persuasively that Carré, the text's ideal of communist commitment, achieves in this respect what Régnier can only imagine in the privacy of his diary, namely, affirmative and productive commitment.<sup>41</sup> In opposition to Thomas, Nizan suggests *refus* to be an inferior political methodology. Catherine however goes beyond the position of refusal. Pascal Ory refers to a *prise de conscience* on the part of Catherine after Rosenthal's death 'qui vaut celle, plus sociable, de Laforgue à la fin du livre, et qu'on oublie généralement de relever'.<sup>42</sup> He is referring I think to Catherine's refusal of Rosenthal's family after his death in her attitude to her mother-in-law and in her refusal to attend the funeral which is connoted by the text as a recuperation of the wayward son by the bourgeois family: 'Catherine, qui s'était laissé embrasser, repoussa brutalement sa belle-mère, et éclata en sanglots' (C, p.238). Ory is correct to point out a much neglected and indeed radical (in gender terms) element of the text, namely that it offers a positive female political *Bildung*. Such a reading might have been justifiable intertextually by the unfinished sequel to *La Conspiration* which was to recount a love affair between Catherine and Laforgue, the text's only other positive political *Bildung*.<sup>43</sup> However, in terms of female sexuality, the fact remains, as Ishaghpour points out, that

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<sup>40</sup> In an essay which first appeared in *la Nouvelle revue française*, 39 (December 1932) entitled 'Les Conséquences du refus', Nizan argues that *refus* in itself is inadequate; that a constructive embracing of the consequences of refusal are necessary if revolutionary progress is to be made. The essay is reprinted in *Paul Nizan, intellectuel communiste*, ed. by Brochier, pp.87-92.

<sup>41</sup> Youssef Ishaghpour, *Paul Nizan: Une figure mythique et son temps* (Paris: Éditions Le Sycomore, 1980), pp.201-02.

<sup>42</sup> Ory, *Nizan: Destin d'un révolté*, p.158.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, p.158, pp.165-66; see also Ishaghpour, *Paul Nizan: Une figure mythique et son temps*, pp.221-22. The manuscript, in progress at the time of Nizan's death, is lost.

incest does not attain the status of an irreparable act;<sup>44</sup> what Ishaghpour does not go on to say is that this is because Catherine refuses to make it one by embracing a transgressive sexual identity. Her successful *Bildung* is provoked by the death of Rosenthal; the outcome of incest on the other hand is Catherine's (temporary) return to the bosom of the family. In the sexual-political domain she makes the wrong choice: death politicizes Catherine just as near death politicizes Laforgue.<sup>45</sup>

Catherine is unique amongst the text's female characters in being granted the agency of choice, and in permitting the political game to be played, if not actually won, on the sexual terrain. We have already seen that for the most part, female sexuality offers a diversion or a distraction from the (male) business of politics. The narration of Rosenthal's visit to the island of Naxos to visit his sister Marie-Anne has more in common with the latter representation despite the fact that certain textual indicators link Marie-Anne with Catherine.<sup>46</sup> Structurally, the visit is narrated within the section of the novel entitled 'Catherine'; secondly, when Rosenthal imagines, in relation to Catherine, his personal concept of the archetypal romantic idyll, it is Naxos, the place where he found happiness with his sister (C, p.185); thirdly, on the point of death, musing on

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<sup>44</sup> Ishaghpour, *Paul Nizan: Une figure mythique et son temps*, p.213.

<sup>45</sup> It is the body of the male subject which permits female politicization. See Chapter 4, pp.245-49 on the question of female politicization by proxy.

<sup>46</sup> This episode is narrated analeptically: we learn that the visit took place in 1925, before the main events of the plot. *Marie-Anne* is almost a homophone of *Ariane*, the Ariadne of classical legend. The link is made explicit on p.140 when Naxos is referred to as 'l'île d'Ariane'. According to Greek myth, Ariadne was the daughter of Minos, King of Crete, and was abandoned on Naxos by Theseus after giving him a ball of thread to enable him to escape from the Minotaur. Dionysus, the god of wine and orgiastic excess (who appears in the novel as Marie-Anne's chauffeur) later found Ariadne on Naxos and married her there. In Nizan's text, Calliope, the Muse of epic poetry and chief of the Muses, also makes an appearance, in the guise of Marie-Anne's servant girl. The significance of this fascinating eruption of Greek legend into Nizan's discourse deserves a more detailed consideration than space will here permit. Nizan's interest in things classical is indicated by a visit he made to Greece in 1931, by the titles of *Le Cheval de Troie* (1935) and *L'Histoire de Thésée* (1937), and by his adaptation of Aristophanes's play *Les Acharniens* (1937). Ory briefly considers the Greek theme in *Nizan: Destin d'un révolté*, pp.162-64.

Catherine, love and eroticism, Rosenthal calls Marie-Anne to mind (*C*, p.237). The Naxos episode thus foregrounds Rosenthal's relationship with Catherine. Naxos is a bourgeois paradise, and it is, like Catherine, beyond time and beyond history, it is tautologically self-identical.<sup>47</sup>

Tout était parfaitement clos et résumé: c'était un de ces paysages qui possèdent en eux-mêmes toutes leurs raisons [...] rien ne paraissait vieillir, se transformer, au sein d'un monde qui, de seconde en seconde se répétait, toujours identique à lui-même [...] on était mis à sa place dans ce monde qui se suffisait absolument, on n'y avait plus ni passé ni avenir, le temps et la mort paraissaient suspendus, on était établi dans la grande aventure imaginaire de la répétition des instants éternels. (*C*, p.144)

Read through the Barthesian filter, the description appears more than simply picturesque or anecdotal.<sup>48</sup> The representation a few pages later of Catherine's 'corps orné' which is 'soustrait à la maladie et à la vieillesse', her 'peau incorruptible', and her 'triomphe sur le temps' echoes this description of Naxos. Stalloni points to a strong generalizing tendency in Nizan's representation of women, signposted by the formula 'une de ces femmes': here we see 'un de ces paysages', the same linguistic signpost being used to introduce the geographical myth as is used to signal what Stalloni terms a 'gynotype'.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps Naxos is a symbolic woman. Naxos is certainly recreational like female sexuality. However, Naxos-as-woman is equivalent to Catherine-as-bourgeois-myth rather than to Catherine-as-revolutionary-incest. Naxos threatens to engulf the visiting

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<sup>47</sup> Barthes proposes *la tautologie* as another of the rhetorical forms of bourgeois myth. *Mythologies*, pp.240-41.

<sup>48</sup> Jacqueline Leiner, in her *Le Destin littéraire de Paul Nizan* (Paris: Éditions Klincksieck, 1970) quotes the same passage and offers the following commentary: '[Nizan] sacrifie maintenant au goût de l'itinéraire (sans l'excuse des nécessités du reportage) au plaisir de l'anecdote, du détail pittoresque' (p.248).

<sup>49</sup> Stalloni, 'L'Image de la femme dans l'œuvre de Nizan', pp.42-44.

subject in its anti-revolutionary ideology, because to embrace the luxurious leisure it offers is to indulge in 'L'identification', bourgeois denial of Otherness:

Bernard n'était pourtant pas tout à fait tranquille: il avait encore cette mauvaise conscience qui le suivait partout, qu'il avait à peine endormie dans la paresse de Potamia. Il sentait qu'il lui était impossible de passer sur l'insolence des cadets, des policiers, sur les huttes de tôle et de carton le long de la route du Stade, sur les prisonniers politiques, les enfants ophtalmiques, et les trop belles bourgeoises smyrniotes émigrées d'Asie Mineure après la guerre gréco-turque, qui promenaient le soir, sur la place de la Constitution et sous les arbres pleins de rossignols du Zappeion, leurs joues fardées, leurs bras nus, leurs seins insolents, et qui allaient danser, étendues au fond de grandes voitures américaines, sous les lanternes vénitiennes des dancings marins de Glyphada. (*C*, pp.150-51)

Naxos does not have Catherine's political-sexual potential. In the latter passage (which ends the Naxos section and directly precedes the introduction of Catherine) the 'trop belles bourgeoises' with their 'seins insolents' and voluptuous behaviour in night-clubs and in American limousines stand for the political ideology to which the text is opposed. Marie-Anne is also ultimately in the enemy camp. She tells exotic stories about Cairo and Héliopolis and the Nile 'comme elle eût fait des récits de Limoges et de Bourg-en-Bresse, si elle s'était mariée en province' (*C*, p.148); she is 'très complice et pleine de mots de passe sur les familles' (*C*, p.149). The possibility for revolution lies with the poverty and corruption that is Other to Marie-Anne and to the 'trop belles bourgeoises': it is on these aspects of Greece, less glamorous than its sexualized women, that the revolutionary consciousness must focus. Naxos tempts Rosenthal just as Brigitte is tempted to take refuge in Pierre, but both characters know that 'la boue', 'le cloaque', 'la misère' and 'la faim' exist. Rosenthal refuses the myth of Naxos and attempts to refuse

the myth of Catherine; Marie-Anne remains linked with the myth of Naxos and Catherine is in the short term reduced to a similar myth when she refuses to embrace the Otherness of incest.

Naxos, Marie-Anne, the 'trop belles bourgeoises' and the majority of the minor female characters suggest that female sexuality has nothing to do with communist commitment. Through Catherine however, a very different association erupts when the text suggests that it is possible for bourgeois ideology to be undermined through the assumption by the bourgeois female subject of a transgressive sexual identity. For Thomas, celibacy represents the rejection of bourgeois ideology; Nizan considers whether incest might fulfil that function. *La Conspiration* is radical in its raising of the possibility that female sexuality might function positively in political terms. Ultimately however, no positive political *Bildung* is achieved through incest since Catherine, like Odile, makes the wrong choice. Her refusal of incest and Rosenthal's suicide represent an erasure of political possibility. Catherine's political *Bildung* is not sexual. In the final analysis, Nizan's text cannot be said to offer female sexuality as its political solution.

## II

### *Le Célibat, état supérieur*<sup>50</sup>

Celibacy is announced in the title of Madeleine Pelletier's *La Femme vierge*. An argument can be made for the semi-autobiographical nature of this text, based particularly on the existence of a manuscript entitled *Anne dite Madeleine Pelletier*, which represents

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<sup>50</sup> Madeleine Pelletier, *Le Célibat, état supérieur* (Caen: Imprimerie Caennaise, c.1926). See note 57 below.

a fragment of an autobiography dictated by Pelletier to the feminist activist H el ene Brion during the former's incarceration at Perray-Vaucluse in 1939.<sup>51</sup> This text bears a striking resemblance to the first part of *La Femme vierge*, although it was broken off during the account of Pelletier's late childhood. Marie Pierrot, although sharing the initials of her author, is by no means a precise fictional representation of Pelletier: the events of their lives do not after all coincide. Nonetheless, their political ideologies do coincide, and it is certainly Marie's voice which expresses the opinions valorized by the text.

Throughout the novel, celibacy is directly equated with effective female political action, and female sexuality runs counter to the latter. Marie's lack of interest in her own sexuality leaves her free to channel her energies elsewhere:

Cette activit e que les jeunes filles d epensent pour l'amour, Marie l'avait en r eserve. Comprim e depuis toujours, par sa m ere d'abord, par la n ecessit e de gagner sa vie ensuite, Marie avait un violent besoin d'agir. L'existence lui paraissait insipide si on n'a pas un id eal pour lequel on travaille. (*FV*, p.96)

Certes elle n' etait pas sans sexe; elle aussi  eprouvait des d esirs, mais elle avait d u les refouler pour  tre libre, elle ne le regrettait pas. (*FV*, p.241)

Marie's celibacy is always positively connoted in political terms as an active and productive choice, since the expression of female sexuality is consistently represented as being incompatible with liberty. Marie's rejection of sexuality in favour of politics is contrasted with the women with whom she comes into contact whose meagre motivation for political action generally has a sexual element. The inspiration for Mademoiselle

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<sup>51</sup> Document dated 23 November 1939, *Dossier Madeleine Pelletier*, BMD. There is also evidence in the *Dossier* that H el ene Brion visited Pelletier at Perray-Vaucluse that day. Pelletier died a little over a month later on 29th December. Two further autobiographical manuscripts exist: *Doctoresse Pelletier: M emoires d'une f eministe*, Fonds Marie-Louise Bougl e, Biblioth eque Historique de la Ville de Paris, and *Journal de guerre, Dossier Madeleine Pelletier*, BMD. All appear in translation in Gordon and Cross, *Early French Feminisms, 1830-1940*, pp.228-60.



Lautaret's involvement with socialism is her sexual attraction for Jaurès: 'Elle se faisait un tableau idyllique de ce qu'aurait été leur amour, leur communion intellectuelle et physique' (*FV*, p.91). This is as far as her politics goes - although highly educated, she is incapable of discussing political or intellectual topics, unlike Marie who craves such stimulation. Marie goes on to discover that most of the members of the feminist group *Solidarité de femmes* have come to feminism because of some failure in their sexual relations:

[...] beaucoup de membres avaient eu autrefois une situation brillante qu'elles avaient perdue avec l'homme qui la leur donnait. Plongées dans la médiocrité elles étaient en colère contre le sexe masculin, leur féminisme n'avait pas d'autre cause. (*FV*, p.104)

For example, Madame Chevrotin, the ex-mistress of a government minister, wants simply to use the feminist movement to avenge herself for his desertion and subsequent attempts to silence her. Catherine joins *Solidarité* having undergone an illegal abortion after being deserted by her lover. Pelletier is severe in her criticism of established feminism between the wars in France.<sup>52</sup> Its participants appear to have no general political awareness beyond their own individual plight: 'Madame Schmall commença par déclarer qu'elle-même n'avait nullement besoin du féminisme, son mari était excellent' (*FV*, p.107).<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, they refuse to sacrifice the conventional trappings of femininity which reduce women to sexual objects. Marie complains that Caroline Kauffmann, president

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<sup>52</sup> Pelletier took over the leadership of *Solidarité des femmes* from Caroline Kauffmann in 1909. According to Sowerwine, Pelletier detested mainstream contemporary feminist groups which were populated, in her opinion, by 'des demi-émancipées'. Sowerwine, 'Militantisme et identité sexuelle', p.22.

<sup>53</sup> As well as Madame Schmall [sic], presumably Jeanne Schmahl (1846-1915), Pelletier also attacks Madame Renooz (Céline Renooz, 1840-1929) and Madame Oddo (Jeanne Oddo-Deflou, 1856-?) in less than complimentary terms. This attack on leading figures of early twentieth century feminism supports Sowerwine's suggestion.

of Solidarité des femmes, insists on parading her own sexual identity by wearing low-cut evening dresses, which for Pelletier is incompatible with feminism: 'Le décolletage est le symbole du servage, cela saute aux yeux. Si les féministes ne le comprennent pas, c'est qu'elles sont des dindes' (*FV*, p.136).<sup>54</sup>

Female sexuality then may motivate women to join political groups but it does not lead to reasoned and effective politicization. The text constantly asserts that oppression is the only possible outcome when a woman expresses her sexual identity. Marriage also gets an extremely bad press in this respect via the cautionary tale of the marriage of Mademoiselle Lautaret to M. Lecornu. A syndicalist, he is a textual vehicle for the discrediting of the syndicalist movement as insidiously reactionary. Lecornu is the epitome of the aggressive patriarch who allows his wife to continue working only for the financial benefits he receives and still forces her to take sole responsibility for the domestic tasks. Ultimately he compels her to continue with a pregnancy at an advanced age, against the advice of doctors, in order to provide him with an heir: a pregnancy which results in his wife's death. Female sexuality can be fatal.

How then is it possible to reconcile such an unambiguous hostility to the expression of female sexuality with the representation historians offer us of Pelletier as a loud if lonely voice in the clamour for sexual freedom?<sup>55</sup> Her pro-abortion and pro-contraception activities would seem to indicate rather a desire to see female sexuality

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<sup>54</sup> Pelletier herself was well known for her short hair and austere masculine style of dress. See Chapter 1, p. 70-73 on Pelletier's advocacy of *virilisation*.

<sup>55</sup> Bard characterizes Pelletier in this way in *Les Filles de Marianne*, p.217. Many historians point out that Pelletier's views on sexuality isolated her from the feminist movement, some suggesting that her radical approach alienated potential supporters of feminism and provided justification for its existing enemies, others suggesting that her extremism had the effect of making moderate feminism seem acceptable. On these points see Boxer, 'When Radical and Socialist Feminism Were Joined', pp.57-59, pp.60-63, Stephen C. Hause with Anne R. Kenney, *Women's Suffrage and Social Politics in the French Third Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp.49-50 and James F. McMillan, *Housewife or Harlot: The Place of Women in French Society, 1870-1940* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), pp. 89-96.

expressed unobstructed. Gordon suggests that although sexually restrained herself, Pelletier was not in favour of the suppression of desire, although she did believe the female libido to be less developed than the male.<sup>56</sup> Pelletier, like Edith Thomas, was also interested in the social manipulation of sexuality and the extent to which the subject's experience of sexuality could be said to be an internalization of culture's presentation of it.<sup>57</sup> Herein lies the key. *La Femme vierge* asserts that within the cultural and political climate of inter-war France, female sexuality is so ideologically coded as to make the combination of political activity and freedom with an active sexual identity impossible:

Plus tard la femme pourra s'affranchir sans renoncer à l'amour. Il ne sera plus pour elle une chose vile, que seuls le mariage et la maternité peuvent relever. La femme pourra, sans être diminuée, vivre sa vie sexuelle. (*FV*, p.242)

In the contemporary social climate sexuality can only be 'une chose vile' for a woman, in direct opposition to the freedom which only active politicization mediated by socialism and feminism can achieve. In 'The Feminist Education of Girls', Pelletier argues:

The inalienable right to sexual pleasure which women ought to possess is not accorded by society, and since we live in society one must take account, as little as possible, but still, take account to some extent, of social prejudices. For example, a girl's belief that she has the right to sexual pleasure must not make her the dupe of men and expose her to being rejected by society as part of a class of shady women, because today distinctions are scarcely made between a girl living in a free union

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<sup>56</sup> Gordon, *The Integral Feminist*, pp.182-87 and Gordon and Cross, *Early French Feminisms, 1830-1940*, pp.164-88.

<sup>57</sup> Pelletier's main theoretical writing on sexuality is represented by the following works: *L'Amour et la maternité* (Paris, undated), *Le Célibat, état supérieur* (Caen: Imprimerie Caennaise, c.1926), *L'Emancipation sexuelle de la femme* (Paris: Girard et Brière, 1911), *La Rationalisation sexuelle* (Paris, 1935) and *Pour l'abrogation de l'article 317. Le droit à l'avortement* (Paris, 1911), which is reprinted in Gordon and Cross, *Early French Feminsims, 1830-1940*, pp.177-83.

and a kept woman.<sup>58</sup>

And, in 'The Right to Abortion':

In practice, free love brings women all kinds of miseries, thanks to the generally unfavourable nature of public opinion. Men treat women disrespectfully; families close their doors to them.<sup>59</sup>

Again, as in *Le Refus*, it is the political connotations with which society invests female sexuality that render it undesirable for the liberated, politically committed female. Therefore, in the contemporary cultural climate, Pelletier recommends celibacy, arguing in 'The Feminist Education of Girls':

If a girl wishes to blot out the chapter of sexuality from her life, she should be encouraged in this path. Laws and customs enslave women and they can only really find a bit of liberty by depriving themselves of sexual love.<sup>60</sup>

Pelletier explored a future where the expression of female sexuality would be compatible with political freedom in her 1932 Utopian novel, *Une Vie nouvelle*. Here, in post-revolutionary France, the expression of women's sexuality is completely free because all socio-cultural meaning has been erased from her sexual identity. There is no stigma attached to female promiscuity nor to the single mother, since the nuclear family has no meaning when all the children of the state are reared by the collectivity. Men and women interact with each other without fear of sexual ambiguity because complete equality has

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<sup>58</sup> Gordon and Cross, *Early French Feminisms, 1830-1940*, p.176.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, p.178.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, p.176.

been achieved.

*Une Vie nouvelle* also offers an interesting insight into Pelletier's views on homosexuality. Lesbianism is perceived to be a result of the necessary repression of heterosexual female desire in a cultural climate which does not permit the existence of a female sexual identity in the absence of a husband, and of the often brutal nature of female sexual experience within a patriarchal marriage:

La société nouvelle avait donné droit de cité aux homosexuels, hommes et femmes. Elle reconnaissait que l'homosexualité n'était pas normale, néanmoins elle trouvait archaïque et arbitraire de régler les caresses, de désigner ce qui est permis et ce qui est défendu [...] Chose inattendue, l'inversion sexuelle, au lieu d'augmenter, diminua. Une bonne part de sa force tenait à l'importance donnée à la sexualité en général [...] Chez la femme, l'homosexualité avait toujours été moins répandue et sa grande pourvoyeuse avait été la continence forcée des femmes qui, n'ayant pu se marier, n'avaient pu prendre un amant. Des femmes mariées recherchaient dans le lesbianisme un amour moins brutal enjolivé de tendresse. La liberté sexuelle de la femme fit disparaître le saphisme à peu près complètement. (*VN*, pp.205-06)

There is absolutely no sense then in which homosexuality appears as a tool for political change in Pelletier's work: rather, it is a direct result of the ideology to which Pelletier is opposed, and thus is shown to have no constructive possibilities whatever. Predictably therefore, *La Femme vierge* does not explore the possibilities of lesbianism. The text does present an exclusively female 'family' formed when Marie and Catherine set up home together and adopt Mme Lecornu's daughter after her mother's death. However there is nothing in the text to suggest any physical desire between Catherine and Marie. Their relationship follows the pattern of a conventional patriarchal marriage, Catherine being the weaker partner, emotional and clinging, completely absorbed by 'motherhood' and domesticity, whilst Marie is a dominant, liberated, active partner who fulfils herself

outside of the domestic setting. The contrast is clearest when Marie decides to emigrate to Germany and Catherine tries to hold her back with traditional 'wifely' arguments:

Que te manque-t-il ici, je te le demande? Tu es presque riche, nous avons un appartement superbe. Tu as ici, en somme, un foyer, puisque tu as moi qui t'aime et la petite Marianne qui est comme notre enfant. Tu ne nous aimes pas, Marie; c'est vrai ce que l'on dit que tu es froide et n'aime [sic] personne. (*FV*, p.220)

Catherine, dependant on Marie and having no wider political awareness, offers petty arguments showing no understanding of Marie's need to fulfil herself via politics. Catherine is left quite literally holding the baby whilst Marie pursues her political ambitions. Catherine is presented as a victim of her own refusal to embrace politics and therefore freedom: the paths which Marie has chosen and which are valorized by the text are shown to be open to Catherine, but she refuses them. There is no sense in which she is presented by the text as a victim of Marie's ambition.

Pelletier comes to the same conclusion as Thomas as regards homosexuality, although via a different route: same-sex relationships threaten the female subject with the same oppression as heterosexual ones. Where Thomas sees lesbianism as politically ineffective, Pelletier interprets it as a direct result of the enemy ideology. Both texts propose celibacy as the only viable female sexual identity in the given sociocultural environment because of the political meanings which are invested in the active expression of female sexuality. Celibacy symbolizes effective political action and constitutes a desirable stage of female evolution between capitalism and the revolution.

*Les femmes sont toute sensualité*<sup>61</sup>

‘Dans l’œuvre de Drieu les femmes [...] ne peuvent jouer d’autre rôle que celui d’amoureuse, d’épouse, de fiancée, d’élégante susciteuse de rêves, ou de putain’.<sup>62</sup> Drieu la Rochelle’s exclusive presentation of female characters in terms of their sexuality, and the misogyny of his novels which results in part from this tendency, would seem to place his work in direct opposition to that of Pelletier. However, a close reading of the precise function of these sexual roles in relation to Drieu’s political agenda reveals interesting points of comparison between their work. Drieu and Pelletier share an extremist’s hostility towards female sexuality in political terms, even though they are located on opposite sides of political polarities - fascist/socialist, misogynist/feminist. Female sexuality appears as the antithesis of positive political commitment in both *La Femme vierge* and in *Gilles*, a novel which contains a varied range of sexualized female characters. Although arriving at their conclusions via very different routes, Pelletier and Drieu both represent female sexuality dichotomously, dividing sexualized, non-politicized female characters very clearly from non-sexualized, politicized female characters.

In *Gilles*, the latter group is comprised of two female characters: Rébecca Simonovitch, a Russian communist and a Jewess, and Myriam Falkenberg, also Jewish.<sup>63</sup> Rébecca is ideologically and racially odious to the political value system of the text,<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Drieu la Rochelle, *Gilles*, p.122.

<sup>62</sup> Dominique Desanti, *Drieu la Rochelle: Du dandy au nazi* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), p.85.

<sup>63</sup> Desanti, in *ibid.*, provides detailed biographical equivalences for the main characters in *Gilles*. Drieu, in his 1942 preface to *Gilles*, remarks that ‘confession ou autobiographie sont des prétentions mensongères de la part de l’auteur ou des explications trompeuses de la part du lecteur’ (*G*, p.11).

<sup>64</sup> Suleiman, in her ‘Ideological Dissent from Works of Fiction’, considers the example of Rébecca in detail in her theoretical treatment of the problem of a text based on ideological premises with which the vast majority of readers are likely to be in disagreement.

since for Drieu, the Jewish race and communist ideology are manifestations of the decadence, 'la terrible insuffisance française' (*G*, p.16), which he believes is infecting the nation and which his fascism aims to eradicate.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, Rébecca is an example of autonomous female political commitment. Such multiple negativity is reflected in her physical person:

Cette Rébecca était petite, laide de visage et de silhouette (*G*, p.405)

En la suivant, il [Paul] voyait comme elle avait de vilaines jambes, le derrière bas et il ne l'en adorait que davantage. (*G*, p.413)

Quel était ce laideron? Venait-il remplacer Dora? Dérision. (*G*, p.425)

Rébecca's sexual identity is thus defined in terms of undesirability. And her undesirability has precise political connotations: in the latter quotation, Gilles, the future fascist, rejects with contempt the possibility that she could be his next mistress, whereas in the previous one, Paul Morel, the politically, emotionally and sexually confused son of the President, the future *suicidé*, desires her precisely for her ugliness. The first thing to note then is that Rébecca's sexuality is available to the reader only in terms of *male* desire. Non-sexualized in this text then means not pleasing to the virile gaze. Thomas M. Hines points out that 'la femme n'existe qu'en fonction du regard hostile et dominateur de l'homme-témoin': more precisely, her sexuality only exists relative to male desire.<sup>66</sup> Secondly, the political significance of the female subject's sexual identity depends on the

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<sup>65</sup> On Drieu's notion of decadence, see R.B. Leal, 'L'idée de décadence chez Drieu la Rochelle', *Revue des Langues Vivantes*, 40 (1974), 325-40, Charlotte Wardi, 'Décadence et rationalisme dans Gilles de Drieu la Rochelle', *Travaux de Linguistique et de Littérature*, 15.2 (1977), 263-74 and Renee Winegarten, 'The Dusty Answer: The Case of Drieu la Rochelle', *The New Criterion*, 10.8 (April 1992), 30-37, (pp.33-34).

<sup>66</sup> Thomas M. Hines, 'Le regard misogyne ou le refus de soi: l'évolution du portrait de la femme chez Drieu la Rochelle', *Les Lettres Romanes*, 33 (1979), 33-49 (p.33).



political value of the male gaze to which it is subjected. Rébecca's sexuality is negative in political terms because Paul Morel finds her appealing; she is also negatively connoted because Gilles finds her unappealing. Thirdly, the text's only autonomously politicized female subject is cut off from the voluptuous sexuality which characterizes the desirable women in the text. Desanti notes that for Drieu, female autonomy is connoted by 'non-désir' and by a 'silence de la chair'.<sup>67</sup> As in *La Femme vierge* then, political activity results in separation from female sexuality. Of course, the fundamental difference between these two positions is that in Pelletier's text, the female subject actively chooses celibacy because of culture's encoding of female sexuality, whereas for Drieu, the politicized female subject is denied a sexual identity because she is simply undesirable.

Myriam, although not characterized in terms of autonomous political commitment like Rébecca, is nonetheless defined in terms of a political identity - decadence - because of her Jewishness. It is through Myriam that the text achieves its most detailed expression of the place of Jewishness in fascist ideology. Myriam is also an example of female autonomy in that she has an active career as a research biologist.<sup>68</sup> Like Rébecca, she is undesirable to Gilles's virile gaze:

il s'apercevait qu'il ne la désirait pas, qu'il ne l'avait jamais désirée. (G, p.67)

N'étant pas désirée, elle n'était plus qu'un amas informe. (G, p.79)

Il n'avait jamais désiré, il ne désirerait jamais une fille frêle et gauche comme Myriam, si ravissante qu'elle fût. (G, p.96)

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<sup>67</sup> Desanti, *Drieu la Rochelle: Du dandy au nazi*, p.85.

<sup>68</sup> Gilles is hostile to Myriam's scientific career because it is indicative both of Myriam's autonomy and of the rationalism he associates with decadence: 'Gilles frémit [...] il eut envie de mordre à cette bouche le mot biologie' (G, p.47).

Here the text goes further to suggest that the not-desired female subject is not really even a woman. The latter quotation suggests that male desire for the female subject is not dependant on externally accepted norms of physical beauty (*ravissante*), but rather on specifically political considerations. Gilles the fascist finds Myriam the bourgeois Jewess equally as repugnant, in ideological terms, as Rébecca. '[F]rêle et gauche' here thus becomes a significantly overdetermined shorthand for all that Gilles finds decadent in Myriam: her race, her autonomy, her rationalist association with science, her civilian, Parisian identity, her alienation from the physical body.

Neither Myriam nor Rébecca are 'toute sensualité', neither is described in terms of voluptuousness, both are undesirable to the virile male gaze. In Drieu's text as in Pelletier's, a negative female sexual identity is equated with political negativity, although there is disagreement over what constitutes a negative female sexual identity: for Pelletier, it is the active exploitation of the female desirable body whereas for Drieu, it is the absence of such a body. Also, in both texts, autonomous female politicization (Rébecca, Marie) results in separation of the female subject from her sexuality. Both texts set apart sexualized, non-politicized female characters from non-sexualized, politicized female characters: Pelletier values the latter and rejects the former, while Drieu clearly rejects the latter but also finds the former politically problematic. I go on to investigate the political function of Drieu's sexualized, non-politicized female characters: I should like first however to consider a second category of women who are undesirable to the virile male gaze - lesbians.

Drieu represents lesbianism unambiguously in terms of decadence when he briefly describes Antoinette's cavorting with 'une vieille lesbienne célèbre', 'cette

opiomane, Nelly Vanneau' (*G*, p.433, p.456).<sup>69</sup> The association with drugs adds to the connotation of decadence. For Drieu, such activities are part and parcel of bourgeois degeneracy - there is no sense in which homosexuality is presented as a potentially constructive attack on the bourgeoisie, as in Thomas's *Le Refus*. Robinson points to a certain relaxation of sexual codes beginning in the last few years of the nineteenth century which led to a tolerance of discrete sexual experimentation amongst safely married upper class women: nothing more radical than this is represented here.<sup>70</sup> Like female heterosexuality, lesbianism is available to the reader via the male gaze - it is through the eyes of Galant and Gilles that we see '[d]es corps de femmes, embrouillés. Des débris de femmes' in the apartment which is dubbed 'ce petit cimetière bourgeois' (*G*, p.458). In few words, Drieu portrays lesbianism unequivocally in terms of degeneracy, self-destruction and death. Drieu establishes an equivalence between lesbianism and the enemy ideology (decadence) just as Pelletier equates lesbianism with her ideological enemy, capitalism. Once more, Drieu offers a negative female sexual identity as an illustration of decadent politics.

In direct opposition to lesbians and to non-sexualized politicized female characters, *Gilles* offers a group of sexualized, non-politicized women towards whose desirable bodies the virile gaze is far from hostile. Such voluptuous femininity finds expression in Gilles's succession of mistresses: Mabel, Alice, Dora, Pauline. Although their sexual identities fulfil a political role in the text in aesthetic terms, these female subjects are non-politicized in that, as characters, they do not attempt autonomous political commitment, as in the case of Rébecca, nor is a particular political-racial

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<sup>69</sup> Paradoxically, Desanti asserts that Drieu had a taste for Nathalie Barney's Parisian lesbian literary *salon*. Desanti, *Drieu la Rochelle: Du dandy au nazi*, p.251.

<sup>70</sup> Robinson, *Scandal in the Ink*, p.23, p.174.

affiliation an essential part of their character, as in the case of Myriam. Rather, their identities are defined by their sexuality - they are indeed 'toute sensualité'. Although they form a cohesive group that might be referred to as 'women desired by Gilles', a close eye must be kept on the different ways in which their sexual identities function politically. Mabel and Alice represent the two extremes of 'bad' sexuality and 'good' sexuality respectively - a comparison of these two characters then will amplify our analysis of the text's political encoding of female sexuality.

In terms of Gilles's desire, Mabel is the antithesis of Myriam: 'Il s'avoua qu'il l'avait toujours trouvée désirable' (*G*, p.92). However the drunken decadence of Gilles's first sexual encounter with Mabel suggests already that the affair will be no more successful in political terms. Already Mabel's sexuality appears as dangerous to the male subject: '[s]es longues mains fortes pressaient la taille de Gilles qui se sentait envahi, violé' (*G*, pp.97-8). Mabel soon reduces Gilles to a 'débauché': 'il la considérait dans son désordre et lui-même demeurait dans le sien' (*G*, p.99). Her sexuality is characterized in similar terms to Antoinette's lesbianism, as degeneracy, disorder, debasement. Those female bodies in the abandoned apartment are anticipated in the following description of Mabel:

Il se laissait aller de temps à autre encore à l'idée qu'il pourrait abandonner son destin à Mabel parce que cette idée se confondait dans son imagination sensuelle avec celle de la jeune femme renversée sur les lits d'un appartement abandonné, jamais tout à fait nue et bouleversée par le plaisir. Le rêve de la déchéance sociale à partager avec elle l'embellissait et la rendait plus désirable' (*G*, p.105)

Mabel's sexuality represents the temptation of decadence.

Again, the desirability of the female subject is dependant on the political value

of the male subject. The question is complicated in the case of Mabel by Gilles's own political ambivalence, his own wavering between decadence and fascism. As a man fascinated by fascism, Gilles does not desire Myriam because she is easily recognizable as the antithesis of fascism. As a man fascinated also by decadence, Gilles desires Mabel, who in her degeneracy is also, more insidiously, the antithesis of fascism. The tension is finally resolved both politically and sexually, since when Gilles comes to his political senses, he no longer desires Mabel:

Tout d'un coup, sa nudité se confondit à ses yeux avec la maigreur de son destin. D'une minute à l'autre, il ne la désira plus. (*G*, p.106)

Il l'avait échappé belle. Une terrible médiocrité l'avait frôlé, avait menacé de le dévorer, cette médiocrité qu'il avait connue avant la guerre (*G*, p.109)

Mabel's sexuality has threatened to engulf the male subject in the wrong sort of politics.<sup>71</sup> Ultimately, Gilles's desire for Mabel is revealed to be of the same order as Paul Morel's desire for Rébecca. However Gilles, who is to achieve a positive political *Bildung*, realizes his mistake; Paul Morel does not. The political loathsomeness of both Paul Morel and Rébecca is mutually reinforced by their sexual liaison - how can Paul desire a woman who is so obviously Russian, and communist, and Jewish? *Dérision*. Gilles escapes such textual opprobrium because Mabel is not primarily a political creature. Our future fascist hero is equal to the challenge, and resists.

Alice on the other hand represents the zenith of the voluptuousness of which Mabel is the nadir. Her sexuality is represented in the same terms as Gilles's fascism:

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<sup>71</sup> In *Gilles*, prostitutes are not threatening to the male subject, even though they are desirable. Prostitutes represent sex separated from subjectivity and as such do no more than service male desire. They offer pleasure in the abstract, which is apolitical.

Le visage, cerné de blanc, était d'une grande beauté. Un nez important, mais magistralement modelé, de grands yeux clairs et libres, à la bouche une noble sensualité. (*G*, p.205)

Her beauty is noble and free; her nurses' uniform comprises *un voile*, ensuring that her medical activities take on the connotation of religious spirituality rather than of decadent scientific rationalism. Furthermore, and most significantly, Alice is associated with combat, the central symbolic locus of virile political activity for Drieu: 'La guerre même, elle la connaissait presque autant que lui' (*G*, p.211). Not for her the hated civilian identity of the decadent capital: 'Alice s'était depuis longtemps détachée de Paris' (*G*, p.223).<sup>72</sup> Reconciled with her body as Myriam is separated from hers, she is '[d]ouée d'une superbe santé, elle aimait manger et boire', and thus she maintains 'la matière excellente de sa chair' (*G*, p.225, p.229). Alice represents everything that the text finds politically praiseworthy, and therefore Gilles 'aimait Alice avec toute sa force de guerre revenue' (*G*, p.210).<sup>73</sup> In Alice, female sexuality seems finally to be allied positively with politics.

David Carroll, in his penetrating analysis of sexuality in Drieu's fiction, places Alice in a privileged position in this respect amongst Drieu's female characters, in opposition to Rébecca: 'At the top of the "racial" and aesthetic hierarchy is the forceful, sexually liberated warrior-woman; at the bottom is the ugly, deceitful, corrupting Jewish communist'.<sup>74</sup> Such a hierarchy is a useful way of conceptualizing the relative political

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<sup>72</sup> Rima Drell Reck, in her 'Drieu La Rochelle's *La Comédie de Charleroi*: A Long View on the Great War', *Romance Quarterly*, 34.3 (August 1987), 285-296, identifies hatred of women with hatred of civilians.

<sup>73</sup> I consider the associations between fascist politics, virility and war in more detail in Chapter 3, pp.226-29.

<sup>74</sup> David Carroll, *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism, Anti-Semitism and the Ideology of Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp.147-70, (p.165).

functions of Drieu's female characters - Myriam would presumably occupy a position slightly higher than Rébecca, Mabel very far below Alice. However, in terms of the overall relationship of female sexuality to politics in *Gilles*, it is important to stress that the top of the female hierarchy does not attain the dizzy heights of male, virile, warring politics. Alice, the closest Drieu comes to an 'ideal woman', serves to demonstrate that, in the final analysis, female sexuality is deemed an inadequate vessel for fascism. For Alice is only familiar with war '*presque* autant que lui': this *presque* is her downfall. 'Et même Alice, qui connaissait les horreurs des hôpitaux, ne pouvait lui donner la satisfaction d'une sympathie exacte' (*G*, p.240): Alice is, after all, only a woman and therefore cannot be a warrior, cannot have access to the political virility which is fascism.<sup>75</sup> Drieu's conclusion is tautological: female sexuality cannot express fascist politics precisely because it is *female*. Therefore Gilles must renounce Alice as he must ultimately renounce all women: 'Il contempla une dernière fois l'image qu'elle lui offrait d'une vie modeste, gaie, ingénue, noble' (*G*, p.240). Female sexuality can only offer precisely this, an image, a pale imitation of fascist nobility, and so Alice is reduced to 'le beau visage [...] qui se décomposait rapidement derrière lui' (*G*, p.241).

*Gilles* shares with *La Femme vierge* an extreme expulsion of female sexuality from the realm of the political. Pelletier's extremism results in a feminist recommendation that the female subject refuse sexuality, as it is culturally encoded in pre-revolutionary inter-war France at least, in order to embrace an autonomous political identity. Drieu's extremism is rather less feminist. His text is more concerned with

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<sup>75</sup> Drieu had already explored this question in *La Comédie de Charleroi* (Paris: Gallimard, 1934): 'Elle ne savait pas ce qu'était la guerre et elle ne voulait pas le savoir. Cela faisait partie de ce domaine des hommes pour lequel les femmes ont si peu de curiosité' (p.55); 'Que sait-on d'une souffrance quand on ne l'a pas ressentie?' (p.55); 'Aucune femme ne partage ma souffrance. Mais savons-nous ce qu'elles sentent quand elles portent et accouchent?' (p.56). For Drieu, the world of the warrior is definitively closed to the female subject, who occupies quite different spheres of experience.

essences than with culture, rejecting the possibility that the politicized female subject could be a desirable object for the virile male gaze, and rejecting also the possibility that the desirable female subject could function as a positive political motif. Both texts effect a separation between female sexuality and politics by constructing a binary typology of female characters where politicized and non-sexualized is opposed to sexualized and non-politicized. Pelletier is perhaps more categorical, less nuanced in her typology than Drieu, since in *Gilles*, all the female characters fulfil both sexual and political roles to some degree; nonetheless the opposition is always clearly perceptible. Although the two texts place an opposite value on the separation of female sexuality and politics, this separation is fundamental to each novel's investigation of gender and politics.

### III

#### *Un roman d'amour?*

Separation between sexuality and politics is announced in the structure of Louise Weiss's *Délivrance*. The text is a first person narrative which follows the evolution of two central female characters, the narrator, Marie, being a vehicle to explore female sexuality and her mentor, Noémi, carrying the political theme. Broadly speaking, the novel traces Marie's inability to make political progress, and Noémi's inability to make sexual progress.

We have seen in Chapter 1 that for Weiss, the power to achieve political transformation is to be found in a uniquely and exclusively female mode of relating to the world and to other people, the goal of this transformation being the inclusion of



women in the polity and a concomitant rejection of war. At the beginning of the novel, the question is posed as to the efficacy of lesbianism as a model for such a relationship. The narrator's response to Noémi has erotic overtones from her first sight of this well-known politician in a newspaper photograph: 'Je portai l'image sous la lampe, la lissant, la caressant' (*D*, p.28). Noémi's body becomes the focus of Marie's erotic fantasies:

L'étoffe moulait ses formes. Moi, je devinais en elle l'amante aux seins fermes, aux hanches drues, sans autre ornement en sa nudité que ses nattes. Mon désir fit un bond et je compris la jouissance d'aimer un être au pouvoir. (*D*, p.92)

However, this text is also categorical in its rejection of any possible political potential of female homosexuality. Noémi gently but firmly rejects Marie's sexual advances because '[l]es lesbiennes sont des impuissantes: nous n'en sommes pas' (*D*, p.94). Not lesbians or not powerless? The phrase remains ambiguous but either way homosexuality and power are deemed to be mutually exclusive. It is clear that the structures of domination and submission which Marie actively desires in her heterosexual relationships also characterize her response to Noémi:

Mon sentiment pour Noémi m'étonnait par sa ressemblance avec mes amours masculines. Androgyne, il oscillait entre les deux stratégies de la domination: la soumission ou l'emprise: c'est que de son inspiratrice émanait une extraordinaire virilité d'esprit; je me délectais en mon goût pour elle. (*D*, p.68)

Marie desires Noémi in the same way as she would desire a man: homosexuality is not distinguished from heterosexuality. *Délivrance* represents homosexual desire in terms of a conventional oppressor/oppressed dichotomy: homosexuality cannot then, for

Weiss, symbolize personal female liberation or political liberation, since the pacifism the text recommends depends precisely on the erasure of the oppressor/oppressed structure on the macro level.

The specifically female mode of relationship that is to guarantee political progress is instead connoted by the maternal role: thus Weiss proposes a feminized politics which will orient humanity towards peace rather than war and which is based on women's life-creating capacities.<sup>76</sup> The lesbianism that is suggested at the beginning of the text might seem to be a more logical motif of Weiss' specifically female political ideal, both theoretically and aesthetically, since maternity implies an initial heterosexual relationship, since it is only the bearing of sons which the text presents as politically enabling, and since the text celebrates the female body as a desirable object only through female eyes. However as we have seen, lesbianism is categorically equated with powerlessness. Lesbianism is effaced in favour of the maternal metaphor which expresses an equivalence between a woman's capacity to create life and pacifism's desire to prevent its destruction. The text's political ideal then is monosexual but not homoerotic. Although rejecting sexualized, embodied lesbianism, *Délivrance* nonetheless attempts to harness the political potential of female specificity and separatism which more recent theorists such as Wittig have equated with female homosexuality. Weiss does not stop at an investigation of the relationship of women and their sexuality to the current political climate, but goes further to propose a new mode of politics.

To assert that Weiss's political ideal is monosexual is to suggest that heterosexual relationships in the text are also likely to be problematic. I have already

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<sup>76</sup> The assertion of a 'natural' link between motherhood and pacifism, and a logical one between feminism and pacifism, gained considerable currency in relation to pacifist politics between the wars. See Chapter 1, pp.31-35.

indicated that heterosexuality and homosexuality equally connote oppression in the case of Marie. She longs for the kind of relational identity which Thomas's Brigitte found so abhorrent. The text suggests that culture offers such an identity to women, and explores the impossibility of fulfilling this role in the cultural context of inter-war France. Marie's existential crisis is the result of the collapse of her identity in the absence of sexual partners:

Depuis que nous avons formé un couple, la notion même de ma personne m'était devenue étrangère. (*D*, p.14)

Privée d'âme ou parfois tellement habitée par la tienne que je n'existais plus (*D*, p.16)

Par amour, je m'étais imprégnée de sa personnalité. (*D*, p.125)

Marie cannot adopt the sexual identity society offers her because of the annihilation of a generation of young men: the embracing of any kind of active heterosexual identity is shown to be problematic for the post-First World War woman because of the deployment of marriage fodder as cannon fodder. This problematic is elucidated at the beginning of the text:

Tant que je ne saurais pas à qui me donner, me dévouer jusqu'à la négation de moi-même, je ne vaudrais rien et toute ma génération me ressemblait. Nous étions des millions de femmes sans maître qui avions erré, hallucinées, à la poursuite d'êtres à chérir, de fantômes qui s'étaient dissous dans la brume. Lasses, nous nous étions enlisées, les unes dans le travail, les autres dans la religion ou la débauche, trois formes de la même solitude. Quelle pitié! (*D*, p.38)

By the end of the text, Marie has not progressed:

Elevée comme toutes les femmes de ma génération par une mère qui n'avait pas vécu seule, pour un foyer où je ne devais pas vivre seule, je me découvrais serve et ne pouvais m'affranchir [...] Je ne m'adapterais pas à la société surgie de la guerre, cette pléthorie de femmes et de gérontes. Je revendiquais un homme pour moi, alors qu'il n'en restait pas un pour chacune de nous et l'exigeais plus fort que moi, alors que tous les vrais mâles gisaient dans les tranchées. (*D*, p.285)

Raised in a culture in which female self-definition was to be achieved only through dependence on a male sexual partner, Marie cannot adapt to her new cultural environment. She exemplifies the problematic of the changing gender roles of 'la femme seule' elucidated by Mary Louise Roberts. Her *Bildung* is the search for a new means of defining her self; Noémi's example of self-definition through politics shows one way of achieving autonomy. However, Marie refuses Noémi's refusal of sexuality which is again an inevitable condition of politicization. Ultimately Marie's *Bildung* is negative: 'Je n'avais rien appris' (*D*, p.266). During a chance meeting with Anselme she reverts to a regressive discourse of self-destruction:

Je t'appartenais si totalement que tu étais devenu moi. (*D*, p.284)

Je concevais que tu me dominais et que cette domination, loi de nos rapports, correspondait au code intérieur de mon existence [...] Mon corps ne valait que magnifié par tes caresses. (*D*, p.286)

Finally choosing abortion as Anselme recommends, Marie also rejects the text's maternal solution. She represents the negation of Weiss's political agenda, refusing both maternity and female emancipation. She fails to change and therefore, locked within a discourse of sexual dependence in the absence of sexual expression, fails to reconstruct her identity.

Noémi on the other hand has avoided the disintegration of the self by embracing an active political identity. However marriage is therefore denied her because it is

socially encoded as female dependence on the male. The dependence which Marie desires is precisely what separates the emancipated female subject from sexuality:

Un homme peut, avec de la chance, rencontrer une compagne dont l'amour, à travers lui, s'unit à la cause qu'il défend, en une sorte de communion idéale et privée; une femme ne peut trouver un tel compagnon, l'abdication n'étant pas le fait d'un amant. (*D*, p.215)

Je comprenais que les hommes puissants ne rencontraient jamais leurs égales et, insatisfaits, se torturaient à les chercher, que les femmes puissantes ne rencontraient jamais leurs supérieurs et demeuraient solitaires, malgré les ferveurs qu'elles suscitaient. (*D*, p.287)

Weiss concurs with Thomas here in her critique of the social manipulation of female sexuality through marriage: for Brigitte, marriage is imbued with bourgeois ideology which is in conflict with her communist beliefs, whilst for Noémi, marriage imposes a relational identity which is in conflict with her political career. Like Brigitte, Noémi explores the possibility of a transgressive sexual identity, but finds it wanting:

Mon second acte de courage [...] fut de renouer librement avec le plaisir. Ma tradition le mêlait à l'amour si intimement que, malgré mon mariage qui l'en avait dissocié, je fus longue à me résoudre à cette décision. (*D*, pp.218-19)

Noémi's attempt to desacrilize pleasure by detaching it from marriage comes up against the implacable force of culture. Furthermore, promiscuity cannot provide a long-term solution since '[o]n se lasse de la volupté indispensable à la santé de l'esprit plus jeune' (*D*, p.219). Ultimately then, Noémi is denied access to a viable sexual identity. She is 'désintégrée de sa chair' (*D*, p.288). Even her relationship with Christian, her companion, offers a maternal rather than a sexual identification: 'plus encore que mon amant, il est mon enfant' (*D*, pp.311-12). Through Noémi, Weiss suggests that the notion of a

politicized female subject is better expressed through a maternal metaphor than through a sexual one.

An article in *Minerva* soon after the publication of *Délivrance* offers the following summary of the text:

[...] ce livre où s'harmonisent si heureusement les élans d'un cœur de femme et d'une sensibilité blessée et la clarté d'une intelligence lucide, familiarisée avec les plus grands problèmes de l'heure. Cri de révolte et cri de désespoir, avertissement, le livre de Louise Weiss nous apporte tout cela en mêlant le drame individuel au vaste drame collectif qui enfievre le monde.<sup>77</sup>

Noémi's story constitutes a 'cri de révolte' against the ways in which culture defines women's experience of their sexuality, Marie's a 'cri de désespoir'. The 'avertissement' offered by the text concerns the dangers which face the female subject who is obliged by post-First World War culture to find a path between a relational sexual identity which precludes female autonomy, and an independent, politically active role which renders the assumption of a female sexual identity highly problematic. Weiss differs from Pelletier and Thomas in that the 'solution' her text offers to the incompatibility of female sexuality and politics is not celibacy but 'la maternité libre'. Although acknowledging that, in the contemporary cultural and political climate, the politicized female subject must forgo physical expression of her sexuality, the text will not accept the stifling of the emotional aspect of sexuality, transferring it instead onto a maternal identification which is in turn associated with politics. Exclusion from sexuality is seen to be a tragedy; erotic love is not to be rejected, as in *Le Refus* and *La Femme vierge*, but rather rechannelled. Perhaps

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<sup>77</sup> *Minerva*, 3 January 1937, *Dossier Louise Weiss*, BMD.

then, in the final analysis, we are dealing here with ‘un roman d’amour’.<sup>78</sup>

### *Cri d’espoir?*

A strong tendency exists within Malraux studies to read *La Condition humaine* as presenting, through the character of May, an ideal of female erotic love and political commitment.<sup>79</sup> May is often presented as an incarnation of successful female opposition to the kind of relational identity Weiss’s Marie exemplifies. Micheline Herz for example, in an article entitled ‘Woman’s Fate’, has maintained:

In a way, May as a character is an adventure in a virgin field. She represents the ideal of the times to come, a brand of woman which does not quite exist yet, at least on a large scale. Malraux, before Simone de Beauvoir, is perhaps the first writer to attempt such a portrayal.<sup>80</sup>

Robert W. Greene has dubbed May ‘the high-water mark in his [Malraux’s] exploration of the status of women’, concluding that:

in the end she represents, more starkly than ever before, the inexorable rise of someone who will finally be heard, of that traditionally most censored Other, that ideal and yet real alternative subjectivity, the self-liberated woman.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> ‘Un roman d’amour, avant tout un roman d’amour, m’a dit Mme Louise Weiss’ states Noël Sabord in a review of the text entitled ‘*Délivrance* ou le drame d’un double avortement’, *Paris-Midi*, 29 November 1936, *Dossier Louise Weiss*, BMD.

<sup>79</sup> André Malraux, *La Condition humaine*, 2nd edn (Paris: Gallimard, 1946; first published Paris: Gallimard, 1933). Further references to the 1946 edition of this work are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>80</sup> Micheline Herz, ‘Woman’s Fate’, *Yale French Studies*, 18 (1957), 7-19 (p.16). Herz’s title refers to the English translation of the novel’s title as *Man’s Fate*; Malraux’s 1937 novel *L’Espoir* has correspondingly been translated as *Man’s Hope*.

<sup>81</sup> Robert W. Greene, ‘Women and Words in *La Condition humaine*’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 46.2 (June 1985), 161-80 (p.163, p.180).

If Malraux really was the first to investigate, fictionally, the intersections between political activity and female subjectivity, then Louise Weiss was hot on his heels, three years after the publication of *La Condition humaine*, with Noémi. The question I should like to put to Malraux's text in the light of critical evaluations such as those I have quoted concerns the extent to which May can be said to constitute a resolution of the problems posed by Weiss, through her portrayal of Noémi and Marie, regarding the sexual possibilities of the politicized female subject and the political possibilities of the sexualized female subject. If Noémi articulates a 'cri de révolte' and Marie a 'cri de désespoir', to what extent can May be said to articulate a 'cri d'espoir'?

Like *Délivrance*, *La Condition humaine* shows an awareness of the problems posed by culture in relation to female sexuality and to female politicization. This awareness finds expression mostly in the reactions of male characters to the women they encounter. Malraux is mindful of 'la misogynie fondamentale de presque tous les hommes' exemplified by 'le très vieux Chinois' with whom Gisors discusses women (*CH*, p.47). As is the case in the work of Drieu and Nizan, female sexuality often appears as a means of male recreation. The 'dancing-girl en rouge' brought to Tchen's attention after the murder which opens the text prefigures a succession of prostitutes frequented by such characters as Clappique and Ferral; Gisors's relating of the murder to Tchen's first sexual experience raises the question of the necessity of prostitutes in Chinese culture for male sexual initiation. Women are, in the cultural environment in which the text is situated, actual commodities for exchange: the sale of Hemmelreich's wife and the activities of the woman trader whom Kyo meets in prison recall Brigitte's escape from the bourgeois marriage market. The autonomy of women and their sexuality then are



shown to be constantly threatened. In the political domain, the text presents women as a constraint on male action. Hemmelreich dare not risk the lives of his wife and child by sheltering Tchen and his comrades after the first failed attempt on the life of Chang-Kai-Shek, but cannot reconcile himself to this limitation imposed on his political activities. After their murder, Hemmelreich suffers the agony of conflicting feelings of horror and liberation (*CH*, p.215). In prison, Katow is pleased not to have to worry about dependents (*CH*, p.254). The text acknowledges then that women are often confined to a relational, sexual identity and that political action is in general perceived to be the domain of the men on whom they depend. The absence of female characters from the novel's combat scenes calls to mind the almost total absence of female characters from Malraux's *L'Espoir*, a text which is firmly rooted in the notion of combat and virile fraternity.<sup>82</sup>

Herz formulates the question as follows:

if Malraux has no real heroines, it is [...] because the realm of action in terms of violence and adventure is closed to women - and it is in terms of violence and adventure that Malraux searches for the solution of his self-made riddle.<sup>83</sup>

*La Condition humaine* recognises, and on one level does not oppose, the inaccessibility of the realm of action to the female subject.

However the text also presents two women who do demand their right to autonomy, their right to be more than just their sexuality. Valérie expresses precisely the resolution of Weiss's dilemmas in her letter to Ferral, when she asserts, '[j]e suis aussi

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<sup>82</sup> I consider *L'Espoir* in more detail in Chapter 3, pp.173-80, in terms of the relationships the text establishes between male sexuality and politics.

<sup>83</sup> Herz, 'Woman's Fate', p.10.

ce corps que vous voulez que je sois *seulement*' (CH, p.184).<sup>84</sup> In words which mirror May's 'Ai-je vécu comme une femme qu'on protège' (CH, p.172), Valérie insists, '[j]e ne suis pas une femme qu'on a' (CH, p.184): both women then reject, grammatically and existentially, the position of the object of male subjectivity so desired by Marie, and claim the subject position for themselves. In the case of Valérie, her realm of action is professional and financial since her autonomy is based on her success in the fashion industry and her resulting wealth. May is more interesting to the present analysis, since the field of her action is politics: as well as working as a doctor, she is committed to the revolution. May then is composed both of a sexual identity - wife and active sexual partner of Kyo, sexual partner of Lenglen - and a political identity - belief in the ideals of the revolution, support for Kyo's political activities. The question which concerns us here is that of the interaction between these two identities. Is it possible to assert a happy coexistence of sexuality and politics in the character of May, and thus to read *La Condition humaine* as *Woman's Hope*? A brief exchange between May and Kyo during the passage where May first appears in the novel suggests precisely such a linking of sexuality and political action: '- Plus il y a de blessés, plus l'insurrection approche, plus on couche. - Bien entendu' (CH, p.43). The point is proved directly, when this assertion turns out to be a prelude to May's confession of her own infidelity with Lenglen. Revolution seems to result in heightened female sexual activity, and furthermore, the woman in question is also politically active. Is it possible then that the Kyo-May relationship offers an ideal of female politicization which incorporates both Noémi's active commitment and the active sexual identity that eludes her?

The short answer is, unfortunately not. To claim the relationship as an ideal is to

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<sup>84</sup> For a close reading of Valérie's letter to Ferral, see Herz, 'Woman's Fate', pp.13-14 and Greene, 'Women and Words in *La Condition humaine*', pp.175-77.

fail to take account of Kyo's attitude to May. For Kyo too expresses a reactionary viewpoint as regards female politicization. The politicized female is part man, part woman:<sup>85</sup>

May entra. Son manteau de cuir bleu, d'une coupe presque militaire, accentuait ce qu'il y avait de viril dans sa marche et même dans son visage - bouche large, nez court, pommettes marquées des Allemandes du Nord [...] Le front très dégagé, lui aussi, avait quelque chose de masculin, mais depuis qu'elle avait cessé de parler elle se féminisait (*CH*, p.42)

That which is active ('sa marche') is masculine, that which is passive ('son silence') is feminine.<sup>86</sup> Secondly, Kyo effects a separation between female sexuality and politics in his gendered conception of freedom: for him, male freedom is achieved in the realm of political action whilst female freedom is a sexual question. In the exchange concerning Kyo's attempt to prevent May from accompanying him to the meeting (the journey during which he is in fact arrested), he conceives of his freedom to engage alone in political action to be equivalent to May's freedom to sleep with whoever she likes (*CH*, pp.169-71). He does not relate his own politicization to any political freedom she might claim for herself. And, perhaps more importantly from the point of view of her own politicization, May does not contest the association. This separation of politics from female sexuality is replicated in the prison scene, where heterosexual love appears as a symbol of escape from political action: 'La lancinante fuite dans la tendresse des corps noués pour la première fois jaillissait, hélas! dès qu'il pensait à elle' (*CH*, p.255). Such

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<sup>85</sup> For a reading of May in terms of masculinity, see Susan R. Suleiman, 'Malraux's Women: A Re-Vision', in *Witnessing Malraux, Visions and Re-Visions*, ed. by Brian Thompson and Carl A. Viggiani (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), pp.124-46 and Anne Greenfield, 'Wives, Mothers and the Mirror Stage in *La Condition humaine* and *Le Temps du mépris*', *French Forum*, 21.2 (May 1996), 231-43.

<sup>86</sup> It is noteworthy that this masculinization of the female subject in Malraux's text does not inevitably imply undesirability, as we have seen to be the case in Drieu la Rochelle's writing.

an escape is directly opposed to 'amour viril', also represented in sexualized terms, which is the pinnacle of political action, manifested here in incarceration and eventual death for one's political beliefs: 'Gémir avec cette foule couchée, rejoindre jusque dans son murmure de plaintes cette souffrance sacrifiée...' (CH, p.256). Woman then is associated with a sexual tenderness which constitutes an escape from the political, whilst man is associated with a suffering which is expressed in sexual terms (*gémir, couchée, murmure, plaintes*) which constitutes precisely the political realm from which woman offers an escape. Woman in her sexual capacity is once again placed in a binary opposition to man in his political capacity.

This separation between female sexuality and politics on the level of representation is repeated in terms of characterization in the factual events of May's life. When Kyo is alive and May is engaged in an active sexual relationship with him, she is relegated to a relational political identity, a mere appendage, and not a very useful one at that, to Kyo's political activities. His response to her suggestion that she accompany him on his ultimately fatal journey speaks volumes: 'Pour quoi faire?', 'Tu ne serviras à rien' (CH, p.169). The fact that she is not arrested with him indicates that she is not considered to be a political danger.<sup>87</sup> May does achieve autonomous political action once Kyo is dead, but her commitment represents an incorrect political choice, and it deprives her of her sexuality. '[L]asse de soigner', tired of playing a supporting role, May decides to carry on the revolutionary struggle in Russia (CH, p.279). But this political course of action runs contrary to the commitment recommended by the text. As Lucien Goldman

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<sup>87</sup> May is thus denied the opportunity to make the ultimate sacrifice for her political beliefs. May comes up against the same prejudice that Thomas perceives in relation to the Spanish Civil war, that women are not permitted to die for the cause. Greenfield, in her 'Wives, Mothers and the Mirror Stage', suggests that 'Kyo wants his wife to die *as part of his own death*' (p.238): what is more important to note is that the female subject is in fact denied this course of action.

points out, the revolutionary politics of the insurrectionists is valorized *as opposed to* adherence to Communist Party line.<sup>88</sup> May then makes the wrong political choice, according to the text's *thèse*, by aligning herself with Moscow. Furthermore, in the privileged position of the novel's closing page she declares, 'Je ne vais pas là-bas pour aimer' (*CH*, p.284): her incorrect political choice also prohibits sexuality.<sup>89</sup> There is no sense in which May's celibacy is an active political choice, after the model of Thomas's Brigitte or Pelletier's Marie. May is passively deprived of a sexual identity because of the death of her husband; furthermore, when Kyo was alive she was happy to accept the relational nature of her politics which resulted from her sexual identity. May perhaps articulates, like Noémi, a 'cri de révolte' against cultural prescriptions about female subjectivity, but in terms of the questions raised by *Délivrance* and by the other texts this chapter has read, no 'cri d'espoir' rings out. Herz unintentionally expresses the separation of female sexuality and politics which characterizes all these texts to some degree, and which May also inadvertently represents: her (political) adventure is ultimately played out on a virgin field.



The unifying thread which links the politically diverse novels with which this chapter has been concerned is their common separation of female sexuality from politics. This separation manifests itself, as we have seen, in various different ways, but remains

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<sup>88</sup> Goldman, *Pour une sociologie du roman*, p.161.

<sup>89</sup> Greenfield, in her Lacanian reading of Kyo's psyche in 'Wives, Mothers and the Mirror Stage', makes much of the feelings of loss suffered by Kyo because of May's sexual infidelity. Reading May as an autonomous female character, her own loss of Kyo is of central importance to her political and sexual identity.

a common denominator. Thomas equates the embracing of celibacy with the positive assumption of female political commitment because female sexuality is too much tainted with the enemy ideology. Similarly, Pelletier links the expression of female sexuality with oppression and equates celibacy with effective political action. Weiss regrets the exclusion of the politicized female subject from sexuality, and therefore rechannels the emotion usually invested in eroticism into a maternal identification, which in turn serves as a model for a new mode of politics. Nicholas Hewitt isolates a literary tradition dating back to the Naturalist novels of the second half of the nineteenth century in which a daughter of the bourgeoisie expresses her rebellion against her social and cultural roots through the embracing of sexual freedom.<sup>90</sup> These novels stand in direct opposition to this tradition. The relationship between female sexuality and politics appears more negatively in the male-authored texts. Here, where representations of politicized female subjects are rare, the reader's expectation that female characters will be simply unthinking, unengaged sexual creatures is not often disappointed. Nizan presents an exceptional female subject who is offered the possibility of politicization, but refuses to politicize her sexual identity. Drieu la Rochelle's politicized female characters are monstrously undesirable; his desirable women do not have politics as part of their experience and their sexuality always functions negatively in aesthetic terms in relation to his political agenda. There is no doubt that Malraux's *May* represents progress, in feminist terms, as regards the representation of women in political texts, compared with the novels of, say, Drieu. However, his supposedly ideal female politicized subject is content to accept the fact that whilst a wife, her freedom is defined in terms of sexuality rather than politics, and her politics is inferior to that of her husband. Furthermore, her politics is ultimately revealed

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<sup>90</sup> Hewitt, 'Victor Marguerite and the Reception of *La Garçonne*', p.48,

to be in contradiction with the text's thesis.

Mindful always of culture's definitions of female sexuality, *Le Refus*, *La Femme vierge* and *Délivrance* suggest that once the female subject assumes a political identity, the possibility is opened up that the political meanings with which a given society invests female sexuality will be in contradiction with that political identity and thus she will be alienated from her sexuality. They differ from their male counterparts in two important respects. Firstly, this alienation is seen to be historically and culturally specific and therefore temporary: for Thomas it is a problem specific to the pre-communist bourgeoisie, for Pelletier it is a problem of the pre-revolutionary epoch and for Weiss, a problem of the post-First World War and pre-feminist period. All three texts look forward to a reconciliation between female sexuality and politics once the political problems with which they are concerned have been resolved. Secondly, these texts all suggest the genesis of some constructive possibility, in terms of female politicization, out of that alienation. For both Thomas and Pelletier, celibacy is clearly politically enabling. Weiss's solution is maternal rather than celibate, but her proposition of a new, specifically female mode of relationship as the way forward for politics similarly arises out of the politicized female subject's alienation from sexuality. All three then propose a willed separation of the female subject from her sexuality in order to achieve a positive political goal. But they achieve much more than what Cora Kaplan terms a 'temporary expedient', namely 'the rejection of woman's pleasure as inextricably bound to her dependent and deferential status'.<sup>91</sup> Kaplan begins her investigation of feminism's response to the problem of female sexuality by suggesting:

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<sup>91</sup> Cora Kaplan, 'Wild nights: pleasure/sexuality/feminism', in *The Ideology of Conduct: Essays in Literature and the History of Sexuality*, ed. by Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (New York: Methuen, 1987), pp.160-84 (p.161).

How difficult it is to uncouple the terms pleasure and sexuality. How much more difficult, once uncoupled, to re-imagine woman as the subject, pleasure as her object, if that object was *not* sexual.<sup>92</sup>

Thomas, Weiss and Pelletier may temporarily reject female sexuality but they do not reject female pleasure. In political terms, they do see female sexuality as being inextricably bound to female dependence and deferentiality, but they assert a very real possibility of its uncoupling from pleasure and conceive of politics as the pleasurable object of their subjectivity. In short, female pleasure is displaced from sexuality to politics. Consider Brigitte's sudden experience of physical exhilaration once the letter which contains her final rejection of Pierre and all he stands for has been sent: 'Elle se mit à courir jusqu'à ce qu'elle sentit une brûlure dans sa gorge et dans sa trachée' (*R*, p.246) The waves crashing onto the deck of the boat which carries her to England and her new political identity offer similar exhilaration:

Mais le vent violent lui battait le visage et ses lèvres brûlaient et l'eau en séchant, laissait des plaques de sel sur ses vêtements et les mèches de ses cheveux venaient dans sa bouche, toutes salées. (*R*, p.250)

Consider Marie's pleasure in her independence (even if it is rather less elegantly expressed): 'elle se dit avec joie qu'elle a réussi à s'organiser une existence très acceptable. Elle remarque qu'elle ne pleure jamais, elle qui a tant pleuré dans son enfance' (*FV*, p.115). Marie-Victoire Louis suggests that, in the case of Pelletier herself, her singular situation as a politicized and emancipated female was a source of pleasure which certainly compensated for the absence of sexual desire: 'Si elle refoula ses désirs, la conscience d'être exceptionnelle, ne fut-elle pas, pour elle, aussi, une forme de

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<sup>92</sup> *ibid.*, pp.160-61.



plaisir?'.<sup>93</sup> Unlike all the other women in the text who privilege sexuality over politics and autonomy, 'Marie est heureuse' (*FV*, p.114). Finally, let us consider the vocabulary of pleasure used by Weiss's Marie to recount Noémi's description of her coming to politics, and Noémi's own paradoxical joy when she burns the reminders of the child whose death has inspired her politics: 'Emportée par sa foi maternelle, elle m'entraînait vers d'autres extases'; 'Le celluloïde des joujoux crépita avec une sorte de joie' (*D*, p.221). Noémi describes her political pilgrimage as 'ma passion' (*D*, p.224).

This reappropriation of female pleasure can be seen as a response to the predominantly negative political inscription of female sexuality which we have seen exemplified in the novels of Nizan, Drieu and Malraux: that female sexuality is irrelevant to, or a simple distraction from politics; the association of female sexuality with the antithesis of the political ideology recommended by the text; the fact that the politics of the female subject who attempts simultaneously to live sexually and politically is inferior both to her sexuality and to male politicization. Feminist literary criticism has often focused on women's engagement with, and attempts to rewrite, the traditions of narrative that have been formed out of a predominantly male canon.<sup>94</sup> In their attempts to rewrite narrative traditions of political fiction, Thomas, Pelletier and Weiss all privilege the role of 'la femme seule' as the only one compatible with female politicization. Neither Thomas, Pelletier nor Weiss appropriate for women the close identifications between sexuality and politics which seem to characterize male politicization. Rather, they suggest a constructive alternative to that tradition which is more than a simple regendering of its terms. The coincidence of male sexuality and politics is the subject of investigation in the

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<sup>93</sup> Marie-Victoire Louis, 'Sexualité et prostitution', in *Logique et infortunes d'un combat pour l'égalité*, ed. by Bard, pp.109-25 (p.125).

<sup>94</sup> On this question, see Walker, *The Disobedient Writer*.

following chapter.

## CHAPTER THREE

*DULCE ET DECORUM EST...: POLITICS AND MALE SEXUALITY.*

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,-  
 My friend, you would not tell us with such high zest  
 The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*  
*Pro patria mori.*

Wilfred Owen

I have seen and endured the sufferings of the troops, and I can no longer  
 be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil  
 and unjust.

Siegfried Sassoon<sup>1</sup>

Siegfried Sassoon's publishing of these words, amongst others in the same anti-war vein, in the national press in Britain in 1917 gained this holder of the Military Cross a sojourn at Craiglockhart War Hospital for Neurasthenic Officers, dubbed 'Dottyville'. There he met Wilfred Owen who, during his stay, wrote what was to become one of the most famous poems to emerge from the Great War, his '*Dulce et decorum est*'. Horace had found his way into the French national consciousness in 1848 in the refrain to the 'Chant des Girondins', which overtook the *Marseillaise* in popularity at that time: 'Mourir pour la patrie, c'est le sort le plus beau, le plus digne

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Martin Gilbert, *First World War* (London: Harper Collins, 1994), pp.351-52. For a specifically French angle, see *Anthology of First World War French Poetry*, ed. by Ian Higgins (Glasgow: University of Glasgow French and German Publications, 1996) and his *Anthology of Second World War French Poetry* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow French and German Publications, 1994).

d'envie'.<sup>2</sup> Alistair Horne notes that the French soldiers of 1914 marched with this refrain on their lips.<sup>3</sup> However, the sheer horror of trench warfare ultimately shook many men's belief in the Horatian exemplar according to which they had been recruited through propaganda campaigns which in Britain were exemplified by the famous recruiting poster by Alfred Leete, featuring Lord Kitchener. 'To die for the fatherland is a sweet thing and becoming': your country needs you to be ready to die for your patriotism.<sup>4</sup> Sassoon had lost faith in the political imperatives of the slaughter; Owen had lost faith in the authority of those who sent men to their deaths from the comfort and safety of the home front.

'Dottyville' cared for soldiers suffering from neurasthenia, a now outmoded term describing chronic fatigue and depression manifested as mental disorder; in layman's terms, nervous breakdown. The neurosis which came to be termed 'shell shock' resulted when the male subject found himself not only unable to cope with the violent spectacle of warfare, but also unable to cope with that very inability to cope. Unable to integrate his 'failure' into received notions of masculinity as, precisely, coping, that is, holding together in extreme situations, exhibiting 'bravery', the male subject's gender identity was experienced as insecure. Elaine Showalter has described shell shock as 'the first large-scale epidemic of male hysteria', quite the opposite of

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<sup>2</sup> *Chants Patriotiques*, 'Plaisir de chanter' collection, Librairie Hachette, Disque 160 E 004.

<sup>3</sup> Alistair Horne, *The Price of Glory: Verdun 1916*, 2nd edn (London: Penguin Books, 1993), p.17.

<sup>4</sup> Horace, *Odes*, III, ii, 13. The translation is that quoted by Gilbert, for which no source is indicated. C.E.Bennet suggests 'Tis sweet and glorious to die for the fatherland' in *Horace: The Odes and Epodes* (London: Heineman, 1914), p.175; Lord Dunsany and Michael Oakley have 'A sweet and seemly thing it is to die for the fatherland' in *The Collected Works of Horace*, Everyman's Library (London: Dent and Sons, 1961), p.55.

poetic representations of the war in terms of 'strong, unreflective masculinity'.<sup>5</sup> Soldiers's experiences of fear and loss of control provoked by trench warfare could not be reconciled with this latter definition of male identity. Showalter offers the following analogy, rich in gender implications:

If it was the essence of manliness not to complain, then shell shock was the body language of masculine complaint, a disguised male protest, not only against the war, but against the concept of manliness itself. Epidemic female hysteria in late Victorian England had been a form of protest against a patriarchal society that enforced confinement to a narrowly defined femininity; epidemic male hysteria in World War I was a protest against the politicians, generals, and psychiatrists.<sup>6</sup>

And also, presumably, against the incompatibility between the view of masculinity proposed in the discourses of the latter and the intolerable situations into which they placed their men. The death they were to die soaked in mud at the mercy of anonymous automatic weapons, alienated from the enemy, was not a 'masculine' death; it was passive rather than active. The results of the research of W.H.R. Rivers, the doctor responsible for Sassoon at Craiglockheart, indicated that immobility was a significant common denominator amongst victims of shell shock: those who had been confined to passive stasis for long periods with no possibility of action were most at risk.<sup>7</sup>

Michelle Perrot has suggested a historical context of 'masculinity crisis' into

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<sup>5</sup> Showalter, 'Rivers and Sassoon: The Inscription of Male Gender Anxieties', p.63.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p.64. Freud considers the relationship between war neurosis and hysteria in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols (London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953-74), XVIII, 7-64 (pp.12-13).

<sup>7</sup> Eric Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp.163-92 (p.182). On the question of shell shock, see also Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, pp.107-23.

which war neurosis can be integrated. The male subject was already dealing with the threat of the 'femme moderne' and her new sexual and economic liberation, the risk that she might disrupt long-established gender roles.<sup>8</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert, in a similar vein, notes that post-First World War masculinity trauma can be understood in the context of a European gender imbalance: whilst eight and a half million European men were dead and thirty seven and a half million wounded, women across Europe were being granted the vote.<sup>9</sup> Woman was arrogating for herself part of male power at a time when man was vulnerable. Gilbert also points to a specifically sexual aspect to masculinity trauma as it manifested itself in literature:

From Lawrence's paralysed Clifford Chatterley to Hemmingways's [sic] sadly emasculated Jake Barnes to Eliot's mysteriously sterile Fisher King, the gloomily bruised modernist antiheroes churned out by the war suffer specifically from sexual wounds, as if, having traveled [sic] literally or figuratively through No Man's Land, all have become not just No Men, nobodies, but *not* men, *unmen*. That twentieth-century Everyman, the faceless cipher, their authors seem to suggest, is not just publicly powerless, he is privately impotent.<sup>10</sup>

General feelings of fear and lack of control were inscribed on the level of the sexual. Gilbert also raises the question as to the place of woman in relation to traumatized masculinity and male sexuality. She suggests that the lover could appear to be more enemy than the enemy:

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<sup>8</sup> Michelle Perrot, 'The New Eve and the Old Adam: Changes in French Women's Condition at the Turn of the Century' in *Behind the Lines*, ed. by Higonnet et al., pp.51-60 (p.57).

<sup>9</sup> Gilbert, 'Soldier's Heart', p.223.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p.198.

Because wives, mothers, and sweethearts were safe on the homefront, did the war appear in some peculiar sense their fault, a ritual sacrifice to their victorious femininity?

Horace is rewritten: 'Dulce et decorum est pro *matria* mori'.<sup>11</sup> Traumatic male experiences of mortality, physical mutilation and loss of control which could manifest themselves as sexual wounds confusingly appeared to have as their sole justification the protection of idle femininity which had once been the focus of their eroticism. Susan Gubar takes up such themes in her analysis of Second World War literature, defining the only positive role for women as follows:

The good woman in the literature of the Second World War is therefore the woman whose sexual accessibility, compliancy, or loyalty reinstates the man's sense of his masculinity without this confusion of love and death, sex and murder.<sup>12</sup>

However, the male subject did not necessarily find this sort of satisfaction:

many literary men bemoaned the inefficacy of love and mourned the insufficiency of women in an absurd universe from which the only exit was a bonding born of brotherhood.<sup>13</sup>

And therefore, part of the sexual manifestation of war neurosis was the need to deal with relationships with men which threatened to spill over into the problematic realm of the homoerotic. It is clear then that the male subject's experience of war is inscribed

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p.199, p.209.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Gubar, "This Is My Rifle, This Is My Gun": World War II and the Blitz on Women', in *Behind the Lines*, ed. by Higonet et al., pp.227-59 (pp.251-52).

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p.251.

with issues of gender and sexuality.

## I

### *The dominant fiction*

Much of the work that has been undertaken about masculinity in the first half of the twentieth century has focused on the male subject's relationship to war. The theoretical issues raised by such studies are those around which the literary analyses of the present chapter also turn; I should like however to shift the focus a little, rewriting Horace again to read, *Dulce et decorum est pro fides mori*. Is it equally sweet and becoming for the male subject to die for his political beliefs? Or rather, how might the stereotype of masculinity invoked by *Dulce et decorum est*, and to which war trauma was a response, relate to politics? The work of Joanna Bourke suggests certain links between war, politics and masculinity indexed by attitudes towards the male body. Wartime concern about 'the military purpose of the body' led to 'a view of the male body as an instrument of authority and status' which survived well into the post-First World War period.<sup>14</sup> The fighting body must be strong and capable. Furthermore, this authoritative military body can be inscribed with discourses of patriotism: the economic and social progress of the homeland are assured by the capacities of the ideal masculine body produced by military training.<sup>15</sup> The stereotype of military masculinity corresponds to the stereotype of political masculinity. The coincidence is underlined

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<sup>14</sup> Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, p.209.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p.176, p.192.



by the prevailing view that citizenship can be bought through military activity, that those who would not or could not fight should not vote.<sup>16</sup> And the conflation of the roles of soldier and citizen might also be seen to be indexed by the fact that male bodies killed on active service become the property of the state in terms of responsibility for burial and commemoration.<sup>17</sup> These facets of the treatment of the male body in war point to a coincidence between the relationship of masculinity to war and the relationship of masculinity to politics: the same logic of male adequacy governs both.

In approaching these issues, I draw upon the work of Kaja Silverman whose concept of the 'dominant fiction' of masculinity offers a useful theoretical model for investigating questions of male sexuality and war, and by extension, I should like to argue, politics.<sup>18</sup> Silverman illustrates her theory with reference to three films of the immediate post-Second World War period in which a crisis in masculinity is revealed to the male subject by his failure to reintegrate himself into civilian society after the war. I diverge from the original somewhat in using Silverman's theory to investigate texts which are neither post-Second World War nor 'post-politics':<sup>19</sup> rather, the texts in the present study suggest a reading of the significance of male sexuality *during* politics, in the thick of political commitment. However, the relevance of Silverman's analysis of traumatic masculinity to texts dating from an epoch all too familiar with the

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, pp.77-78.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p.211.

<sup>18</sup> Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (London: Routledge, 1992). Silverman elucidates her concept of the dominant fiction in Part I, 'Ideology and Masculinity', pp.13-121. Also relevant is Silverman's earlier article, 'Historical Trauma and Male Subjectivity', in *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: Routledge, 1990), pp.110-27.

<sup>19</sup> 'Inter-war' is in this context a peculiar classification since it suggests a sense of both pre-war and post-war.

sorts of post-First World War traumas I have been considering will, I hope, emerge clearly.

Silverman's theory is founded on the Lacanian premise that all subjectivity is based on lack, and that identity or selfhood is an illusion based on a series of misrecognitions, or *méconnaissance* in Lacanian terminology. Body image is central to the subject's hiding from itself the truth of lack. The dominant fiction consists in the conflation of the penis with the phallus.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the truth of castration - the fact that no individual can in reality possess the phallus, which represents ultimate control and adequacy - is hidden from the male subject. Stereotypical masculinity is based on a misrecognition which is confirmed for the male subject by his biological possession of the penis. The dominant fiction offers a cohesive totality and unity of identity to the male subject: the phallus is a guarantee of homogeneity.

Silverman derives the term 'dominant fiction' from Jacques Rancière.<sup>21</sup> 'Dominant' suggests acceptance by the social community; 'fiction' suggests illusion. Rancière offers the idea that the dominant fiction is created and sustained in aesthetic discourses - stories, images, films, literature, popular culture and so on - which leads Silverman to describe the dominant fiction as 'a "bank" of representations' which induce *méconnaissance*.<sup>22</sup> She specifies that the dominant fiction is 'the representational system by means of which the subject typically assumes a sexual identity, and takes on the desires commensurate with that identity'. More precisely:

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<sup>20</sup> The most important Lacanian source in this context is 'La Signification du phallus' in Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966), pp.685-95.

<sup>21</sup> Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, pp.29-31.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p.31.

Our dominant fiction calls upon the male subject to see himself, and the female subject to recognize and desire him, only through the mediation of images of unimpaired masculinity. It urges both the male and the female subject, that is, to deny all knowledge of castration by believing in the commensurability of penis and phallus, actual and symbolic father.<sup>23</sup>

Three elements of the above quotation should be stressed. Firstly, the notion of 'unimpaired masculinity': the dominant fiction of masculinity is a constant identification of the male subject with control and adequacy. Secondly, the relevance of images: the male subject is aided in this identification by the repertoire of representations which present the coincidence of penis and phallus as a fact. Thirdly, the role of the female subject: Silverman suggests that the male subject may also secure his belief in the (fictitious) coincidence of penis and phallus by projecting the lack which is in fact the traumatic truth of his own subjectivity onto the female, that is, by defining woman as castration. Furthermore, the female may be called upon to reinforce the penis-phallus identification by expressing her own belief in this *méconnaissance*.<sup>24</sup> This echoes Gubar's point about the 'good woman'.

Silverman's thesis is that 'history may manifest itself in so traumatic and unassimilable a guise that it temporarily dislocates penis from phallus'.<sup>25</sup> She presents the Second World War as an example of such 'historical trauma' which brings about a loss of belief in the adequacy of the male subject. 'Historical trauma' is defined as:

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, pp.41-42.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, pp.44-48.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p.47.

any historical event [...] which brings a large group of men into such an intimate relation with lack that they are at least for the moment unable to sustain an imaginary relation with the phallus, and so withdraw their belief from the dominant fiction.<sup>26</sup>

According to this definition, the phenomenon of shell shock indicates that the First World War can equally be read as a moment of historical trauma; shell shock then is the psychic manifestation of a loss of belief in the coincidence of penis and phallus. Bourke points to some historical evidence that part of the trauma of the First World War was experienced in sexual terms by the returning soldier:

To be in the company of women was 'strange'. In some cases there was nothing to say. The strain of war had 'desexed' men, rendering them impotent. Pity in the eyes of women was resented. So was women's power.<sup>27</sup>

The loss of belief in male adequacy could easily be mapped on to a failure to communicate, both physically and emotionally, with women, and that loss of belief was integrated into an awareness of the threat posed by the new roles women were adopting in post-war society. The conflation of penis and phallus could not be maintained when sexual activity was problematic and women were usurping the social roles which had previously guaranteed men access to images of themselves as powerful and controlling.

Silverman argues that the films on which she focuses her analysis all demonstrate a loss of belief in the dominant fiction by presenting male subjects directly confronted with the truth of castration. The films in question are William Wyler's *The*

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p.55.

<sup>27</sup> Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, p.166.

*Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) and Henry Levin's *The Guilt of Janet Ames* (1947). Their male protagonists are all scarred in some way by the war, scars which hinder successful reassimilation into the dominant fiction when they return to civilian life. Thus they experience a crisis of masculinity. Silverman concludes that Wyler's film persists in contravening the dominant fiction by putting male lack on display, whilst Capra's and Levin's both ultimately reassert the dominant fiction. *It's a Wonderful Life* transforms male lack into plenitude by marshalling a specifically Christian discourse, whilst in *The Guilt of Janet Ames*, the eponymous war widow, who initially appears as a threat to the dominant fiction in her refusal to accept her husband's death as worthy or justified, learns to disavow male lack by blaming herself for reading his sacrifice as inadequacy.

This chapter focuses on ways in which the dominant fiction is manipulated for political ends in political novels. Its scope is necessarily narrower than that of Silverman, since it focuses on the specifically sexual aspect of masculinity. Nonetheless, the idea of the penis-phallus equation provides a useful metaphor to name the alignment of male sexuality with ultimate power and control which often characterizes political texts, and for this reason I make use of Silverman's terminology as an analytical tool.

## II

### *A fascist fiction*

My consideration of female sexuality in Drieu la Rochelle's *Gilles* has suggested

that the representation of Gilles's sexual encounters consistently aligns male sexuality with power and control. Here, the penis is shown to coincide with the phallus according to the dominant fiction. Gilles as a sexual male appears as a possessor of women; women do not constitute an obstacle to phallic possession since they show no resistance. The sexual male appears as a consumer - words such as *dévoré*, *mordiller*, *sucer* are ascribed to him; female flesh is *viande* and is described as being 'cuit comme un pain'; male sexual desire is *appétit* and *faim*. Women who trespass on the position of the phallic sexual consumer are punished for the attempt: Madame Florimond 'le dévorait des yeux' (*G*, p.180) and receives humiliating rejection from Gilles; Rébecca directs 'les regards d'admiration dévorante' (*G*, p.409) towards Galant but, as we have seen in Chapter 2, is rejected as a monstrous female. Furthermore, woman only attains a female identity once she has been consumed and possessed by the phallic male: 'Il tenait dans ses mains le sort d'un être humain. En une minute, par le corps, elle pouvait devenir heureuse, triomphante, une femme' (*G*, p.196). A network of images is in evidence where the 'amas informe' (*G*, p.79) that is woman not yet the object of male desire appears as raw material waiting for the sculptor's creating touch:

Elle était un bloc offert à son marteau. (*G*, p.172)

Il ne le détacha pas du bloc des circonstances dont la stature de Dora se dégageait à peine, dont il devait l'extraire avec une patience de tailleur de pierre. (*G*, p.293)

The sexual male is sure of his power to possess, control, consume and create woman: his sex organ convinces him that he is the repository of the phallus.

The occasions on which Gilles's faith in the dominant fiction of male sexuality

is shaken have a specific political function within the novel - they are occasions on which Gilles is tempted to succumb to decadence. We have seen in Chapter 2 how Myriam functions variously as an index of decadence. Accordingly, sex with Myriam threatens Gilles with emasculation. Gilles reproaches himself for having restrained his phallic sexual brutality: 'Il n'était pas un homme, pas un homme; s'il l'avait été il aurait foncé sur cette enfant, sans horreur' (*G*, p.199). Thus the non-phallic, emasculated male is associated with decadence in contrast to the phallic male who has fascist potential. Already an association between fascism and a vehement assertion of the dominant fiction is emerging.

Male sexuality in *Gilles* has a political dimension also because the exercise of power through male sexuality appears as an apprenticeship for politics. In narrative terms, Gilles's sexual experiences, although individually negative in outcome, are represented as a positive *Bildung* culminating in the discovery of a positive political identity fighting for fascism, in the Epilogue.<sup>28</sup> The concept of sexual relationships as a political *Bildung* suggests that the female subject may have a role to play in reinforcing the penis-phallus equation, according to Silverman's model. In political terms, the lovers over whom Gilles exercises phallic power represent either positive elements he wishes to incorporate into his own identity, elements he will eventually find in fascism, or negative elements he deplors and rejects. Myriam represents the decadence and disintegration of modernity, indexed for Gilles by her Jewishness. She is the epitome of the negativity fascism is to overcome. Alice is associated with war and thereby offers Gilles a glimpse of the virility he has so far only found in the trenches:

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<sup>28</sup> Reck points out that Drieu cannot conceive of successful relations between the sexes in any form in her 'Drieu la Rochelle's *La Comédie de Charleroi*', p.292.

'Il aimait Alice avec toute sa force de guerre revenue' (*G*, p.210). However, as we have seen in Chapter 2, the text ultimately rejects the possibility that female sexuality might positively be aligned with fascism. In the ontological terms of the dominant fiction, women seem to promise presence and unity and plenitude. As well as offering an antidote to lack (castration), in Silverman's terms, such ontological wholeness also characterizes fascism's quest for the total fascist man.<sup>29</sup> Images of presence and plenitude characterize Gilles's sexual encounters:

Il voulait passionnément que ce fût une réalité plénière, que cette femme fût là tout entière. Ainsi sa jalousie était d'une part un sentiment panique de la nature et de l'animalité, et d'autre part la vibration inquiète de son désir de plénitude morale. (*G*, p.275)

Here Gilles expresses the hope that Dora will guarantee him phallic wholeness. However her departure leaves Gilles still facing 'le trou noir de l'absence' (*G*, p.382) and he realizes that her promise of presence had only ever been a mirage: 'Elle n'avait jamais été là et elle n'y serait jamais' (*G*, p.398). The contact with phallic masculinity promised by woman is illusory, and furthermore, women appear to be at fault for failing to provide what the male subject is seeking. The novel testifies to a lack of belief in Gubar's 'good woman'. Thomas M. Hines notes that for Drieu, 'woman serves as a transitional conduit from the divided masculine self to the Eternal Essence', that she allows him to attain 'fleetingly a state of quasi-mystical plenitude'.<sup>30</sup> Hines

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<sup>29</sup> For a detailed discussion of this idea, see Carroll, *French Literary Fascism*, pp.125-46. See also Thomas M. Hines, 'Myth, Misogyny and Fascism in the Works of Drieu La Rochelle', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 24.2 (Summer 1978), 197-207 (p.198).

<sup>30</sup> Hines, 'Myth, Misogyny and Fascism in the Works of Drieu La Rochelle', p.205.



mentions but does not stress the temporary and illusory nature of this role. The female subject in *Gilles* fails to aid the male subject in his identification of penis and phallus.

Contact with France functions in a similar way to contact with women. After the failure, in political and gender terms, of his sexual relationships, Gilles attempts to find plenitude in the February riots of 1934:

Gilles courait partout aux points de plénitude qui lui apparaissaient dans la nuit et dans les lueurs et, quand il arrivait essoufflé, il trouvait un carré de bitume déserté qu'un corps couché ne comblait pas. (*G*, p.596)

All he finds is emptiness and death. If his search for plenitude in the nation is read as a quest for the ontological unity which characterizes the dominant fiction, the result is similarly emasculation. Thus when Gilles realizes that the February riots do not contain the seed of productive fascism in France he remarks to Clérences: 'Je viens de te faire une scène de femme. Prends-moi, fais-moi mal. Une scène d'inverti. Nous sommes pires que les tantes' (*G*, p.603). By contact with the riots, Gilles has been placed temporarily in a feminine role - the one taken, the masochistic subject. And not only feminine, but also homosexual. Here homosexuality is feminized by its association with the decadence of woman and with the decadence of the French nation. Drieu's representations of the decadence of France and the femininity of decadence in *Gilles* go a long way towards explaining why Drieu made use of 'de curieuses métaphores qui présentent les relations entre la France et l'Allemagne sous l'aspect d'une union sexuelle où la France joue le rôle de la femme' for which Sartre berated him, along

with other collaborators, in 1945.<sup>31</sup>

Drieu makes explicit the twin failures of France and the female subject to shore up the dominant fiction of masculinity:

Les ponts qu'il avait lancés dans sa vie vers les femmes, vers l'action, ç'avait été de folles volées, insoucieuses de trouver leurs piliers. Il n'avait pas eu d'épouse et il n'avait pas eu de patrie. (*G*, p.604)

In the final pages of the section of the novel entitled 'L'Apocalypse', Gilles asserts, 'Je ne puis plus aimer une femme', and the narrative voice confirms that 'Il était mort aux femmes' (*G*, p.608). Indeed, Gilles does not engage in any sexual activity during the Epilogue which testifies also to a concurrent rejection of France, since Gilles can only find political fulfilment in Spanish fascism. France and woman have failed to provide a successful political-sexual identity for the male subject. However, male sexuality is not suppressed: rather, the text's solution lies in a combination of phallic sexuality and fascist politics.

How then is this Utopian coincidence of phallic sexuality and fascism characterized in the novel? Drieu's political ideal is dependent on an idealization of the past and on an idealization of combat:

Tu comprends, autrefois, les hommes pensaient parce que penser, pour eux, c'était un geste réel. Penser, c'était finalement donner ou recevoir un coup d'épée... Mais, aujourd'hui, les hommes n'ont plus d'épée... Un obus, ça les aplatit comme un train qui passe. [...] ce sont des hommes sans épée. (*G*, p.487-88)

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<sup>31</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Qu'est-ce qu'un collaborateur?', in *Situations III* (Paris, Gallimard, 1949; first published in *La République Française*, August 1945), pp.43-61 (p.58).

Here Gilles looks back to an ideal time when thought and action formed a single unity and the phallic sword was an integral part of warfare and a guarantee of virility. The sexualized nature of the image is obvious.<sup>32</sup> Drieu too is conscious of the passivity of modern war which is linked with shell shock. But for Drieu, the fear of neurasthenia is replaced by the fear of decadence. Drieu's representation of modern war is ambivalent. On the one hand, Gilles constantly looks back to moments during his active service as instances of a virile identity successfully achieved: active combat can assure masculinity. Yet on the other hand, World War I is tainted by the decadence of modern society: its technology makes soldiers into passive victims rather than active agents.

David Carroll points out:

In spite of all the critical comments he made about modern war in his texts, the experience of war for Drieu La Rochelle cannot be considered totally negative. For war also provided exceptional moments of self-realization that continued to serve as models for the actualization of the positive myth of 'Man'. At very rare moments in the midst of death and destruction, the soldier, as if drawn out of and beyond himself by a superior force, is able to get up from his prone position and be miraculously transformed.<sup>33</sup>

This shred of virility is the one non-decadent element of modern war which could form the basis of the new political regime. As Alice Yaeger Kaplan points out, it is a

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<sup>32</sup> Peter G. Jones, in his *War and the Novelist: Appraising the American War Novel* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1976), points to the recurrence of such images in American literature: 'That prowess with a weapon equals sexual ability is an American literary tradition as old as Rip van Winkle's rusted musket' (p.153).

<sup>33</sup> Carroll, *French Literary Fascism*, p.130.

question of isolating 'the possibility of true combat in mechanically waged war'.<sup>34</sup>

Nostalgia for a virile and homogenous past is always set against the decadent disintegration and destructiveness of the modern world, variously symbolized by the avant garde, Jewishness, democracy, freemasonry, femininity, drug abuse, alcoholism and perverse sexuality. In the final chapter of the section entitled 'L'Elysée', Gilles and his mentor, Carentan, discuss the decadence of modern France compared with the grandeur of the Middle Ages, a conversation which is significantly narrated analeptically. If modern man is castrated - 'sans épée' - then this is a symptom of the modernism that created weapons such as the unmasculine *obus*, which is round and feminine in contrast to the phallic sword. The strikingly dualistic physical description of Gilles illustrates the struggle between virility and decadence which he embodies. Half his body is infected by modernism, symbolized by injuries caused by the mechanized weapons of the First World War, and half corresponds to the ideal fascist body (notably the right hand side).<sup>35</sup> Thus, Gilles straddles the ideal state and the modernist state:

D'un côté, c'était un corps d'homme épanoui et presque athlétique, avec un cou largement enraciné, une épaule droite pleine, un sein ample, une hanche stricte, un genou bien encastré; de l'autre, c'était une carcasse foudroyée, tourmentée, tordue, desséchée, chétive. C'était le côté de la guerre, du massacre, du supplice, de la mort. (*G*, pp.500-01)

Modernism threatens the dominant fiction by creating castrated men: ancient forms of

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<sup>34</sup> Alice Yaeger Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature and French Intellectual Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p.101.

<sup>35</sup> See Carroll, *French Literary Fascism*, pp.158-64 for a more general discussion of fascism and the body.

war allow for the penis-*épée*-phallus identification, whereas modern war turns ‘un corps d’homme’ into ‘une carcasse foudroyée’, whose grammatical femininity is stressed by the succession of feminine adjectives. In Silverman’s terminology then, ancient combat is for Drieu quite the reverse of historical trauma; rather it is the primary representation via which the male subject can identify penis with phallus and convince himself of the truth of the dominant fiction. Modern warfare has an ambivalent status. As combat, it retains traces of virility, but the methods of that combat, represented by the feminine *obus*, taint it with modernism. For Drieu then, it is modernism and not the First World War which represents historical trauma and threatens the dominant fiction.

Ultimately, for Drieu, the dominant fiction must triumph over historical trauma. Drieu welcomed the destruction of France by its own modernist decadence, since its death would allow for the birth of a new fascist Europe which would transcend nation states. This idea is mapped onto the character of Gilles in the overcoming of the destruction (emasculatation) which threatens him in the form of his war wounds, by fascist commitment. By the end of the novel, Gilles has aligned himself with the virile, fascist side of his body: we see him fighting for the fascist cause in Spain completely unhindered by those wounds. We leave Gilles suspended between life and death under heavy enemy fire, convinced that ‘[r]ien ne se fait que dans le sang. Il faut sans cesse mourir pour sans cesse renaître’ (*G*, p.687). Drieu’s refusal to represent Gilles’s war wounds here as debilitating represents a refusal to allow modernism to triumph over fascism. The Epilogue provides a political resolution of problems posed in terms of sexuality in the main part of the text. The complete absence of sex in the Epilogue

contrasts sharply with its abundant presence in the rest of the novel. Sexual desire however is not absent from the Epilogue: it has simply found a different manifestation. The quest for the dominant fiction of male sexuality which women and France fail to provide for the male subject ends in fascism: only in fascism can male desire find authentic and fertile self-expression.

However it is problematic for Drieu to propose an exclusively male, virile, sexualized fascism. 'Donner [...] un coup d'épée' is clearly an active, masculine position. But *recevoir* implies that the male subject might also be the object of the action, a conventionally female position. If fascism is to exclude femininity completely, then male subjects must necessarily occupy both active and passive positions. If male desire cannot be channelled through women then perhaps it is to be expressed through male-male relations. As Carroll notes:

this is where the question of homosexuality comes in. In fact, it comes in everywhere, in all those places left empty by the suppression of the woman, everywhere men desire their own phallic rigidity and themselves to the exclusion of women.<sup>36</sup>

Drieu's fascism would indeed seem to imply a male desire that is homosexual.<sup>37</sup> His rejection of femininity leads him to posit a positive, if disembodied, homosexuality *malgré lui* which is quite the opposite of the feminized homosexuality of Galant and

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<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, p.156.

<sup>37</sup> As a point of comparison, see Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, trans. by Stephen Conway, Erica Carter and Chris Turner, 2 vols (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987-88), I, 277 and II, 30 and 339 where the author discusses the issue of the focus of male desire where women are expressly rejected as love objects but insists that this desire is not homosexual. I should also like to distinguish Drieu's 'homosexualization' of politics from Peter G. Jones's reading of homosexuality in American war novels as an unnatural last resort for the male subject deprived of women, and as a response to the peculiar stress of the combat situation. Jones, *War and the Novelist*, pp.116-17, p.128.

Antoinette. Their sexuality is decadent and bourgeois: it is to this sort of self-destructive degenerate that Gilles likens himself after the February riots. This other homosexuality on the contrary is entirely masculine. Despite itself, the text permits a reading of homosexuality as a transgressive force that is positive within the political value system of the text.

This symbolic virile homosexuality finds expression in the relationship between Gilles and his mentor, Carentan. Here, Drieu chooses a motif highly charged with positive homosexual connotations, the 'Greek love' motif, as a means to present a political ideal of fascism and virility.<sup>38</sup> The positive homosexual connotation is cemented by two references to Greece in the Normandy episode: Gilles's active service in Greece is mentioned, and, perhaps more significantly, we learn that Carentan is writing a book about Greek influences on Christian culture (*G*, p.147, p.155). The tutor's alignment with the text's political ideal is also made clear. Carentan, associated, by extension, with the virile force of nature manifested in the Normandy coast where he lives, displays ideological virility in his distance from the decadent and feminine modern period and the capital (*G*, pp.143-44). Declaring 'je ne connais pas ton époque', preferring 'un univers complexe et ancien', he cites a hatred of modernity as the source of his anti-Semitism: 'Eh bien! moi je ne peux pas supporter les juifs, parce qu'ils sont par excellence le monde moderne que j'abhorre' (*G*, p.156, p.159). That the relationship between Gilles and Carentan is set away from Paris is not an attempt to neutralize homosexuality by situating it in an Other, distant geographical location, but

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<sup>38</sup> See Robinson, *Scandal in the Ink*, p.46, where the author suggests, in relation to Proust, that the Greek model was the only positive model for homosexuality for early twentieth century writers.

rather a means of endowing the relationship with a positive political connotation.<sup>39</sup> Here then, a male-male relationship positively charged with homosexuality is fused with positive fascist commitment. Through the Gilles-Carentan relationship the text provides clear justification for a reading of its fascist ideal in terms of homosexuality. That which is to be inferred from the exclusion of femininity from male desire is overtly present in this relationship: sexualized fascism, which is in direct opposition to femininity, Jewishness, modernity, Paris and so on, is in a continuum with a symbolic (because disembodied) and virile homosexuality which the text therefore recommends.

My proposition is that for Drieu, castration simply is not true - the penis *is* the phallus. In *Gilles*, male lack appears as a creation of modernism and not as a necessary mode of consciousness, as Silverman, after Lacan, asserts it to be. It is not that historical trauma reveals the truth of castration which must be hidden, but rather that modernism has produced castration which must be eliminated by returning to an ideal situation before it existed. This return to a state of pre-castration is to be achieved, according to Drieu, via fascism. However, the complete exclusion of female sexuality from fascist politics introduces a homoerotic element into Drieu's vehement assertion of the dominant fiction.

*'A desperate engagement with that which unmans man'*<sup>40</sup>

In the case of André Malraux, the two terms at the heart of the present analysis

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<sup>39</sup> See *ibid.*, p.14, where Robinson identifies geographical distancing as a means of neutralizing homosexuality as 'other'.

<sup>40</sup> Victor Brombert, 'Remembering Malraux: On Violence and the Image of Man', in *André Malraux*, ed. by Harold Bloom, Modern Critical Views Series (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), pp.151-64 (p.151).



-‘politics’ and ‘sexuality’ - are instantly problematic. Malraux is very far from providing the communist equivalent of Drieu’s absolute recommendation of fascism; he writes as a critical *compagnon de route* rather than as a convinced adherent.<sup>41</sup> Jean Lacouture characterizes Malraux’s political stance in the 1930s as ‘[a]mbigu vis-à-vis du marxisme, engagé clairement face au fascisme’.<sup>42</sup> His reticence concerning the Party is clear from *La Condition humaine* as well as from *L’Espoir*.<sup>43</sup> In the former, as Lucien Goldmann points out, the cause of the Shanghai revolutionaries is privileged over strict adherence to the Party line; in fact, the orders of the International are seen to be responsible for the failure of the insurrection and the massacre of its protagonists.<sup>44</sup> In *L’Espoir*, Spanish republicanism is the cause advocated, rather than communism itself: communism here represents just one strand within antifascism.<sup>45</sup> Goldmann is also instructive on the question of sexuality, pointing to a tension between eroticism and love in Malraux’s fiction, and suggesting also some of the political resonances of these terms:

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<sup>41</sup> It seems that Malraux was never actually a party member, despite his close association with communism in the inter-war period. On his relationship with communism, see Boak, *André Malraux*, pp.9-13, Jean Lacouture, *André Malraux: Une Vie dans le siècle* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973), pp.161-87, and Curtis Cate, *André Malraux: A Biography* (London: Hutchinson, 1995), pp.183-87, pp.209-21. Geoffrey Harris offers a provocative reading of the view of communism which emerges specifically from *L’Espoir* in his ‘Malraux, Myth, Political Commitment and the Spanish Civil War’, *Modern and Contemporary France*, 5.3 (August 1997), 319-28.

<sup>42</sup> Lacouture, *André Malraux*, p.166.

<sup>43</sup> André Malraux, *L’Espoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1937). Further references to this work are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>44</sup> Goldmann, *Pour une sociologie du roman*, p.161.

<sup>45</sup> See Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions*, pp.132-41. Suleiman stresses the importance of what she terms a ‘secondary confrontation structure’ within the republican side, mainly between communism and anarchism, in addition to the ‘primary confrontation’ between fascism and republicanism. She takes issue with Goldmann’s assertion that *L’Espoir* represents ‘l’acceptation intégrale du parti communiste’. Goldmann, *Pour une sociologie du roman*, p.194.

dans *La Condition humaine*, roman de la communauté révolutionnaire authentique, l'érotisme est, comme l'individu, intégré et dépassé dans une communauté authentique et supérieure: celle de l'amour.

Dans les romans antérieurs, érotisme et domination constituaient des valeurs précaires mais positives, alors qu'ils sont entièrement modifiés et surtout dévalorisés par la présence même de l'amour dans ce roman de la communauté révolutionnaire qu'est *La Condition humaine*.<sup>46</sup>

For the purposes of the present investigation, the term 'sexuality' is taken to encompass both elements, although I return to Goldmann's distinction.

The generally light-hearted, anecdotal and rather non-political treatment of male sexuality in *L'Espoir* gives the initial impression that the reader is dealing with a *non-sexualization* of politics. Sérurier's brief exploit with Spanish prostitutes, during which linguistic confusion rather amusingly leads to accusations of espionage, is quickly dismissed 'au milieu de la rigolade' (*E*, pp.159-61). Manuel's brief surge of desire for a *milicienne* is just as swiftly passed over, and despite a reference to the incident at the end of the novel, it is not integrated in any significant way into the novel's political *thèse* (*E*, p.78, p.578). This impression seems confirmed by Manuel:

Je crois qu'une autre vie a commencé pour moi avec le combat; aussi absolue que celle qui a commencé quand j'ai pour la première fois couché avec une femme... La guerre rend chaste... (*E*, p.576)

Manuel's 'la guerre rend chaste' is a far cry from *Gilles*'s 'il était mort aux femmes': Drieu's sexual-political *Bildung* is as antithetical to Malraux's approach to politics as is his unambiguous recommendation of a specific political ideology.

To return to Silverman's model, the reader also initially appears to be faced

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<sup>46</sup> Goldmann, *Pour une sociologie du roman*, p.176, pp.177-78.

with a representation of the disintegration of the dominant fiction of masculinity, as opposed to Drieu's emphatic assertions of (fascist) male adequacy. The constant spectacle of death and physical mutilation which faces the combatants in *L'Espoir* recalls the horrors of the First World War which provoked shell shock and masculinity crisis. And indeed, the male subject is seen here to react to such stress with neurosis. Perhaps the most striking example is Manuel's loss of voice. Eric Leed notes that mutism and other speech disorders were the most common manifestations of shell shock.<sup>47</sup> In *L'Espoir*, vocal potency symbolizes a successful response to the stress of combat when Manuel's effective resolution of serious military discontent, in the first chapter of the 'Être et faire' section of the novel, is characterized by images of his loud, clear voice:

La voix de Manuel était très forte. (*E*, p.311)

Manuel recommença à crier, à pleine voix mais très lentement, pour être sûr d'être entendu (*E*, p.314)

However, when the pressure is too much to bear, it is Manuel's voice which betrays him. In a situation of 'extrême abaissement du moral' (*E*, p.473), two of Manuel's men, volunteers, desert. Manuel's mutism is a reaction to his own refusal to rescue them from execution, that is, to *speak* for them, at the *conseil de guerre*. Their reproach makes a clear association between voice and power: '- Alors, t'as plus de voix pour nous, maintenant?'. The narrative continues, 'Manuel s'aperçut qu'il n'avait pas encore dit un mot' (*E*, p.458). Manuel's refusal to exercise the power to speak is

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<sup>47</sup> Leed, *No Man's Land*, pp.167-68.

succeeded by an inability to speak which is a loss of power and which, the text makes clear, has no physiological cause:

Il est à tel point enrôlé qu'on ne l'entend pas. Il a beaucoup crié toute la journée; mais pas au point d'avoir perdu la voix. (*E*, p.474)

Solitude accompanies Manuel's neurosis which is a response both to the consequences of his own actions and to the increasing strength of the fascist affront: 'Jamais Manuel ne s'était senti aussi seul' (*E*, p.478). And it is a weakness he will not admit to Ximénès: 'Il ne dit pas qu'il avait réellement perdu sa voix' (*E*, p.480). Speaking thus becomes a motif of male control and adequacy: it guarantees power and permits solidarity. Mutism on the other hand represents castration, in Silverman's terms: a failure on the part of the male subject to align himself with the phallus.

Within the framework of the present analysis, Jaime's loss of sight when his plane is shot down is also significant (*E*, p.191). The sight/blindness opposition governs Jaime's function in the novel completely, his first two appearances depending on the verb *voir*: 'Jaime Alvear avait vu qu'ils se dirigeaient vers le bar'; 'Jaime avait vu le canon' (*E*, p.46, p.48). I hesitate to base an argument on a simple Freudian reading of his injury as symbolic castration, but in context this connotation is not irrelevant. More importantly, Jaime is traumatized by his injury as Manuel is by the emotional scars inflicted by the combat situation: like the soldiers in Dottyville, ashamed of their emotional inability to cope, Jaime is ashamed of his blindness (*E*, p.500). Shame emasculates, whilst pride is its virile antithesis. Furthermore, Jaime is experienced as a threat by his able-bodied, as yet untraumatized comrades:

Depuis que Jaime était revenu d'avion pour la dernière fois, il n'avait jamais parlé qu'à des camarades isolés, autour d'une table, dans un coin; il semblait qu'il vînt de retrouver sa voix des chansons d'autrefois, assourdie comme si quelque chose en elle aussi fût devenu aveugle. Tous savaient que chaque fois qu'ils montaient ils étaient menacés de sa blessure. Il était leur camarade, mais aussi la plus menaçante image de leur destin. (*E*, pp.346-47)

Here the circle is closed around neurotic mutism, solitude and blindness: Jaime's voice is also synaesthetically blind; his social interactions are characterized by isolation; he is a symbol of the potential for breakdown.

Combat then is potentially traumatic for Malraux and does threaten the dominant fiction of male adequacy and control by putting the truth of male lack/castration on display. Victor Brombert formulates this element of Malraux's work as follows:

The sadistic will to reduce the other to the limits of his body, to reduce him to pain and degradation, is a concrete challenge to the dignity of man [...] Explosions, sirens, the rattle of machine-guns, the cries of the wounded, are part of what Malraux himself calls the atmosphere of a 'fin du monde', of a 'nuit du jugement dernier'.<sup>48</sup>

But Brombert goes on to envisage Malraux's spectacles of violence in terms of apocalypse: revelation through destruction. Malraux's traumatic violence also has a positive face. Recasting the question in Silverman's terms, I should like to argue that the precise revelation is that the dominant fiction is true: despite, or even because of, the spectacle of death and mutilation, the dominant fiction is recuperated and is allied with political commitment, which in turn is represented in terms of male sexuality.

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<sup>48</sup> Brombert, 'Remembering Malraux', pp.153-54.

The trauma of death and physical mutilation is recuperated on two levels. Firstly, there is straightforward physical recuperation: Jaime begins to see lights, and there is hope that he will see again; Manuel recovers his voice and completes what Suleiman terms a 'positive exemplary apprenticeship', transforming himself into an efficient and successful military leader.<sup>49</sup> This of course does not solve the problem of death. And so, secondly, the ultimate sacrifice is transformed into an index of male political solidarity, which in Malraux's fictional universe is an absolute value. There are many examples:

Pour Jaime, qui avait vingt-six ans, le Front populaire, c'était cette fraternité dans la vie et dans la mort. (*E*, p.49)

Devant ce sang, pour un instant anonyme, devant ces jambes qui ne bougeaient qu'avec précaution, dans cette carlingue pleine de camarades, Pol, à moitié étranglé par son berlingot, pensait que tous étaient en train d'apprendre dans leur corps ce que veut dire solidarité. (*E*, p.68)

And male solidarity is an absolute value in terms of masculinity:

Il avance avec eux, soulevé par la même marée, par une exaltation fraternelle et pure. En son cœur, sans quitter du regard le tank qui vient vers lui, il chante le chant profond des Asturies. Jamais il ne saura davantage ce que c'est qu'être un homme. (*E*, p.275)

Malraux successfully neutralizes the threat of castration by making death in the line of (political) duty the ultimate index of virility and heroic fraternity. It is the male solidarity which politics demands and facilitates which constitutes the dominant fiction

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<sup>49</sup> Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions*, p.135.

of masculinity. According to Brombert, 'that which unmans man' is the nothingness which death reveals, 'man's incurable weakness', or rather, the fatal flaw in the human condition.<sup>50</sup> The strength to overcome that fatal flaw is to be found in the virile fraternity which pervades Malraux's fiction. The most memorable example is perhaps the relationship between Kassner and an unseen comrade in the concentration camp in *Le Temps du mépris*. Here the triumph of fraternity is dramatized very succinctly when Kassner is rescued from the madness of solitude by the tapping of a comrade on the prison wall which, although unintelligible as a code, is indicative of solidarity. In the preface to that text, Malraux identifies himself as an author attempting to rescue French aesthetic production from 'l'agonie de la fraternité virile' which has blighted it for fifty years.<sup>51</sup> For Brombert, Malraux writes 'the most death-and-meaning obsessed fiction of our time'.<sup>52</sup> This feature of his fiction is often analyzed via an existentialist vocabulary, in terms of man's actions in the face of the absurd, whereby fraternity offers death-defying meaning in the face of nothingness.<sup>53</sup> My suggestion is that this can also productively be assessed via Silverman's model, whereby death and nothingness correspond to castration and lack, and meaning and fraternity correspond to the dominant fiction which rescues the male subject.

Despite the apparent trivializing of male sexuality which we noted at the outset, this virile, fraternal political commitment is expressed through a vocabulary of

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<sup>50</sup> Brombert, 'Remembering Malraux', p.153.

<sup>51</sup> André Malraux, *Le Temps du mépris* (Paris: Gallimard, 1935), p.10.

<sup>52</sup> Brombert, 'Remembering Malraux', p.152.

<sup>53</sup> See for example David Wilkinson, 'The Bolshevik Hero', in *André Malraux*, ed. by Bloom, pp.33-56 (p.35).

sexuality. For example, Sembrano links politically fertile commitment with fertile sexuality:

Tant qu'on est seulement marié avec une politique, ça n'a pas d'importance, dit Sembrano; mais quand on a des enfants avec elle... (E, p.98)

The political faith Manuel places in the ex-fascist Alba is also expressed in terms of sexuality:

Bien que ses muscles fussent aux aguets, Manuel sentait une sourde confiance entre cet homme et lui, comme il sentait parfois des bouffées de sensualité entre sa maîtresse et lui. Quand on couche avec une espionne, pensa-t-il, ça doit un peu ressembler à ça. (E, pp.198-99)

Even though we are not dealing here with such an overt sexualization of politics as is exemplified in Drieu la Rochelle's *Gilles*, nonetheless, male sexuality is an adequate metaphor for constructive politics; quite the reverse of the functions of female sexuality we have seen in political texts. The associations made in *L'Espoir* between death, virile heroism and desire are cemented in the slogan of *La Pasionaria*, which the text cites: '*Il vaut mieux être la veuve d'un héros que la femme d'un lâche*' (E, p.456, Malraux's italics).<sup>54</sup> Only a *héros* has access to *Éros*. The coward is unphallic, having no power to attract female desire; risking and accepting death is clearly the phallic position here. A heroic death cannot emasculate the male subject. *La Pasionaria* occupies the role of

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<sup>54</sup> *La Pasionaria* (meaning 'passion flower') was the pseudonym of Dolores Ibarruri, a Spanish communist politician of considerable renown and influence, particularly during the Spanish Civil War: Hugh Thomas refers to her as 'the most famous Spanish communist' in his *The Spanish Civil War*, 3rd edn (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p.9. Edith Thomas published a poem entitled 'La Pasionaria' in *Commune*, 38 (October 1936), 134-35, advocating international intervention in Spain.



Gubar's 'good woman', exemplifying also Silverman's suggestion that the female subject might be called upon to reinforce the penis-phallus equation in the face of the possibility of castration.

*La Conditon humaine* provides an interesting point of comparison which will amplify these remarks about *L'Espoir*. The associations between male death, male sexuality and virile, masculine solidarity emerge very clearly from the account of the deaths of Kyo, Katow and the other revolutionaries. Goldmann reads these deaths as 'le dépassement définitif de la solitude'; Wilkinson comes to the same conclusion.<sup>55</sup> The textual evidence is unambiguous:

Il est facile de mourir quand on ne meurt pas seul. Mort saturée de ce chevrottement fraternel, assemblée de vaincus où des multitudes reconnaîtraient leurs martyrs, légende sanglante dont se font les légendes dorées! Comment, déjà regardé par la mort, ne pas entendre ce murmure de sacrifice humain qui lui criait que le cœur viril des hommes est un refuge à morts qui vaut bien l'esprit? (*CH*, p.256)

Katow's heroic action of giving his cyanide to his two fellow prisoners attains the status of ultimate male solidarity and commitment. We noted in Chapter 2 the opposition between the virile sexualization of this situation of political sacrifice and feminine sexual tenderness which constitutes the antithesis of politics:<sup>56</sup>

Depuis plus d'un an, May l'avait délivré de toute solitude, sinon de toute amertume. La lancinante fuite dans la tendresse des corps noués pour la première fois jaillissait, hélas! dès qu'il pensait à elle, déjà séparé des vivants... (*CH*, p.255)

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<sup>55</sup> Goldmann, *Pour une sociologie du roman*, p.187; Wilkinson, 'The Bolshevik Hero', pp.49-53.

<sup>56</sup> Chapter 2, pp. 142-3.

Entre tout ce que cette dernière nuit couvrait de la terre, ce lieu de râles était sans doute le plus lourd d'amour viril. Gémir avec cette foule couchée, rejoindre jusque dans son murmure de plaintes cette souffrance sacrifiée... (CH, p.255-56)

Both Goldmann and Wilkinson read the Kyo-May relationship in terms of love, as synonymous with political commitment and thus as an overcoming of solitude.<sup>57</sup> Yet a close reading of the above citation suggests a caveat. The solution to solitude offered by May is a 'lancinante fuite' which is ultimately, I would suggest, inferior to the virile fraternity ('amour viril') of dying for the cause: the latter represents a politically and existentially superior symbolic, virile reinscription of male sexuality.

The opening sequence of the text which describes the murder of an arms agent by the terrorist Tchen provides another piece in Malraux's jigsaw of male sexuality and politics. The episode is couched in obviously sexualized vocabulary. The *poignard* chosen over the less phallic razor blade is experienced by Tchen as part of his body:

Sensible jusqu'au bout de la lame, il sentit le corps rebondir vers lui, relancé par le sommier métallique. Il raidit rageusement son bras pour le maintenir [...] Tchen ne pouvait lâcher le poignard. A travers l'arme, son bras raidi, son épaule douloureuse, un courant d'angoisse s'établissait entre le corps et lui (CH, p.11)

Naked, his weapon is personified: 'le poignard était nu dans sa poche, sans gaine' (CH, p.10). The imagery recalls Drieu's penis-*épée*-phallus equation. To commit the act, Tchen must 'raidir son bras' which beforehand is 'complètement mou'; afterwards he is 'mollement écrasé'. If this murder is orgasmic, then what is its political significance? According to Goldmann's model of love versus eroticism, the episode should be

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<sup>57</sup> Goldmann, *Pour une sociologie du roman*, pp.175-86; Wilkinson, 'The Bolshevik Hero', pp.51-52.

negatively charged because it is purely erotic. More significant however is its onanistic quality. Before imposing the act upon the other, Tchen has enacted it upon himself: 'Convulsivement, Tchen enfonce le poignard dans son bras gauche' (*CH*, p.10). Thus, the sexualized representation of the murder is inscribed with solitude. We have seen already in the case of Manuel's and Jaime's neuroses that solitude is negative both in political terms and in terms of the dominant fiction. Tchen's terrorist politics is a politics of solitude, the antithesis of the virile, politically productive fraternity Malraux's fiction recommends.<sup>58</sup> His attempt on the life of Chang-Kai-Shek is also an individualist and self-destructive action, undertaken against the advice of the community of Shanghai revolutionaries. It achieves no political product since Chang is not in the car under which Tchen throws himself and his suicide bomb. His own commitment is not valorized through death because it cannot be integrated into a discourse of fraternity: 'Il fallait que le terrorisme devînt une mystique. Solitude, d'abord: que le terroriste décidât seul, exécutât seul' (*CH*, p.197). Tchen's death does nothing to assert the dominant fiction; his fatal individualism associates him rather with castration.

Male sexuality is a shifting term in Malraux's fiction. As an index of solidarity it can function to defeat 'that which unmans man', to guarantee virility and to symbolize the dominant fiction. However, male sexuality in its onanistic guise is precisely 'that which unmans man', it represents the solitude which is the fatal flaw of the human condition, and which the dominant fiction of male political solidarity must hide. It seems then that love/eroticism is a less pertinent distinction with regard to a

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<sup>58</sup> On Tchen's politics as a politics of solitude see Goldmann, *Pour une sociologie du roman*, pp.168-71, pp.190-91 and Wilkinson, 'The Bolshevik Hero', pp.36-38.

political reading of male sexuality in these texts than distinctions between solidarity and solitude, fraternity and onanism, or even masculinity and femininity.

### III

#### *Demystification*

So far, my analysis has considered ways in which the fiction of phallic male adequacy is manipulated for political ends in relation to male subjectivity. The following investigation focuses rather on the dominant fiction as a cultural myth. Silverman stresses the importance of 'social consensus', or 'collective belief' to the maintaining of the power of the dominant fiction: this ideological belief, which Silverman insists is outside of consciousness, is central to the existence of conventional, traditional masculinity.<sup>59</sup> By considering the function of the dominant fiction in texts which are concerned with female politicization, and which view masculinity from the outside, so to speak, it is possible to focus on the repercussions of this *dominance* of the dominant fiction, rather than on ways in which that fiction is constructed.

Because Madeleine Pelletier's *La Femme vierge* and Edith Thomas's *Le Refus* are both texts which recommend female politicization, it is only to be expected that these texts will reject *méconnaissance*, will refuse to shore up the penis-phallus equation which implies that access to power, of which politics is one example, is exclusively male. A correlation of the cultural construction of politics as a masculine

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<sup>59</sup> Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, p.8. Silverman offers a detailed analysis of the individual and collective psychic mechanisms which permit such belief, with particular reference to Lacan, Freud and Althusser (pp.16-42).

sphere is that the male subject can make use of politics as an opportunity to assert his phallic identity: male control and adequacy can be reinforced through the wielding of power, display of strength, exercise of leadership, and so on which politics entails. Gloria Steinem notes that the assumption of a political identity allows the male subject to prove his stereotypical manliness through the pursuit of aggressive political and military policies.<sup>60</sup> If the female subject desires access to the political sphere, she must attempt to demystify the dominant fiction by severing the cultural, or representational, links between the male subject, masculine adequacy and politics which ensure her exclusion. My purpose here is to examine the different ways in which that demystification is achieved by Pelletier and Thomas.

We have seen in Chapter 2 that for Pelletier, the expression of female sexuality necessarily results in oppression under the sociopolitical regime she critiques. Marie-Victoire Louis formulates this critique as follows: 'Pour Madeleine Pelletier, tout ce qui contribue à desserrer les relations de pouvoir entre les sexes et à poser l'affirmation de la liberté individuelle est positif'.<sup>61</sup> Power relations favour the male subject, and in *La Femme vierge* male sexuality is presented as precisely that which cements those power relations. The association of male subjectivity with control which characterizes the dominant fiction is shown to be brutally detrimental to the female subject; this association is political in that it constitutes the antagonistic focus of the female political struggle.

The dominant fiction of masculinity in *La Femme vierge* then finds its

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<sup>60</sup> Gloria Steinem, 'The Myth of Masculine Mystique', in *Men and Masculinity*, ed. by Joseph H. Pleck and Jack Sawyer (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1974) pp.134-39.

<sup>61</sup> Louis, 'Sexualité et prostitution', p.118.

expression in male sexual behaviour. Marie's first encounter with oppressive male sexuality occurs when, as a young adolescent, she is mauled by an elderly librarian taking advantage of the secrecy offered by bookshelves. He is however thwarted by her early feminist audacity:

Elle veut voir jusqu'où l'homme ira, et s'il va trop loin, elle poussera des cris terribles. La fenêtre est ouverte sur la rue Beauregard et on est au rez-de-chaussée. Elle criera, on viendra, ce sera un scandale épouvantable et le vieux sale bonhomme perdra sa place. (*FV*, p.44)

Warned off simply by the look in her eye, he desists. Uncharacteristically optimistic, Pelletier does not consider that the sexual double standard against which she writes might function to favour the librarian. Instead, the incident is politicized as an instance of the triumph of feminist consciousness over that which the male subject assumes to be his sexual right; this is a feminist cautionary tale with a happy ending.

The story of Mademoiselle Lautaret's marriage to Monsieur Lecornu does not have such a happy ending. The text holds him responsible for his wife's death by imposing upon her an inadvisable pregnancy late in life and against medical advice, because of his desire for a son. She is 'tuée par l'égoïsme masculin et l'ignorance' (*FV*, p.146), by an abuse of male sexual and emotional control. Lecornu is also characterized by an abuse of political control. Despite his role within the CGT, he wants simply to maintain the status quo; despite the 'belle époque' of syndicalism, manifested in strikes, the narrator tells us that the revolution is not being brought closer by the likes of Lecornu:

Mais la révolution ne vient pas et c'est tout à fait à tort que la presse réactionnaire traite de meneurs les chefs syndicalistes; ils ne mènent pas, ils retiennent. Loin de pousser à la révolution, ils en ont peur, presque autant que la bourgeoisie. (*FV*, p.142)

There is a closer link than one of simple juxtaposition between Lecornu's twin abuses of the political and sexual control to which, as a man, society grants him access.<sup>62</sup> It is a question of Pelletier's belief that changes in sexual power relations can only be made through more general social, and socialist, revolution. Louis notes:

C'est en cela qu'elle est socialiste: le progrès social et l'évolution des rapports entre hommes et femmes seront la conséquence d'un changement de régime. Aussi lucide et critique soit-elle sur la révolution soviétique, son espoir de liberté sexuelle réside bien là-bas.<sup>63</sup>

Whilst those in control of revolutionary politics continue to conflate penis with phallus, no progress will be made because stereotypical male sexuality and subjectivity are threatened by true revolutionary politics. Thus the stereotypical male has no interest in promoting such politics. In Pelletier's 'vie nouvelle', Lecornu will not be able to make the penis-phallus association in either the political or the sexual arena, because phallic male sexuality based on domination and exploitation will be a thing of the past.

Again, Pelletier's work brings the reader up against an apparent contradiction. How is it possible to reconcile such a negative presentation of phallic male sexuality with Pelletier's advocacy of *virilisation* and her overtly-expressed desire to

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<sup>62</sup> Gordon and Cross cite as one of Pelletier's strengths as a feminist analyst her ability to make causal connections between the realms of the sexual, the social and the political. *Early French Feminisms, 1830-1940*, p.164.

<sup>63</sup> Louis, 'Sexualité et prostitution', p.123.

appropriate the 'masculine' for political ends? Her feminist valorization of the masculine must necessarily be selective. According to Bard:

Chez Madeleine Pelletier le masculin devient en principe la norme commune *puisque les oppresseurs se sont octroyé la plupart des bonnes choses de ce monde* (my emphasis)<sup>64</sup>

Pelletier certainly demands access to the 'bonnes choses' which society has inscribed with masculinity; on the other hand, her political project consists precisely in the elimination of the oppression and domination which are also inscribed with masculinity, and which find expression in *La Femme vierge* in the representation of male sexuality. According to Louis, Pelletier's feminist analysis of sexuality should be understood according to the following 'double démarche':

Son refus d'être inscrite physiquement dans une sexualité féminine dominée, au nom d'une analyse intellectuelle féministe.  
Son adhésion aux valeurs socialement construites comme masculines auxquelles, seul son sexe biologique lui interdit de participer.<sup>65</sup>

A focus on the political implications of Pelletier's presentation of male sexuality clearly shows that the former statement heavily qualifies the latter. Her politics does not imply a simple substitution whereby the female subject is allowed to appropriate the phallus, because phallic sexuality is condemned as a root cause of the inequality to which she is opposed. Her hope for the future in *Une Vie nouvelle* is that, in the post-

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<sup>64</sup> Bard, 'La virilisation des femmes et l'égalité des sexes', p.92. See Chapter 1, pp.70-73 on Pelletier's concept of *virilisation*.

<sup>65</sup> Louis, 'Sexualité et prostitution', p.109.



revolutionary society, relations of domination within sexuality, which manifest themselves in pornography, female sexual passivity and crimes of passion, will have been removed (VN, pp 200-02). In Pelletier's socialist Utopia, equality implies that no subject will appropriate the phallus to the detriment of another. The myth of the dominant fiction will not survive the revolution.

Edith Thomas is also engaged in a demystification of the dominant fiction from a broadly leftist and feminist perspective. Again this is achieved via a negative textual stance adopted vis-à-vis male characters who embody the dominant fiction. *Le Refus* attacks on two fronts: through Henri Millet, the penis-phallus equation is exposed as a ruse; through Pierre de Métrange, the dominant fiction is imbued with specific class connotations which are in conflict with the ideology recommended by the text.

Henri Millet, an acquaintance of Brigitte's friend Anna, occupies very little textual space. Anna's response to his arrival, seen through the eyes of Brigitte, characterizes him immediately in terms of sexual potency:

- Faites-le entrer, dit Anna très vite. Elle se jeta un coup d'oeil dans la glace, elle passa sa main sur son ondulation, et il y eut à sa place une Anna inconnue (R, p.89)

Anna's sudden and uncharacteristic concern with her appearance suggests a potential sexual relationship: the sensual reference to his gaze on her 'bras nus [...] qui sortaient de sa blouse de soie' a few pages later intensifies this impression (R, p.95). Henri then has a power over Anna which Brigitte also desires, as we have seen in Chapter 2, but cannot achieve. The way in which the text situates Henri politically also identifies him with power and suggests a more precise relationship to the dominant fiction:

- A six heures, je vais à l'Arc de triomphe [sic] rallumer la Flamme. Ces cérémonies symboliques permettent de reconnaître et de grouper ceux qui sont enfin résolus à lutter contre les canailles en casquettes. (*R*, p.91)<sup>66</sup>

Henri here subscribes to the view that it is a sweet thing and becoming to die for the fatherland: he honours those who have already died in order to convince those who might lose their lives in the forthcoming struggle against 'les canailles en casquettes' that the sacrifice is worth it. He places his belief in the military-virility equation so that the horror of dying - which reveals the truth of lack, according to Silverman - may be hidden from potential soldiers.

However, the narrative punctures the myth of the dominant fiction which Henri Millet attempts to incarnate. This is achieved through his voice; we have noted already the recurrence of the motif of voice as representative of male adequacy and control:

Il parlait d'une voix impérieuse qui semblait sous-entendre aux plus simples paroles: 'Admirez mes épaules et cette force qu'il y a en moi et mon corps... mon corps... mon corps. Cela n'empêche pas de porter un vêtement bien coupé, ni une cravate' (*R*, p.90)

He speaks with a voice of authority which wants to convince the onlooker that the male body is a site of power. However the text invites the reader to distance herself from Henri's presentation of himself. The 'look-at-me' structure of his self-characterization (*admirez*) reveals the conventional masculinity Henri appropriates for himself to be a

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<sup>66</sup> An Unknown Soldier was buried in Paris, at the Arc de Triomphe, and in London, at Westminster Abbey, at the same hour on 11 November 1920. Gilbert, *First World War*, pp.529-30. Eugen Weber notes: 'Paris, of course, had the tomb of the Unknown Soldier, whose constantly burning flame under the Arc de Triomphe was regularly rekindled in memorial ceremonies'. Eugen Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1995), p.16.

role he puts on like his well-cut suit. Thus the narrative suggests that conventional identifications between masculinity, the male body, strength, power, and politics are cultural rather than natural, and therefore potentially insecure. Such identifications are precisely those which must be loosened if women are to gain access to politics.

Chapter 2 addressed from the point of view of female sexuality the significance of Pierre de Métrange's desire for Brigitte as an index of bourgeois ideology, and his personification of the threat of the engulfment of Brigitte's identity by that ideology. Pierre exemplifies male adequacy as it is defined by the bourgeoisie. There are two complementary strands to Pierre's bourgeois adequacy: his uninhibited access to professional success, and his hereditary wealth. Along these lines, there is no chink in his armour which might allow lack to be exposed. Pierre's professional identity is a legacy from the father. He is 'le fils d'un président de Cour d'appel' and *therefore*, it is implied, 'le futur président de Cour d'appel'; his mother concludes that 'à vingt-cinq ans, Pierre entrera dans la magistrature, comme son père' (*R*, p. 125). The male bourgeois professional identity then is a phallic legacy. As well as offering a means to secure control - over subordinate workers, over dependant wives, over wealth - it is the material expression of the male child's identification with the paternal phallus, the law, authority. Furthermore, as Brigitte's sister points out, it is the male profession which guarantees bourgeois marriageability, that is, legitimate bourgeois sexuality:

Maman te ferait en plus des considérations générales sur les convenances parfaites des familles Chevence et de Métrange: des procureurs, des médecins, des industriels. Aucune de ces tares que sont un grand-père boulanger, un oncle marchand de légumes. Pis, un tourneur sur métaux, un ouvrier électricien. (*R*, p.224)

The phallic, paternal, professional legacy ensures that the male subject can participate in the exchange of women, which further defines him in terms of control as the giver of woman-as-gift.<sup>67</sup> Here, the penis is conflated with the phallus when a sexual relationship confirms once again the male subject's controlling position within the social order. Family wealth similarly functions as a guarantee of bourgeois male adequacy: 'C'est un jeune homme charmant qui fait son droit à Paris. Une vieille famille, tu sais, et dont la fortune est en terres' (*R*, p.124). Juxtaposition here suggests causality - Pierre is *charmant*, sexually alluring, only because his family is wealthy. And his wealth is a phallic legacy just as much as his profession, since it is passed down to him through the male line of inheritance.

Pierre's political identity as a fully adequate bourgeois male implies a specific sexual identity, namely heterosexuality, expressed through marriage and its exchange of women. The text makes explicit the inextricable entwining of the sexual and the political in Pierre's identity:

Est-ce qu'elle ne pouvait le détacher de sa fortune et du salon de tante Renée où elle l'avait rencontré? Est-ce qu'elle ne pouvait pas le rejoindre: ses yeux verts et gris, ses mains, son corps, et, à travers eux, lui-même?

Lui-même? Le fils d'un président de Cour d'appel, le futur président de Cour d'appel, le catholique sans croire en Dieu, le patriote pour croire en quelque chose.

Lui-même? (*R*, p.219)

In *Le Refus*, phallic male sexuality appears as a manifestation of the bourgeois ideology the text condemns. The male subject's attempt to equate penis with phallus, and the

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<sup>67</sup> Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, pp.35-42.

support lent to this equation by the bourgeois social collectivity, must be rejected along with reactionary politics.

In the post-Second World War films through which Silverman illustrates her analysis, the dominant fiction is revealed precisely as a fiction by a discourse which puts male lack overtly on display. Neither Pelletier nor Thomas attack the dominant fiction in this way. Thomas achieves the same result as these post-war films in her presentation of Henri, by revealing the dominant fiction *as* fiction through the structure of specularity in her own discourse. In Pelletier's work, and in Thomas's presentation of Pierre, the dominant fiction is acknowledged to be *dominant*, but the pernicious nature of this cultural myth is revealed by displaying its detrimental effect on both the female subject and on the (revolutionary) quest for the erasure of more general social and political oppression. For Silverman, any effective assault on the dominant fiction necessarily implies:

the confrontation of the male subject with the defining conditions of all subjectivity, conditions which the female subject is obliged compulsively to reenact, but upon the denial of which traditional masculinity is predicated: lack, specularity, and alterity.<sup>68</sup>

This is, as she acknowledges, no mean feat, since 'there is no subject whose identity and desires have not been shaped *to some extent* by it [the dominant fiction]'; that is, no subject can stand outside of culture in order to criticize it.<sup>69</sup> Silverman suggests that what little contestation is possible must occur at the level of discourse, since the

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<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, pp.50-51.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, p.48.

dominant fiction can only be said to exist as 'discursive practice and its psychic residue', and she proposes Marxism and feminism as possible sites of resistance.<sup>70</sup> *La Femme vierge* and *Le Refus*, both of which engage to some degree with these latter ideologies, are examples of texts which attempt to resist the dominant fiction of masculinity because their political imperatives demand it.

#### IV

##### *War and peace*

Louise Weiss's political imperative is primarily pacifist, therefore any positive representation of masculinity emerging from *Délivrance* must somehow rescue virility from the military; her feminist mandate also requires that masculinity be rescued from the phallus if it is to occupy anything other than a politically antagonistic position in the novel. I should like to suggest that *Délivrance* opposes negative (phallic) masculinity to an altogether different male subjectivity through the contrast between the narrator's two lovers, Anselme, the narratee, and Merri, the narrator's dead fiancé. Thus the text demystifies the dominant fiction, but also goes further to offer a potential model for adequate but non-phallic masculinity.

Anselme occupies a negative position within the romance plot - he has abandoned the narrator, Marie, who is devoted to him, and, meeting her again by chance, contributes to her decision to undergo an abortion (the child is not his), a decision which bars Marie from the maternal solution ultimately recommended by the

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<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*, pp.48-49.

text. During their chance meeting (the only point in the novel where the reader witnesses Anselme directly as a character), a position of absolute control is ascribed to Anselme throughout (*D*, pp.256-82). Marie however desires this domination: 'dans mes yeux passaient les sentiments du caniche qui fête son maître rentré' (*D*, p.268); 'je voulais encore me soumettre' (*D*, p.269). The nature of this power relationship is manifested in the language attributed to Marie which describes Anselme's actions: 'Tu me dominais' (*D*, p.267); 'Tu m'ordonnas' (*D*, p.268); 'Tu m'emmenas' (*D*, p.268); 'Tu me commandais' (*D*, p.268); 'Tu m'installas dans une chambre et tu tournas la clef' (*D*, p.269). Here the subject/object opposition between the characters is stressed grammatically. Furthermore:

Soudain, me soulevant comme un fêtu, tu me flanquas sur le lit [...] Tu tâtas ma gorge qui était pleine et mon ventre endolori, me violentant avec des mains d'accoucheur.

Tu constatas:

- C'est vrai. (*D*, p.274)

Tu me renversas. Tu clouas mes épaules de tes deux poings sur les draps (*D*, p.276)

As the scene progresses, the subject/object opposition takes on a specifically sexual, and then altogether brutal element. Anselme, already rejected by the reader because of his role in the plot, must also be despised ideologically; like Thomas and Pelletier, Weiss makes the point that phallic male sexuality is detrimental to the female subject. The point is a feminist one - women's liberation is opposed to the dominant fiction, but is dogged by women who remain complicit in the oppression phallic masculinity produces.

Anselme's ontological alignment with the dominant fiction in its sexual manifestation is further politicized in that this element of his subjectivity is stated to be a direct result of the war. In Anselme, war trauma manifests itself as a sexual wound. Thus his odious sexuality is integrated into the text's pacifist theme.

Je suis un homme qui veut toutes les femmes, celles qui sont à moi, celles qui ne sont pas à moi, les salopes que je n'aurai plus, les misérables que j'aurai demain. Tu entends, Marie, toutes les femmes. Je suis aussi malheureux que toi, qui m'aimes.

Un peu plus calme, tu voulais t'expliquer:

- Tu comprends, la guerre...

La guerre! Que me voulait encore cette garce? Tu me dis:

- Je l'ai commencée trop jeune. On m'a sorti du dortoir de mon collège pour m'envoyer à la caserne. Alors, j'ai pris une femme pour oublier maman qui pleurait. Et puis j'en ai pris une autre pour imiter les camarades, et puis une autre pour me tenir chaud dans les châlits, d'autres encore pour ne pas entendre le vacarme qui me poursuivait pendant les permissions, et puis d'autres, pour rien, pour le plaisir, pour le changement. (*D*, pp.276-77)

Anselme's excessive sexuality is a vehement assertion of male adequacy in response to historical trauma - the First World War - which threatens to expose male lack. Like Gilles, he makes use of his sex organ to convince himself that he is the repository of the phallus. For Anselme, the possession of the penis must compensate for the experience of trauma, allowing him access once again to phallic masculinity. The lack of the mother must initially be hidden through sexuality; then that failure in male adequacy which is fear (*vacarme*) must also be compensated for. Eric Leed and Joanna Bourke both point to impotence as a widespread manifestation of war trauma, suggesting also that such psychoses increased after the cessation of hostilities, afflicting



a large number of veterans such as the fictional Anselme.<sup>71</sup> Anselme's desire for promiscuity then can be read as an emphatic affirmation of the dominant fiction in the face of historical trauma. He refuses the identity of what Gilbert terms 'the gloomily bruised modernist antihero', one of the 'unmen'.<sup>72</sup> Thus, through Anselme, Weiss does not so much expose male lack as make transparent the male subject's attempt to conceal the truth from himself. The device is similar to that employed by Thomas in her representation of Henri Millet, though arguably more developed.

Merri by contrast occupies a positive position in the romance plot as Marie's constant and gentle childhood sweetheart; pathos is achieved in the account of his untimely death at the front before the fulfilment of his romantic potential. He is present in the text as a narrator when Marie rereads his letters from the front. The letters occupy approximately twenty pages of the novel (*D*, p.111-33). The ideological problem presented to the text by Merri is that of representing recognizably adequate masculinity (a male subject who will not be dismissed by the reader as weak or effeminate) without recourse to phallic definitions of masculinity or the equation of virility with the military, which stand in contradiction to the text's pacifist and feminist messages. Is there a viable area between phallic masculinity and masculinity trauma which can be occupied by the male subject?

Despite initial optimism that the war will be short and he will be spared, Merri conforms to the pacifist message and becomes clearly disillusioned with the war. In

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<sup>71</sup> Leed, *No Man's Land*, pp.183-4, p.189, and Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, p.266. Leed quotes the findings of Dr. Sandor Ferenczi who identified impotence in almost all of his neurasthenic military patients in 1915.

<sup>72</sup> Gilbert, 'Soldier's Heart', p.198.

September 1914, after his first exposure to actual fighting, he states: 'On a l'impression que rien ne sert à rien et qu'il faut obéir sans comprendre' (*D*, p.117). At Christmas of the same year, he writes:

Pour ma part, il y a longtemps que je ne comprends plus l'honneur de tuer. Je suis un chasseur qui veut bien abattre sa pitance ou se défendre contre les mauvaises bêtes, mais je ne suis pas un guerrier fou d'attaquer. (*D*, p.122)

Merri certainly does not believe that it is a sweet thing and becoming to die for one's country. Nor indeed, to kill for it. An opposition is created and sustained between necessary, justified killing in the rural community and futile politically-motivated slaughter. Accordingly, Merri's shooting of a suffering calf is 'une bonne action' (*D*, p.118) as opposed, it is implied, to the shooting of German soldiers. The futility of shooting a man because of his nationality is dramatized in the account of the truce of Christmas Day, 1914, when French troops fraternized with the Germans after hearing them singing. The historical veracity of this detail suggests that the resolution of the problem of Merri has, for Weiss, a significance beyond the confines of fictional characterization.<sup>73</sup> Merri is shown both to have lost faith in the constructiveness of the war, and to be prey to feelings of loss of control and resentment at the task forced upon him, for which he can no longer see any justification. His response to the war is reminiscent of that of Sassoon and Owen. As their cases suggest, such feelings,

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<sup>73</sup> Martin Gilbert describes 'a spontaneous outburst of pacific feeling' which led to the exchange of souvenirs between enemy troops as well as cigars, chocolate and alcohol: 'That Christmas Day, fraternization between the Germans and their enemies took place almost everywhere in the British No-Man's Land, and at places in the French and Belgian lines. It was almost always initiated by German troops, through their messages or song'. Gilbert, *First World War*, pp.117-9.

potentially pacifist, are also precisely those which can herald neurosis. Leed, examining the conditions which provoked shell shock, states:

As men experienced the war increasingly as the estrangement of themselves from their 'actions', as a loss of control, as a damming up of their potencies, their lost autonomy and repressed energies were invested in an abstraction: 'the War', the autonomous mechanism of slaughter.<sup>74</sup>

Thus opposition to 'the War' and neurosis are seen to be closely, if not inextricably, linked.

However, Merri emerges from his epistolary narrative without being afflicted by neurasthenia, and with his masculinity intact. Though disillusioned, he states: 'Je ne suis pas découragé' (*D*, p.125); he is brave - brave enough both to overcome his initial fear and to admit it: 'Comme le tir de l'infanterie se faisait entendre, j'ai rentré la tête dans mes épaules. Après, j'ai bien ri de ma couardise' (*D*, p.116). But most of all he is capable, in a common-sense, rural way. For example, he does not suffer from blisters because he has buttered his boots instead of wasting supplies on his bread for short-term pleasure; he washes his clothes; he could have milked a goat to nourish himself if only there had been time (*D*, p.113, p.117). In his attitude to military command, Merri also shows himself capable of adequate masculinity without recourse to the phallus. Promoted to the rank of *sous-lieutenant*, he is aware that his rise is due simply to the deaths of others. Access to authority hardly permeates his identity. He carries out his new job with efficiency - he is a good leader - but this does not lead to any ontological alignment with control for its own sake:

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<sup>74</sup> Leed, *No Man's Land*, p.152.

Maintenant je commande à des territoriaux. Le plus jeune a au moins trente-cinq ans, ce qui est bien vieux, et je t'assure que je suis gêné de leur donner des ordres. Mais ils sont très gentils pour moi et ils me facilitent la tâche. (*D*, p.126)

It is also noteworthy in this context that the account of trench warfare contained in Merri's letters focuses on fighting in retreat - not a stereotypically virile mode of combat. But it is certainly not a tale of cowardice. Furthermore, in emotional terms, Merri offers Marie an ideal combination of *amitié* and *amour*, the potential for love and mutual understanding, which offers a direct contrast to Anselme's phallic masculinity. His commitment to her is indicated by the frequency of his letters, by his constant desire to communicate his experience:

Parfois je hais de te parler de la guerre. Parfois, au contraire, il faut que je t'en parle pour avoir l'impression que tu continues à partager ma vie [...] Je ne sais pas, mais il me semble que j'ai plus chaud dans la poitrine que les camarades et que je ne tousse pas parce qu'un être existe au monde, toi, ma gentille chérie, qui sans vivre dans cette fange saura, après ma lettre se la représenter et me faire croire que je pourrai en émerger. (*D*, p.124)

Military-virility then is not a sealed unity for Merri; the idea of the female subject's irrelevance to war and her innate inability to understand it, which emerges from Drieu's writing, is absent here. Merri readily admits a female presence into the trenches in the form of his narratee.<sup>75</sup>

The tragedy, within the novel's political framework, is that the war will be responsible for the non-fulfilment of this ideal of masculinity. The 'good' man is lost

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<sup>75</sup> Bourke, in *Dismembering the Male*, suggests that soldiers who maintained a regular correspondance with loved ones at home tended to experience a much less traumatic reintegration into post-war society (p.164).

along with the 'bad'. Furthermore, neither the peace, the freedom nor the happiness for which Merri was sacrificed have been achieved: Marie is miserable, and Noémi has sacrificed her life to League of Nations pacifism in an abortive attempt to prevent another war (*D*, p.133). And it is not only through death that Merri is sacrificed. For the war is shown to have had a detrimental effect on his sexuality before he dies. The war has tempted Merri, as well as Anselme, into promiscuity, which, through an *ex post facto* justification, Merri says will strengthen his relationship with Marie since he has come to know his own sexuality better and thus is more convinced of his commitment to her. The sexual double standard is clearly in operation here, since he wants to shield Marie from the knowledge of men she might acquire simply from working in a war hospital!<sup>76</sup> More insidiously:

J'ai découvert aujourd'hui que j'avais le goût du danger et que sans toi, je m'y livrerais avec passion. De loin tu me sauves. Je ne sais pas comment te faire parvenir cette lettre. Ton frère -*Merri* (*D*, p.118)

Merri believes that his sexuality (his love for Marie) can defeat the war but Marie, noticing that *frère* has replaced *amour*, realizes that the male subject is susceptible to the excitement of combat:

La guerre l'épargnerait peut-être, lui, mais n'épargnerait pas notre sentiment. J'avais traduit son adieu: l'aventure et le danger lui sortaient l'amour de la tête. (*D*, p.118-19)

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<sup>76</sup> That Merri is not without flaws does not nullify the argument that he can offer the ideal male-female relationship. If he shows a degree of paternalism, it is more a question of psychological realism: the reader is aware that Marie desires domination, and must be made to believe that Marie and Merri are compatible. In any case, the war is held responsible rather than Merri as an individual.

If the war does not kill him physically, it will kill in him the potential for positive male sexuality. However, Merri's self-justification and his self-delusion rescue him to a certain extent from blame, allowing him to appear as a victim of the war without endangering his generally positive inscription in the text. The reader is ultimately willing to forgive him these transgressions because they are clearly integrated into the text's pacifist message: war must be defeated, because it even threatens the life, the subjectivity and the sexuality of a generation of potentially 'good' men.

The resolution of the ideological problem of the representation of Merri allows *Délivrance* to go beyond a gendered politics which subsumes pacifism entirely into feminism, and to oppose the notion that pacifism is necessarily inscribed uniquely with femininity. According to Siân Reynolds:

A common term to describe pacifism before the war is 'bélant', bleating', the sound made by sheep and associated with female weakness [...] Is it too far-fetched to argue that the historical focus on the extreme right-wing or fascist leagues, 'nasty but virile', along with study of the Popular Front as a reaction to fascism, has been a way of avoiding looking too closely at peace movements whose behaviour (non-violence, fraternization) was associated symbolically with the feminine?<sup>77</sup>

Through Merri, Weiss achieves a viable presentation of a male subject who is neither phallic nor traumatized, who is characterized in terms of both non-violence and fraternization, but is not therefore negatively feminized. A different model of masculinity is being suggested whereby the male subject can relinquish control, give play to his emotions, be on the losing side in battle, advocate peace, admit a female presence into the trenches and still be a man. Merri and Anselme's common experience

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<sup>77</sup> Reynolds, *France Between the Wars*, pp.182-83.

of war positions them differently in relation to the dominant fiction: Anselme incarnates it, whilst Merri offers an escape from it. In the final analysis, this potential for a different mode of masculinity is cut off by the war: it is precisely this cutting-off of potential which further underlines the pernicious nature of war and stresses the need for an effective pacifist politics in 1936 if France is to avoid the sacrifice of yet another generation of Merris.



My suggestion in this chapter has been that the Horatian exemplar *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* and Silverman's concept of the dominant fiction function according to a comparable dynamic. *Dulce et decorum est* provides a justification or meaning which conceals the horror of dying from the male subject; similarly the alignment of penis with phallus provides ontological meaning which conceals the horror of lack which is the truth of subjectivity. Both Horace and the dominant fiction suggest a particular form of adequate masculinity which implies a privileged relationship to politics. The fact that dying for the fatherland is an exclusively male possibility, and that this possibility is in some way a pinnacle of masculinity suggests an inextricable intertwining of masculinity and that polity; this intertwining is also suggested by the penis-phallus equation, also an exclusively male subject position through which masculinity is deemed to be appropriate to politics-as-power.

Given the existence of the dominant fiction - of whose bank of representations *Dulce et decorum est* could be said to be a part - it is perhaps to be expected that a male

author writing about politics will make clear links between male sexuality and politics. Thus Drieu marshals the dominant fiction for fascism and locates castration entirely within modernism. For Malraux, the dominant fiction is associated with a politically productive and virile fraternity, and is opposed to onanistic sexuality and solitude. These texts then, which exhibit very different ideological stances produce very similar models of masculinity. In both cases, ideal male sexuality functions positively as a motif of successful politicization. In both cases also, inadequate male sexuality functions negatively as a motif of inadequate politicization: thus for Drieu, embodied homosexuality is linked with decadence, and for Malraux, onanistic sexuality is linked with a politics which renounces virile fraternity. Both texts refuse the threat of castration, or masculinity trauma, Drieu insisting that fascism will eradicate castration as a result of its eradication of modernism, and Malraux ensuring that the potential for trauma is always recuperated either literally, through the physical recovery of the male subject, or symbolically, through the myth of heroism.

It emerges clearly from the work of Thomas, Pelletier and Weiss that associations between male sexuality and politics must be contested by a female subject advocating female politicization. If she cannot see any possibility of reconciling her own sexuality with politics in the contemporary cultural climate, she certainly refuses to maintain associations between male sexuality and politics which constitute one specific element of the exclusive masculinization of the polity. By attacking the dominant fiction of male sexuality in discourse, Pelletier, Thomas and Weiss advance a more general cultural demystification in order to bring closer their goal of political emancipation. Pelletier is not hindered in this aim by the privileging throughout her



writing of *virilisation*: although wanting to appropriate for women the advantages of masculinity, she adopts a highly critical stance as regards the masculinity of actual men in the society she wants to see abolished, particularly in its sexual manifestation. Such criticism in Thomas's *Le Refus* is achieved both through formal devices and thematic content. Thomas's *Bildungsroman* permits her to analyse specific class elements of the dominant fiction and its relationship to male sexuality. Weiss is the only author to propose an alternative to phallic masculinity. Her critique of phallic masculinity through the character of Anselme is countered by Merri. However the text's recommendation of pacifism takes precedence over its analysis of masculinity, and, in the final analysis, Merri as an incarnation of positive masculinity must be sacrificed to achieve the pathos which will convince the reader of the necessity of avoiding another war at all costs.

This chapter began by making an analogy between masculinity and war, and masculinity and politics through the image of the male body. It has argued throughout that the male subject's concept of his physical sex organ is relevant to aesthetic reconstructions of the relationships between masculinity, male sexuality and politics. Chapter 4 takes up in more detail the question of the relationships between the physical body, both male and female, and politics.

## CHAPTER FOUR

THE GROTESQUE FEMALE BODY AS POLITICAL POSSIBILITY: THE  
EXAMPLE OF HENRIETTE VALET.

J'ai marché longtemps le long du quai. Pour retarder mon arrivée devant l'hôpital, pour prolonger je ne sais quel espoir absurde, j'ai fait un long détour. Pitoyables ruses avec la misère et l'inévitable.

Un vent glacial rabat le brume en larges cercles au ras du sol, chaque tourbillon prend les jambes dans un lasso. J'ai froid.

Dans le brouillard je ne vois pas les passants qui me croisent - à peine les lumières des ponts en banderoles et les reflets mouvants sous les arches. Malgré la brume et le froid le fleuve n'est pas triste. Ses ponts illuminés le pavoisent, l'eau puissante roule en lourds paquets. Je voudrais le suivre sans fin, je m'attarde, mes mains traînent sur la pierre rugueuse des parapets.

Un taxi. Il freine et grince le long du trottoir. J'ai l'air d'attendre, le chauffeur me fait signe. -Mais non je n'attends rien. Je vais, le plus lentement possible, chercher refuge à L'Hôtel-Dieu.

Déjà dans l'ombre j'aperçois l'angle du bâtiment, la pierre grise est tassée dans la brume grise, la pierre grise avec ses grands trous aveugles: les portes, les fenêtres [...] C'est donc là que les femmes enceintes pauvres viennent chercher un abri? Je m'attendais à trouver la porte ouverte. Devant cette forteresse je reste immobile. La maison me repousse comme un être sans visage.<sup>1</sup>

Claire Mélin, dactylographe au 'Commissariat du Ravitaillement', monte doucement à pied le boulevard Michel-Bakounine [...] Claire aurait pu facilement prendre l'autobus; mais elle a préféré marcher quoique, à vrai dire, elle soit bien lasse. Enceinte de neuf mois, elle va accoucher à la Maternité du boulevard Port-Royal et comme elle sait devoir rester peut-être un mois enfermée, elle profite de ses derniers instants de liberté pour flâner par les rues.

Elle n'est déjà plus très jeune, trente-deux ans, et elle se rappelle le temps où le boulevard avait un aspect tout différent de celui qu'il a aujourd'hui.

C'était alors le boulevard Saint-Michel, il était bordé de boutiques et de cafés, maintenant l'aspect est tout différent.

Tout est plus vaste. Le trottoir est très large et tout le long des

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<sup>1</sup> Henriette Valet, *Madame 60*<sup>BIS</sup> (Paris: Grasset, 1934), pp.1-3. Further references to this work are given after quotations in the text.

maisons règne une plate-bande garnie de gazon et de fleurs. Ces maisons qu'elle a connues étriquées sont maintenant de colossaux palais ornés de colonnes et hauts de vingt étages et, comme ils sont très grands, il n'y en a guère qu'une dizaine de chaque côté du boulevard [...] C'était sans appréhension, nous l'avons dit, que la jeune femme se rendait à l'hôpital d'accouchement. Elle en était à sa quatrième grossesse. Deux ans auparavant, elle avait donné à l'Etat une belle petite fille qui lui avait valu un an de congé payé; elle en avait profité pour visiter la Suisse qui était aussi en régime communiste [...] L'hôpital d'accouchement n'avait plus rien de triste. Le nouveau régime avait compris que dans toute maison où des humains devaient vivre pour n'importe quel motif, il fallait leur rendre la vie agréable. (*VN*, pp.1-25)

The openings of these two very different novels are strikingly similar in terms of setting and subject. In each, a pregnant woman makes her way towards a Paris hospital, walking slowly towards her destination in the area of the boulevard Saint-Michel and the Seine. In each, the character of that destination - the institution where the pregnant female body is to be confined - functions as an index of the text's political context. In Valet's capitalist Dystopia then, the building is miserable and unwelcoming and provokes fear. Here, the experience of pregnancy dramatizes the dreadfully flawed nature of the institutions provided by the polity for its socius. In Pelletier's post-revolutionary Utopia, those institutions reflect the zenith of political progress: the hospital is designed to 'rendre la vie agréable' so that its patients can approach 'sans appréhension'. Pelletier describes equality achieved - all women have the right to give birth 'à la Maternité du boulevard Port-Royal'. Valet describes a world in which the nature of a woman's experience of pregnancy is entirely contingent on her economic circumstances: the Hôtel-Dieu is a refuge rather than a right. Furthermore, 'les femmes enceintes pauvres' have the right only to a refuge which reproduces the misery of their condition. This misery is manifested in the grey, faceless, closed building which is a far cry from the 'plate-bande garnie de gazon et de fleurs' which brightens up Claire Mélin's experience of Parisian

topography. Through physical descriptions of the city, Pelletier and Valet introduce the sociopolitical critique which will be central to their novels; these descriptions are integrated into an analysis of the experience of female physicality, which is the motif chosen to express the text's political message.

In the case of *Madame 60<sup>BIS</sup>*, the institution and the female body that is to be institutionalized are brought close together in aesthetic terms. The representation of the building in terms of 'grands trous' prefigures the representation of women's pregnant bodies in terms of its orifices which pervades the imagery of the text. Similarly, the flowing of the Seine past the Hôtel-Dieu presages Valet's representation of female carnality in terms of fluidity and flux, in terms of an absence, or a transgression, of conventional physical boundaries. This is only the beginning of Valet's socialization and politicization of the female pregnant body. The social critique which is here inscribed on the building of the Hôtel-Dieu is increasingly reinscribed on the woman's body in both aesthetic and thematic terms. This chapter aims to investigate that inscription. To that end, it compares Valet's treatment of the female body with the appearance of physical bodies in the political novels this study has examined.

*Madame 60<sup>BIS</sup>* recounts the story of its eponymous first-person narrator from her arrival at the Hôtel-Dieu to her departure with her newborn child. The narrator gets this strange epithet from the positioning of her makeshift hospital bed squeezed in between the beds of Madame 60 and Madame 61: the patients are all called either by their numbers or by some appropriate nickname. Although poor and pregnant like the other women she finds cramped together in the inadequate hospital ward, the narrator is endowed with a degree of political insight and lucidity which the others lack. She gradually becomes integrated into the daily life of the ward, and, through her

conversations and observations, the lives and experiences of the other women are revealed to the reader. The only ‘plot’ as such is the progression of various bodies from pregnancy to labour and finally birth.

Valet uses childbearing to dramatize a threefold political oppression which is specific in its effects but general in its source:

Elles sont opprimées et écrasées parce qu’elles sont pauvres, parce qu’elles sont femmes, parce qu’elles vont être mères. Les causes de leur malheur sont les mêmes pour toutes et ne viennent pas d’elles-mêmes mais de tout un monde. (*MSB*, p.91)

The female pregnant body is the site of Valet’s analysis of much wider class, economic and gender inequalities. The text asks how the suffering which is inscribed on the female body, and the political roots of that suffering, can fruitfully be brought into discourse as a weapon against oppression. The narrator sets herself the task of revealing to the women in the hospital the political truth of their condition in order to achieve political progress. The text’s central problematic then is formulated by the narrator as ‘Que leur dire?’, ‘Qui a jamais exprimé leur souffrance?’ (*MSB*, p.41). She discovers that the production of a liberating discourse is hampered on the one hand by working-class women’s lack of revolutionary fervour and complete inability to generalize the negative aspects of their particular situation, and on the other by their pragmatic blindness to their own misery which, whilst actually cementing that misery, renders it tolerable on a day-to-day basis. They are utterly resigned: ‘C’est comme ça parce que c’est comme ça’ (*MSB*, p.24). It is clear to the narrator that their misery is a manifestation of their socio-political environment, but the women in the Hôtel-Dieu do not share her political insight: ‘Et pourtant chacune d’elles se croit un petit point particulier dans l’ensemble; chacune pense

que sa misère est unique' (*MSB*, p.91). They subscribe to a right-wing individualist view which blames the private self for the poverty the class system imposes on its underdogs: 'Si les gens crèvent de faim, c'est qu'ils ne sont pas débrouillards' (*MSB*, pp.38-39). Valet suggests a double bind - the class system produces proletarian misery, a misery which the miserable themselves must not admit if despair is to be avoided, yet the consequent disguising of class-based misery as individual fault supports the ideology responsible for the creation of misery in the first place. For to focus on 'l'ensemble', to speak their oppression, would be unbearable:

Alors la douleur est en elles, et elles le savent à peine, parce qu'elle n'a pas été dite. La souffrance est ensevelie dans la torpeur. On la supporte mieux ainsi. La misère serait intolérable s'il fallait la voir en face. (*MSB*, pp.41-2)

Mes compagnes n'étouffent pas dans les maisons noires; elles n'ont jamais vu leur taudis, leur misère, leur esclavage. (*MSB*, p.73)

The narrator is faced with the paradox that the creation of a discourse which is politically liberating in general terms will consign individual women to a despair which is less tolerable than their ignorance: 'Pour éveiller en elles la révolte, il faudrait d'abord éveiller le désespoir. Mais ai-je le droit de le faire?' (*MSB*, p.93).<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately the narrator cannot provide the solution to the text's political dilemma.

She concludes: 'Je n'ai pas su répondre à cette question: que faire? J'ai seulement appris

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<sup>2</sup> The narrator here articulates the sort of dilemma Simone de Beauvoir engages with in her introduction to *Le Deuxième sexe*: 'Mais nous ne confondons pas non plus l'idée d'intérêt privé avec celle de bonheur: c'est là un autre point de vue qu'on rencontre fréquemment; les femmes de harem ne sont-elles pas plus heureuses qu'une électricienne? La ménagère n'est-elle pas plus heureuse que l'ouvrière? On ne sait trop ce que le mot bonheur signifie et encore moins quelles valeurs authentiques il recouvre; il n'y a aucune possibilité de mesurer le bonheur d'autrui et il est toujours facile de déclarer heureuse la situation qu'on veut lui imposer: ceux qu'on condamne à la stagnation en particulier, on les déclare heureux sous le prétexte que le bonheur est immobilité' (I, 30-31). Beauvoir overcomes the problem by replacing the question of happiness with that of 'la morale existentialiste'; Valet's text does not dismiss the problem quite so categorically.

que mes colères intérieures et mes révoltes étaient inutiles' (*MSB*, p.242). The act of giving birth in abject poverty is presented to the reader as a microcosm of what is wrong with bourgeois capitalism in general; the narrator cannot however go on to suggest the precise nature of the political possibilities for change. But this is not a pessimistic text in gender and political terms. It is through its imagery rather than through its narrative voice that *Madame 60*<sup>BIS</sup> suggests political potential. This chapter investigates ways in which the text's representation of women in terms of their reproductive function, the flow of bodily fluids, gaping holes, and a viscous and undifferentiated mass of female flesh functions to express potential relationships between women and power.

## I

### *Carnival and the grotesque body: Bakhtin*

I read Valet's novel through the filter of Mikhail Bakhtin's 1965 reading of Rabelais in terms of carnival and the grotesque body.<sup>3</sup> Bakhtin offers a productive opportunity to perceive the relationship between Valet's representations of the female body and her evident Marxist-feminist consciousness. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin notes the incapacity of La Bruyère, reading in 1688, to integrate Rabelais's grotesque imagery, which the latter terms 'ordure' and 'sale corruption', with Rabelais's literary and academic insights, which causes a failure to comprehend the homogeneity of the text.<sup>4</sup> Similarly it would be possible to object, in the case of Valet's text, that it is difficult to reconcile the subsuming of woman in the pregnant body with its advocacy

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<sup>3</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, pp.107-9.

of female liberation and politicization. However, the Bakhtinian filter will show that reading like *La Bruyère* is not the only possibility.

There is textual justification for reading Valet's text in terms of Bakhtin's theory and Rabelais's aesthetic. The coincidence of imagery in the texts of Rabelais and Valet is striking enough to suggest a deliberate intertextual link. The most overt reference is Valet's naming of one of her characters after Gargantua's mother, Gargamelle. Such intertextual coincidence is not without historical context. Surveying the history of 'Rabelaisiana' in the twentieth century, Bakhtin notes the founding of *La Société des études rabelaisiennes* in 1903, and in its wake the production of a scholarly edition of Rabelais's work and various critical studies in the 1920s and 1930s: Rabelais then was in the intellectual air in the inter-war period.<sup>5</sup>

The potential political relevance of carnival has aroused considerable critical debate. Various feminist engagements with Bakhtin exist.<sup>6</sup> Nancy Glazener, for example, describes how Bakhtin is attractive to feminism because of his favouring of a multiplicity of socially and ideologically differentiated 'voices' or 'languages' and his presentation of carnival as anarchic in its otherness.<sup>7</sup> Clair Wills likens this anarchy to the situation of the female hysteric theorized in the 1970s by French critics such as Catherine Clément.<sup>8</sup> For Wayne C. Booth, on the other hand, Bakhtin's carnival is problematic in

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, pp.129-36.

<sup>6</sup> See for example *Bakhtin, Carnival and Other Subjects: Selected Papers from the Fifth International Bakhtin Conference, University of Manchester, July 1991*, ed. by David Shepherd (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), pp.163-258, and *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, ed. by Ken Hirschkop (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Nancy Glazener, 'Dialogic Subversion: Bakhtin, the Novel and Gertrude Stein', in *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, ed. by Hirschkop, pp.109-29.

<sup>8</sup> Clair Wills, 'Upsetting the Public: Carnival, Hysteria and Women's Texts', in *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, ed. by Hirschkop, pp.130-51.



feminist terms because the Rabelaisian source text fails completely to address a female reader.<sup>9</sup> For Glazener, the actual carnival images are ultimately problematic and the female grotesque body is seen to create more problems than it solves. The present analysis investigates the political potential of manifestations of carnival in Valet's text. In the Bakhtinian carnival, the grotesque body image is always positive: my question then is the extent to which Valet's grotesque female bodies can similarly be accorded a positive significance. Can Bakhtin's insistence that carnival 'is in no way hostile to women and does not approach her negatively', that carnival is part of a positive comic strand of the 'Gallic tradition', be said to be true for Valet in political terms?

Bakhtin argues strongly in favour of a positive political reading of carnival. He constantly stresses the non-official, illegitimate nature of carnival and maintains that carnival images 'grant the author the right to treat an unofficial subject' and 'to express unofficial views of the world'.<sup>10</sup> Chapter 7 of Bakhtin's study, entitled 'Rabelais' Images and His Time', argues for the historical relevance of Rabelais and the capacity of grotesque images to deepen textual explorations of political issues. He insists that carnival laughter is liberating, sincere and free, that 'laughter could never become an instrument to oppress and blind the people. It always remained a free weapon in their hands'.<sup>11</sup> However theorists and critics have not taken the political efficacy of carnival for granted. Can carnival really be more than a Barthesian 'vaccine' whereby the bourgeoisie permits 'quelques subversions localisées', the better to ensure its own

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<sup>9</sup> Wayne C. Booth, 'Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism', in *Bakhtin: Essays and Dialogues on His Work*, ed. by Gary Saul Morson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp.145-76.

<sup>10</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p.262.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p.94.

survival?<sup>12</sup> Absolutely not, according to Eagleton:

Carnival, after all, is a *licensed* affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art. As Shakespeare's Olivia remarks, there is no slander in an allowed fool.<sup>13</sup>

Bakhtin does acknowledge the interdependence of official and unofficial feasts and the temporary nature of carnival hilarity:

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions<sup>14</sup>

But he nonetheless asserts that carnival is imbued with a critical and subversive potential and that its images, when transposed into literature, are revolutionary. It is not my intention to rehearse the argument here.<sup>15</sup> Ben Taylor's conclusion that the subversive potential of carnivalesque images is historically relative seems convincing: my aim in this chapter is indeed to assess specific texts of a specific historical moment without being sidetracked by debates regarding a potential generalized political validity for carnival. The following analysis asserts some political potential for carnival images in the case of Valet's text. Its hypothesis is that, through the grotesque body images which

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<sup>12</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, p.239.

<sup>13</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981), p.148. See also Peter Stalybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), pp.12-26 on this question.

<sup>14</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p.10.

<sup>15</sup> A valuable evaluative description of the polemic is to be found in Ben Taylor, 'Bakhtin, Carnival and Comic Theory' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Nottingham, 1995), pp.10-75.

pervade her novel, Valet is suggesting a solution to the political dilemma which the narrator proves unable to resolve.

Bakhtin maintains that '[t]he grotesque conception of the body is interwoven not only with the cosmic but also with the social, utopian, and historic theme, and above all with the theme of the change of epochs and the renewal of culture'.<sup>16</sup> He suggests that Rabelais used grotesque body images to express the historical change occurring around him. My suggestion is that Valet uses such images in an attempt to *create* change, to approach the political dilemma contained in the narrator's 'Que leur dire?'

### ***Carnival and the grotesque body: Valet***

According to Bakhtin: '[t]he essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation'.<sup>17</sup> Degradation is the rhetorical form which characterizes grotesque representation. Degradation is, in the final analysis, positive, although necessarily ambivalent. Carnival is by its nature ambivalent, focusing on moments of transformation and becoming but always providing a positive 'other side' to that which it negates.<sup>18</sup> Degradation is 'the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity'. Furthermore,

Degradation [...] means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time [...] To

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<sup>16</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, pp.324-25.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p.19.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, pp.410-15.

degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one.<sup>19</sup>

The pregnant female body then is a privileged carnivalesque motif. It is ambivalent in its association of new life with death: Bakhtin often makes reference to the idea of 'pregnant death'.<sup>20</sup> Degradation provokes carnival humour. Carnival is characterized by a collective festive hilarity that is at once deriding and triumphant; it is a free and liberating laughter which banishes fear.<sup>21</sup> Two episodes in Valet's novel are particularly striking in their combination of these elements into a effusion of carnival images. In the first, the description of the *revue* which takes place every evening in the maternity ward of the Hôtel-Dieu (*MSB*, pp.63-67), the women parade their swollen bellies in a celebratory competition of largeness:

- En avant! Marche! Un, deux, crie la moucharde.

La file s'ébranle; les ventres énormes, distendus, bosselés, sans nombril, se suivent en cadence, perchés sur des pattes. Des pattes longues ou courtes ou tordues, lisses ou velues, qui s'écartent comme les branches des compas. Une! Deux! Les femmes creusent les reins, enflent leur ventre. En avant! sans arrêt elles font cercle, elles passent, repassent; les ombres dansent sur le mur [...] une voix nasillarde et vacillante chantonne. C'est une musique étouffée, irréaliste, un jazz mortuaire, une musique à scander les hémorragies, les agonies, la fin de tout. C'est infiniment triste et il y a de quoi crever de rire. C'est une parade obscène, une ronde macabre et rigolarde, une caricature bouffonne de la fécondité.

La mort et la vie se mêlent! (*MSB*, pp.64-65)

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p.19, p.21.

<sup>20</sup> See for example Bakhtin's analysis of the image of the senile pregnant hag in *ibid.*, pp.25-6, and his analysis of Gargantua's wife's death in childbirth in *ibid.*, pp.407-8.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, pp.87-96.

In the second, *la boniche* goes into labour in a frenzy of drunkenness and a concert of sounds and bodies (*MSB*, pp.196-200):

Il faut le fêter, le chérubin. Qui a du pinard en réserve? Allons, sortez les bouteilles, amenez-les, apportez tout ce qui se boit, les médicaments, les purges, tout. Remplissez les verres. Qu'on se saoule, qu'on rigole. Qu'on crève de rire [...] Je veux être saoule, saoule! Je veux arriver sur le billard à quatre pattes. Je veux accoucher en rigolant. Si le médecin connaissait son métier, il mettrait une chopine de Beaujolais à côté de moi [...] Attendez que je gueule un coup. Non, commencez quand même. En cadence, une, deux, une, deux. Et toi, la clocharde, tu dis jamais rien. Tu sais pas de chansons? Eh bien tousse, rote, pète, crie, pleure, pince-toi, accouche, mais fais du bruit. (*MSB*, pp.196-98)

Here then we are clearly in the realm of 'the lower stratum of the body'. Any conventional abstract, romantic, novelistic ideas about the delights of motherhood are clearly degraded, brought down to earth. In the *revue*, the key elements are firstly the ambivalent coexistence of life and death, 'pregnant death', and secondly the hyperbolic representation of the belly. Bakhtin notes that for Victor Hugo, the belly was the centre of the Rabelaisian grotesque aesthetic.<sup>22</sup> Valet's novel turns around the grotesque image of the massive, swollen, pregnant belly: the women's bodies seem to be entirely summed up by this one body part. Such metonymy is typically carnivalesque:

Rabelais presents a number of typical grotesque forms of exaggerated body parts that completely hide the normal members of the body. This is actually a picture of dismemberment, of separate areas of the body enlarged to gigantic dimensions.<sup>23</sup>

*La boniche*'s labour has drinking and noisy celebration as its central images: even

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 18, pp.125-6.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p.327-28.

medicine is to be drunk in this hyperbolic orgy of consumption which is typical of carnival. Eating and drinking, like pregnancy, concern the belly, and, like childbirth, their results are expelled from the body via its lower stratum. The strange births of both Gargantua and Pantagruel involve extended images of eating and drinking: Gargamelle consumes vast quantities of tripe before Gargantua is born; the narration of her labour is interrupted by a drunken chorus, 'Les propos des bien yvres'; and the baby's first words are 'A boyre! à boyre! à boyre!'.<sup>24</sup> Pantagruel is preceded out of the womb by cartloads of salty food, which the attendant midwives interpret as an incitement to drink wine: 'Voicy bonne provision; aussi bien ne bevyons-nous que lâchement, non en lancement; cecy n'est que bon signe, ce sont aiguillons de vin'.<sup>25</sup> The relevance of singing needs no clarification: Bakhtin notes that 'in the atmosphere of Mardi Gras, revelling, dancing, music were all closely combined with slaughter, dismemberment, bowels, excrement, and other images of the material body lower stratum'.<sup>26</sup>

As well as these two discrete outbreaks of carnival, an extended network of imagery pervades Valet's text which situates it clearly within the grotesque aesthetic. The hyperbolic, metonymic representation of the female body as a swollen belly and the general focus on the lower stratum of the body have already been mentioned. The association of the female body with bestial images, flow, the hole, and with the viscous are all elements of the text which a feminist reading might well be forced to decry; all these however are significant manifestations of the grotesque.

Bakhtin tells us that '[t]he combination of human and animal traits is [...] one of

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<sup>24</sup> Rabelais, *La Vie Très Horrificque de Grand Gargantua* (Paris: Flammarion, 1968), pp.57-68. See also Bakhtin's analysis of this episode in *ibid.*, pp.220-27.

<sup>25</sup> Rabelais, *Pantagruel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p.65. Bakhtin's analysis of this episode is to be found in *Rabelais and His World*, pp.325-40.

<sup>26</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, pp.223-24.

the most ancient grotesque forms', noting 'the grotesque character of the transformation of the human element into an animal one'.<sup>27</sup> In the analysis of the scene of guests eating which precedes Gargamelle's labour, Bakhtin points to a pun on the word *tripes* which allows grotesque identification of the guest's own internal organs with the meat they consume; the image continues in the next chapter with Gargamelle's consumption of *tripes* and the consequent descent of her own internal organs. Bakhtin explains,

These images create with great artistry an extremely dense atmosphere of the body as a whole in which all the dividing lines between man and beast, between the consuming and consumed bowels are intentionally erased. On the other hand, these consuming and consumed organs are fused with the generating womb.<sup>28</sup>

Man and beast become indistinguishable, and this hybrid is associated with the pregnant womb. We are not very far then from Valet's description of women who give birth 'comme une bête' (*MSB*, p.106), from Madame 61's 'grognement de bête dérangée' (*MSB*, p.8), from the 'gémissements animaux' (*MSB*, p.10) which fill the maternity ward at night. Childbearing reveals the body in all its grotesque animality, placing it in an ambivalent position on the borderline between the human and the bestial.

Frequent reference is made in *Madame 60*<sup>BIS</sup> to women's body fluids. When she arrives at the Hôtel-Dieu, the narrator immediately notices 'les chemises fripées, tachées de lait et de sang' worn by the sixty or eighty women in the hospital ward (*MSB*, p.7). The expectant mothers identify with the body fluids of other females:

Le lit de La Pologne est resté ouvert. Des malades, l'une après l'autre,

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p.316.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, pp.224-26.

s'approchent, se penchent, reniflent le sang encore chaud. Un sombre plaisir passe dans leurs yeux. Elles restent silencieuses, pâles et voluptueusement troublées. (*MSB*, p.107)

Women's body fluids are also a commodity for exchange: their milk can be sold 'pour ne pas risquer la faim et la déchéance complète' (*MSB*, p.174). Women's actual bodies even seem to be fluid. A fat Polish woman is described as '[i]nforme et blême, avec les seins gélatineux comme les grosses méduses laissées sur le sable par la marée' (*MSB*, p.164), her breasts are 'deux mottes de beurre fondantes' (*MSB*, p.171). Elizabeth Grosz has suggested that there might be a positive way to imagine the conventional association of women with fluid, with seepage, with the viscous in terms of a transgressive refusal to conform to reassuring oppositions such as solid/fluid.<sup>29</sup> The grotesque similarly privileges body fluids of all descriptions. Bakhtin asserts that 'defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing)' join with eating, drinking, copulation, pregnancy and dismemberment as actions that are 'performed on the confines of the body and the outer world' and are thus grotesquely ambivalent, transgressing the body/world demarcation.<sup>30</sup>

The privileging of the hole represents the same transgression. We have already noted the association between the hole and the female body in terms of the representation of the actual building of the Hôtel-Dieu. The grotesque stresses orifices, particularly the gaping mouth which is further associated with the open womb. The wide open mouth of the carnival mask is still a familiar cultural reference. The bowels, genital organs and anus are similarly holes via which 'the confines between bodies and between the body

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<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp.192-210.

<sup>30</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p.317.



and the world are overcome; there is an interchange and an interorientation'.<sup>31</sup> Thus, Valet's labour room is full of 'les corps béants' and 'des chairs ouvertes' (*MSB*, pp.228-29).

The narrator, however, responds negatively to the hole. For example, she cannot bear the nauseating sight of the open mouth of the sleeping Madame 61: 'Je voudrais fermer brutalement ce trou béant' (*MSB*, pp.9-10). She also responds negatively to the merging of individual female bodies into one viscous mass of undifferentiated flesh, another image which is privileged in the grotesque aesthetic. She describes her first experience of the communal hospital bathroom in the following terms:

Les corps sont si rapprochés dans la nuée dense qu'ils forment bloc. C'est un monstre informe, blanchâtre, gluant, grouillant de têtes, gesticulant de ses pattes innombrables.

Je commence à mieux voir. Des femmes se détachent, fragments du monstre gélatineux. Je les vois se profiler sur le fond blanc comme sur un écran, ventres, seins, fesses, chevelures [...] Je voudrais quitter ce lieu. Je me sens fondre et devenir gluante dans cette vapeur. Je voudrais échapper à cet amas sans contours et sans formes. Mais la pièce est petite et les corps sont mêlés; au moindre mouvement on se touche, la peau colle à une autre peau. Le contact des chairs moites et flasques me fait frémir. (*MSB*, pp.13-14)

For Bakhtin however, as we have seen, the ambivalence implied by the transgression of self/other, fluid/solid oppositions is grotesquely positive. A Bakhtinian interpretation of such images would link them with 'the pressing throng, the physical contact of bodies' which characterizes the celebrating crowd in the street or marketplace.<sup>32</sup> Bakhtin asserts:

We find at the basis of grotesque imagery a special concept of the body

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<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p.317.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p 255.

as a whole and of the limits of this whole. The confines between the body and the world and between separate bodies are drawn in the grotesque genre quite differently than in the classic and naturalist images.

Actually, if we consider the grotesque image in its extreme aspect, it never presents an individual body; the image consists of orifices and convexities that present another, newly conceived body [...] the grotesque ignores the impenetrable surface that closes and limits the body as a separate and completed phenomenon.<sup>33</sup>

Through this very physical image of collectivity to which Valet's narrator responds with revulsion, Bakhtin accords positive social and political significance to the grotesque body. The 'people's mass body' in its 'sensual, material bodily unity and community' is a model for a popular, non-hierarchical and unofficial mode of association:

The carnivalesque crowd in the marketplace or in the streets is not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organized *in their own way*, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity.<sup>34</sup>

A reading of Valet's novel productively informed by Bakhtin must ask whether its grotesque images function in political terms in opposition to the negative gloss supplied by the narrator. Adopting the narratorial perspective will not reveal a positive transgression of animal/human, fluid/solid, inside/outside, self/other, body/world oppositions because for the narrator, the association of the female body with the bestial, fluidity, holes and the viscous is revolting. The narrator tends to read like La Bruyère. We are not obliged to do so. It is important to note that the carnival episodes of the *revue* and *la boniche*'s labour both escape narratorial condemnation. Here she does not express

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<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, p.315, p.318.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p.255.

characteristic revulsion, but recognises its ambivalent deriding and triumphant hilarity: ‘C’est *infiniment triste* et il y a *de quoi crever de rire*. C’est une parade obscène, *une ronde macabre et rigolarde*’ (MSB, p.65, my emphasis). This change in narrative interpretation suggests a possibility for a positive reading of carnival.

## II

### *Disembodiment: the fleshy body and the body politic*

On the most basic level, Valet’s text is radical in according the body, and particularly the female body, any place at all in a political discourse. The body is ‘an unofficial subject’ *par excellence*, always banished from the public and official world of politics into the realm of the private and the unofficial:

The relation of the social and political structures of the ‘body politic’ to the fleshy specificity of embodied identities has generally been masked behind the constitutional language of abstracted and implicitly bodiless ‘persons’<sup>35</sup>

Karen Sánchez-Eppeler, in her introduction to her study of American abolitionist and feminist discourses, goes on to suggest that the banishing of the specific, physical body from politics creates a fictional ‘bodiless subject’ which is easily aligned with the white male body. Inter-war debates around the question of female suffrage bear out this assertion. Many such arguments suggested that women were deemed to be too much embodied for politics, thereby asserting an impassible gulf between the body and politics. In their summary of anti-suffrage arguments, Albert and Nicole du Roy identify a range

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<sup>35</sup> Karen Sánchez-Eppeler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism and the Politics of the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p.1.

of ‘arguments médicaux’, such as woman’s ostensible physical weakness, and the supposed subordination of her reason and intellect to her specific physicality.<sup>36</sup>

Comments such as those of the Radical Party senator Alexandre Bérard concerning ‘les mains des femmes’ are a case in point:

Sont-elles bien faites pour le pugilat de l’arène publique? Plus que pour manier le bulletin de vote, les mains des femmes sont faites pour être baisées dévotement quand ce sont celles des mères, amoureusement quand ce sont celles des femmes ou des fiancées.<sup>37</sup>

That which had no basis in physical fact could easily be ‘proved’ mythologically. Similarly, the fear that the politicized woman would be masculinized found physical justification in the incredible assertion that increased political activity in women would lead to physical sterility.<sup>38</sup> Such examples suggest that for the inter-war male political establishment, the right and proper character of politics was disembodiment, and that of women, embodiment. Transgression of such boundaries was unacceptable. In its integration of grotesque images of the female body into a political narrative, Valet’s *Madame 60*<sup>BIS</sup> represents precisely such a transgression.

Paul Nizan’s *La Conspiration* subscribes to the view that the ideal political protagonist is a ‘bodiless subject’, exemplifying the conventional linking of disembodiment with politics and the covert alignment of the white male body with that disembodiment. The embodied male in Nizan’s text is a political failure. Thus, Rosenthal’s political failure consists in submitting to the body through incest and

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<sup>36</sup> du Roy and du Roy, *Citoyennes!*, pp.131-33.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p.133.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, p.132.

ultimately suicide: his sexuality and his death ultimately mark him as a member of the bourgeoisie.<sup>39</sup> When Pluvinage fails to win entry to the *École normale supérieure*, he becomes obsessed with his body which he experiences very negatively:

J'ai commencé alors à avoir honte de mon corps, auquel j'avais jusqu'alors à peine pensé, je me regardais dans les glaces avec dégoût, je me voyais voué, dans le domaine du corps comme dans tous les autres, à je ne sais quelle défaite fatale, je ne me pardonnais pas ces odieux cheveux frisés, cette grâce de garçon boucher qui ne séduit que les petites ouvrières d'usine, la maladresse de mes mouvements, le poil noir qui poussait sur mes joues. (C, pp.279-80)

'[L]e domaine du corps' becomes associated with a generalized failure which foregrounds Pluvinage's forthcoming political failure. Furthermore, his association of the less-than-ideal male body with 'les petites ouvrières d'usine' reveals an attitude to the working classes which calls his revolutionary credentials into question. It is not simply that Pluvinage is physically unattractive: this is Pluvinage's subjective judgement and it rests, of course, on a normative concept of the ideal body. Rather, it is significant that the character who represents most explicitly the antithesis of the political position advocated by the text should be represented in terms of the body. Betrayal of the communist ideal is inscribed on the somatic level. Pluvinage is also feminized by his association with the somatic, since physicality in this text is generally the domain of women, its male characters on the other hand tending to appear in terms of opinions and motivations. For example, Laforgue's body is quite absent from the description of his afternoon encounter with Pauline whereas her nakedness is constantly

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<sup>39</sup> See Chapter 1, pp.43-48 for a detailed account of Rosenthal's commitment.

referred to (C, pp.38-40). When André Simon is seduced by Gladys in the taxi it is her naked breast and genitals which appear; although he reaches orgasm and not her, his pleasure is described entirely in the abstract (C, pp.105-06). For Nizan then, politics is disembodied, and the distinction between disembodiment and embodiment is clearly gendered.

Madeleine Pelletier's *Une Vie nouvelle* identifies a political ideal with an overcoming of the physical body. In her text, that overcoming has a clear sociological focus. In the Utopian state presented in the novel, childbirth has become, as the opening account of Claire Mélin's visit to the *Maternité* shows, a matter for the state rather than for the individual, since all women have an equal right to give birth in comfort in the hygienic state-controlled hospital. In this Utopia of social and scientific progress, it is possible to ignore the body even in labour:

L'accouchement se passait simplement; les progrès de la technique en avaient banni presque toute la crainte. On transportait la patiente dans la salle d'opération et là une infirmière commençait par lui faire une piqûre *eutocique* qui avait pour effet de supprimer la douleur sans diminuer le travail des organes, beaucoup de parturientes accouchaient en lisant un roman ou en écoutant la T.S.F. (VN, pp.25-26)

Progress is not limited to procreation. The ageing of the physical body has also been overcome by the pioneering work of the text's biologist hero, Charles Ratier. Thanks to his new technique of organ grafting, the novel leaves him at the ripe old age of one hundred, 'car il vient de se faire régénérer pour la seconde fois'; the narrator notes: 'le confort est parfait; aussi les maladies sont-elles rares; la mortalité à beaucoup diminué' (VN, p.245). The inconveniences of the body are here completely identified with the

execrable *monde ancien* which the new political regime has overcome. Political progress has ensured that embodiment is a thing of the past.

Aragon's *Les Cloches de Bâle* offers a further example of the disembodiment of the political ideal. I have discussed in Chapter 2 Aragon's elision of the question of the integration of female sexuality with politics by placing Clara Zetkin beyond sexuality, safely cocooned by old age. He similarly elides her female body, focusing his description instead on 'les yeux de Clara'. Her body is an irrelevance compared with these exceptional eyes which almost outlive frail flesh:

L'auteur de ce livre a vu vingt ans plus tard Clara Zetkin presque mourante. Alors encore, à Moscou, épuisée par la maladie et l'âge, décharnée et ne retrouvant plus son souffle au bout de phrases qui semblaient chacune venir comme une flèche du passé vivant qu'elle incarnait, alors encore elle avait ces yeux démesurés et magnifiques, les yeux de toute l'Allemagne ouvrière, bleus et mobiles, comme des eaux profondes traversées par des courants. Cela tenait des mers phosphorescentes, et de l'aïeul légendaire, du vieux Rhin allemand. (*CB*, pp.423-24)

Here we see the tendency, which has its roots in Enlightenment, to associate the political - by extension the public, the realm of reason - with the sense of sight, thus with light (phosphorescence), which amounts to a refusal of the significance of the body. The body may fade without the political light being extinguished.

Well-known images of vigorous, marching Aryan youths suggest parallels between the body and fascist politics which contrast directly with Sánchez-Eppeler's notion of 'bodiless persons'. The question of Drieu la Rochelle's politics of the body is too vast to be exhaustively surveyed here; I shall limit my remarks therefore to a development of the somatic implications of the analysis of sexuality and politics suggested in Chapter 3. Drieu's sexualization of fascism suggests that the relationship

between embodiment and fascism cannot, in *Gilles* at least, be said to be one of unproblematic equivalence.

David Carroll offers the following summary of 'the fascist cult of the body':

If the individual body is weak, badly functioning, divided against itself, so will be the body politic, the people, and the nation. If the body is healthy, vigorous, and the support of spiritual and cultural values and energies, the people will also be healthy and united. The fascist cult of the body was thus not just an eccentric curiosity; it was at the very foundation or centre of fascist aesthetics and politics. In fascist discourse the body functions as a metaphysical concept in physical form, the spiritual embodied in flesh and blood.<sup>40</sup>

He stresses the opposition, often found in fascist writing, between the frail, unhealthy body of the citizen and the forceful, healthy one as manifestations of the political sickness, or health, of the nation. We have noted already that Gilles's own physical body, divided between frailty and vigour, is emblematic of his vacillation between fascism and decadence.<sup>41</sup> Marie Balvet points to an opposition in Drieu's work between a conception of the modernist body as decadent, and the need for what she terms a 'restauration du corps' if fascism is to triumph over modernism:

L'homme, en restaurant son corps, en vivifiant ainsi son âme, se donne les forces primordiales pour combattre, annihiler une civilisation industrielle et rationnelle qui l'opprime depuis deux siècles. Cette restauration du corps proposée par Drieu est, on le voit, directement articulée à sa philosophie politique.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Carroll, *French Literary Fascism*, pp.160-61.

<sup>41</sup> Chapter 3, pp.167-68.

<sup>42</sup> Marie Balvet, 'Décadence et restauration du corps chez Drieu la Rochelle', in *Les Temps Modernes*, 39.437 (December 1982), 1183-97 (p.1193).



The body which is to be reinstated is clearly a male body. Women, as we have seen, are for Drieu inextricably associated with decadence, and their bodies are a manifestation of this decadence which threatens to taint the male subject if he should make sexual contact. Sexual activity is, for Drieu, the lowest form of physicality.<sup>43</sup> Decadence threatens to taint the male body in other ways too, most notably through modern war: 'Peut-être le soldat, qui n'est pas très fort, a-t-il besoin de voir le corps de la femme humilié et endolori comme fut le sien' (*G*, p.103). The modern *soldat*, as opposed to the ancient and noble *guerrier*, is physically humiliated by trench warfare and feels the need to project that humiliation onto the female subject, the legitimate repository of decadence.

It is clear then that the concept of the virile, healthy male body forms a significant part of Drieu's political aesthetic.<sup>44</sup> However, his political gynophobia creates a problem for his desire for an embodied fascist politics. It emerges over and over again from Drieu's writing that the positively politicized individual must be male, virile, vigorous, healthy and bellicose. It also emerges that the male subject's specifically sexual virility must be mapped onto his politics, because any sexual activity which involves women might also potentially involve decadence. Chapter 3 has investigated the ways in which this politicizing of sexuality thus comes to imply homosexuality. However, Drieu's politics is as homophobic as it is gynophobic; embodied homosexuality is equally associated with the decadence of modernity. Thus the logic of Drieu's sexualized politics points to disembodiment. If the political individual is to be housed in an ideal Aryan body, his sexuality is nonetheless to remain on the level of the abstract.

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<sup>43</sup> On Drieu's view of sexual activity, see *ibid.*, p.1186. Hines, in his 'Myth, Misogyny and Fascism in the Works of Drieu la Rochelle' suggests: 'Drieu envisaged the sexual act primarily as a means of self-humiliation through the dissolution of self-awareness and not as a mode of mutual fulfilment' (p.205).

<sup>44</sup> On Drieu's concept of the fascist body, see Robert Soucy, *Fascist Intellectual: Drieu la Rochelle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), pp.175-210.

This subtle tension between embodiment and disembodiment is dramatized in Gilles's relationship with Carentan, his mentor, a relationship which, as we have seen, is central to *Gilles's* sexualization of politics. Already the 'Greek love' model suggests a relationship which is something other than purely physical in its tutor/tutee structure. The text's designation of Carentan's body as 'cette chair qui ne l'avait pas engendré' (*G*, p.145) stresses a lack of physical connection between Gilles and himself; accordingly, Carentan remarks to Gilles: 'Je suis ton père spirituel' (*G*, p.154). However the following exchange does suggest physicality:

- Tu n'es pas mon père par hasard?
- Mais non, imbécile. Nous ne serions pas si bons amis.
- C'est que je t'aime physiquement. (*G*, p.155)

In the light of the text's negative presentation of embodied homosexuality in political terms, and the positive political gloss of the Gilles-Carentan relationship, Gilles's response to Carentan's body must be read not as the sort of embodied homosexual desire which taints Galant with decadence, but rather as admiration for a vigorous Aryan body:

Il n'était pas si vieux. Sous son costume de rapin campagnard il montrait encore une stature imposante, et sous sa lourde moustache blanche un visage régulier et assez beau. Il avait de grands yeux bleus un peu dilatés et un peu troubles, un nez droit et fort. (*G*, p.149)

The positive values of fascism are housed in this vigorous body; the potential fascist disciple admires that body like a son rather than a lover. There is a caveat then to Drieu's fascist cult of the body: the ideal fascist body is present in the text, but it cannot be integrated into Drieu's sexualization of politics if the politically essential distinction between virile and feminine (decadent) homosexuality is to be maintained.

These four examples all suggest a predominance of disembodiment over embodiment in the aesthetic representation of politics. There is a marked tendency in political novels to associate the body with the feminine, in opposition to politics. However, Valet's is not the only novel of its genre to make use of the procreating female body as a political motif. With the predominant gender and political implications of the embodiment/disembodiment in mind, I now turn to a comparison of other examples of this motif with Valet's use of it.

### ***Political production and sexual reproduction***

Elizabeth Grosz notes that binary modes of thought such as those which effect a rigid separation between the political and the corporeal are commonplace:

Feminists and philosophers seem to share a common view of the human subject as a being made up of two dichotomously opposed characteristics: mind and body, thought and extension, reason and passion, psychology and biology.<sup>45</sup>

She goes on to recognize how binary thought patterns provoke hierarchical evaluations, how the mind comes to be privileged over the body. Grosz also points to the gendering of the hierarchy whereby man is conventionally aligned with mind and woman with body. The representation of female physicality which pervades Valet's text might on one level appear to conform to this hierarchy. However, because Valet's images of the maternal body are simultaneously physical and ideological, the grotesque body transmits explicit, reasoned analysis of a political nature. In its particular manifestation of the motif

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<sup>45</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p.3.

of the unruly, disruptive body as a political motif, the text refuses the notion of a rigid separation between body and mind, somatic and political. The grotesque maternal body is a socio-political and historically specific entity. Maternity is not indicative of an eternal female 'essence'; for Valet's narrator, pregnancy is presented rather in terms of political choice:

Vais-je tenir jusqu'au bout? Ne vais-je pas défaillir et m'avouer vaincue et regretter d'avoir voulu cet enfant, de l'avoir voulu pour moi seule, malgré les lois et les gens? Vais-je souhaiter honteusement de revenir en arrière et m'apercevoir que je veux l'impossible? (*MSB*, p,147)

To actively choose (to write about) 'la maternité libre' in 1934 is indicative of a particular political standpoint, a deliberate and active refusal of, or resistance to, cultural norms.

As well as functioning as a mode of resistance, the experience of maternity also serves to pinpoint and illuminate that which is execrable in contemporary culture. The living-out of certain aspects of working class maternity reveals pressure points where the full horror of society's treatment of its underclass becomes clear. The account of 'la petite femme chétive' of her previous miscarriages is perhaps the most striking example:

Les fausses-couches, c'est rien de les faire, ce qui est dur c'est de se débarasser du truc. Ça bouche les cabinets et ça fait des ennuis avec le propriétaire, vous pouvez m'en croire. On ne peut pas le garder chez soi. Le brûler je n'ai jamais eu le courage! Faut le foutre dans un égout ou dans la Seine. Non, vous ne pouvez pas vous rendre compte de ce qu'il peut y avoir des flics sur les ponts quand on veut faire quelque chose. Y a peut-être un brigade exprès pour les fausses-couches! et ce qu'il peut y avoir aussi des passants, juste au moment où on n'en a pas besoin! je restais des heures, avec mon petit paquet à la main. Des fois on allait ensemble, mon homme et moi. Moi j'avais l'air de venir des grands magasins avec mon paquet bien enveloppé. Lui faisait le guet. 'Vas-y, jette-le', qu'il disait, et puis pan, v'la quelqu'un. Alors on s'en allait plus loin. Pour s'occuper, et pour avoir l'air de rien, on faisait semblant de se disputer. Puis on se disputait pour tout de bon à la fin. Ce que ça donne

des ennuis, la maternité. Mais je vais pas lui raconter ça à Rothschild; ça jetterait un froid... (MSB, pp.49-50)

The grotesque manifests itself in the degradation of the horrific image of the dead foetus by the humour of the police brigade and the passers-by farcically appearing over and over again out of nowhere: a paradoxical combination of the banal and the serious. In the juxtaposition of the trauma of miscarriage with the inconvenience of blocking the drains and irritating the landlord, the joy of birth is brought down to the level of the sewer. The sewer is a social manifestation of the lower bodily stratum; it is civilization's repository for excrement. A further level of social critique is added by the inappropriate comparison of the 'paquet bien enveloppé' with the purchases of a *bourgeoise* returning from a shopping spree. The nature of the female body's 'disorder' is social as well as physical. When the unruly female body performs the disruptive and traumatic action of spontaneous abortion, it also threatens to effect a disruption and a trauma in terms of established social configurations, such as the commonly-held view that it is not acceptable to throw a corpse into the Seine. When physical and economic conditions conspire to necessitate such a course of action, the female subject risks punishment at the hands of the (male) law. Thus, Valet's text asserts that the significance of pregnancy is not confined to the private experience of individual women. The grotesque maternal body is in a very physical sense a body politic, because its functioning and its effects are conditioned by social factors.

Such an appalling experience of maternity is of course class-specific. A bourgeois such as Rothschild, to whom the women in the hospital intend to write to ask for charity, would be horrified by such a story. The anticipated emotional bourgeois response ('ça jetterait un froid') contrasts sharply with that of 'la petite femme chétive' herself ('les

fausses-couches, c'est rien de les faire'). Working-class experience is so saturated with the necessity of coping with material difficulties that emotion and reflection are no longer feasible. On one level, there is humour in the Bakhtinian degradation which characterizes this episode. On another level, the social critique contained within such degradation is too acute to be funny. The reader is presented with the same annihilation of the 'appropriate' response (that miscarriage is traumatic) to a given set of material circumstances by those circumstances themselves as is in evidence in the working class women's inability to perceive 'leur taudis, leur misère, leur esclavage'.

Valet's representations of the female body constantly suggest that working class misery is inscribed on the body, that the political is inscribed on the somatic. Elizabeth Grosz, drawing on Alphonso Lingis's work on 'savages', asserts that physical inscription - scarring, mutilation and so on - defines the position of a given body in a particular socius. Paraphrasing Lingis, she explains:

Cicatrizations and scarifications mark the body as a public, collective, social category, in modes of inclusion or membership; they form maps of social needs, requirements, and excesses. The body and its privileged zones of sensation, reception, and projection are coded by objects, categories, affiliations, lineages, which engender and make real the subject's social, sexual, familial, marital, or economic position or identity within a social hierarchy. Unlike messages to be deciphered, they are more like a map correlating social positions with corporeal intensities.<sup>46</sup>

By extension:

In our own culture as much as in others, there is a form of body writing and various techniques of social inscription that bind all subjects, often in quite different ways according to sex, race, class, cultural and age

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<sup>46</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p.33, pp.140-41. Grosz refers to the chapter entitled 'Savages' in Lingis's *Excesses: Eros and Culture* (New York: State University of New York, 1984).

codifications, to social positions and relations.<sup>47</sup>

In 'civilized' societies, such physical inscription functions as a sign to be interpreted according to its context. In Valet's text, a mutual affectation is identified between the social and the physical. The individual's social situation results in specific physical characteristics; therefore, at the same time, the body can be read as a signifier of that social situation. Bodies are historically and culturally produced by their external situation:

Que de corps usés par le travail, tachés, marbrés, dégradés par la maladie!  
Beaucoup de femmes ont les jambes couvertes de plaies violacées, de cicatrices, de pustules bleuâtres. (*MSB*, p.13)

en arrière de ce qu'elles sont, ce qu'elles furent se dessine: leur pays, leur enfance, leur vie, tout ce qui s'est accumulé sur leurs visages comme une série de masques et de marques. (*MSB*, p.224)

Sur les chairs et les races venues du plus profond de la terre, les dures villes d'aujourd'hui ont mis leur empreinte avec leurs labeurs et leurs pestilences. Sous cette marque commune les races s'éloignent; les mêmes causes sont venues modeler ces femmes, les pâlir, les exténuer, éteindre en elles la fierté et le désir et faire qu'elles se consomment sans vivre... (*MSB*, p.226)

Work, regional origins, past experience and present suffering can all be read from the body's surface, distinguishing each body according to its particular history. And yet these bodies also bear a common scar over and above this particularity, that of being oppressed as women. However, the majority of the women in the Hôtel-Dieu do not read their own bodies and therefore do not become aware of their oppression in order to resist: they do not *politicize* their bodies. The narrator on the other hand places herself in a position of privileged lucidity as a reader of those bodies. It also emerges that it is not only for the

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<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, p.141.

working classes that experience is inscribed corporeally. La Bonne Dame de Charité bears the scars of a bourgeois life of idle pleasure:

La Dame de Charité est en ruines, grignotée, ravagée par les ans et les plaisirs passés. Sa peau est flétrie et pend le long de ses joues comme des pansements défaits. Autour de son cou un ruban de velours noir contient la chair défaillante et cette chair se répand en larges fanons au-dessus du collier.

La vieille femme est répugnante. (*MSB*, p.201)

Her rotten body does not merely represent the rotten bourgeois capitalist system, rather her physical decay has been produced by that system. It is precisely this physical decay which consigns her to the role of 'Dame de Charité', since '[o]n ne peut plus jouer à l'ingénue avec des dents branlantes et des cuisses molles et variqueuses' (*MSB*, p.206). Thus, the bourgeois body plays its part in maintaining the economic structures which cause misery to be inscribed on the working-class body: whilst the decayed bodies of the *grandes dames* of the bourgeoisie constrain them to adopt the role of 'dames de charité', they have no interest in erasing the inequalities on which their new position depends.

Valet's text is not unique in its adoption of the motif of miscarriage as a political symbol. In broadly feminist texts, the motif of 'failed' pregnancy is often used to accord a socio-political dimension to the female body. For example, this mechanism manifests itself in overt novelistic 'propaganda' against the illegality of abortion, when a woman's life is endangered because of a botched back-street operation. In Weiss's *Délivrance*, a degree of class analysis is achieved in the episode where the narrator's *femme de ménage* is taken ill following an abortion, because of the fact that she is constrained by economic necessity to work when she should be recovering (*D*, pp.133-36). In *Les Cloches de Bâle*, the death of Judith Romanet shows a 'femme moderne' (Judith has adopted an



independent lifestyle as a sculptor) punished in her female body for her independence (CB, pp.267-74). In Pelletier's *La Femme vierge*, Marie is faced with the dilemma of risking criminal prosecution to save Catherine's life. Catherine's analysis is as follows:

- Et dire que nous avons dû nous cacher, trembler comme des criminelles... Les hommes nous imposent la grossesse, ils ne veulent pas prendre la responsabilité de l'enfant, et lorsqu'on l'empêche de venir, ils vous mettent en prison, n'est-ce pas révoltant? (FV, p.124)

The style is trite but the point made is one central to any feminist politics of the body: that the regulation of the female body in law is a male prerogative. Patriarchy may attempt to assert a fundamental principle of disembodiment in relation to politics: male legislation however has never been quite content to assign the female body an exclusively private role and thus risk its escape from his hegemony.<sup>48</sup> In these examples, the experience of fictional characters is constructed to mirror authentic social experience in order to recommend actual social change. These are 'cautionary tales' which critique the only-too-real social and political situation of the reproductive body.

I should like to focus in more detail on the example of Weiss's *Délivrance*, because, although the text attempts to create a politics of maternity, it does not produce a politics of the maternal *body*. Weiss, like Aragon, elides female physicality. In *Délivrance*, childbearing functions as a metaphor for the creation of the political discourse:

Dans l'acharnement de ma résistance, les transports qui labouraient mes

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<sup>48</sup> Grosz, in her *Volatile Bodies*, recalls the slogan 'Get your laws off my body' adopted by New Wave feminism (p.9).

entrailles remontèrent à mon cerveau. Alors, secouée d'un furieux besoin de créer, de sortir malgré tout quelque chose de mon être fécondé et d'œuvrer en poussant des cris, instinctive jusqu'au seuil de l'éternité, je me levai pour m'emparer d'une plume, pour te parler, ah! encore une fois avant de mourir. (*D*, p.315)

These, the closing words of the text which serve to explain its fictional genesis, reveal a displacement of the maternal body in favour of mental travail: purely cerebral activity has been substituted for 'les transports qui labouraient mes entrailles'. When failed pregnancy is politicized it is disembodied: Marie has undergone an abortion, and thereafter, the creation of a child is exchanged for the creation of a political discourse, that is, the novel itself. This relationship between the first-person narrator and the text is mirrored directly in the relationship between Noémi and pacifist politics within the League of Nations. Politics functions as a substitute child after the death of Noémi's flesh-and-blood son; when her political project fails, the narrator remarks that 'l'enfant de son esprit avait avorté' (*D*, p.109). Later, Noémi's retreat from politics is encoded as a return to motherhood since her new task, to care for Christian, is a maternal one which excludes politics for the moment: 'plus encore que mon amant, il est mon enfant [...] Ma tâche la plus certaine est auprès de Christian. Pour l'action politique, il sera toujours temps' (*D*, pp.311-12). Politics and maternity then are symbolically equivalent in *Délivrance*, but they must observe a strict sequentiality. The relationship is one of substitution: a separation is effected between the body and politics. This is quite different from Valet's representation of the somatic as intrinsically linked to the political.

Susan Stanford Friedman has argued that culture has effected a separation between production and reproduction, creating a fiction of the mutual exclusivity of

creation and procreation.<sup>49</sup> *Délivrance* maintains this opposition in its assertion that woman writes, in the case of the narrator, or becomes engaged in politics, in the case of Noémi, only when procreation has failed. Friedman's close analysis of various examples of female-authored childbirth-creation metaphors suggests a typology of such images, organized as various points along a continuum beginning with 'a fundamental acceptance of a masculinist aesthetic that separates creativity and procreativity' and ending with 'a defiant celebration of (pro)creation, a gynocentric aesthetic based on the body'.<sup>50</sup> *Délivrance* seems to exemplify the first two points on Friedman's scale. In that the text offers no model for the fusion of creation and procreation, it exemplifies 'the use of the metaphor to confirm the patriarchal separation of creativities'.<sup>51</sup> In *Délivrance*, female creation, which appears in the guise of writing a political narrative (Marie) and political activism (Noémi), can only follow the death of the child. Furthermore (political) creation as symbolic birthing is not as good as the real thing: the text's ultimate solution is 'la maternité libre'. And, when the lover needs to be mothered, female creation must be sacrificed. The next point along Friedman's continuum is termed the 'desire for and fear of possible fusion of literary and literal motherhood'.<sup>52</sup> This formulation precisely describes Noémi's situation as, on the one hand, the arch-mother of League of Nations politics, but as such, on the other hand, a hybrid and inadequate creature:

On me critiquait comme un homme que je n'étais pas et comme une femme que je n'étais plus; on applaudissait en moi le monstre d'un

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<sup>49</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse', *Feminist Studies*, 13.1 (Spring 1987), 49-82 (p.52).

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, p.66.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, p.67.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, p.68.

genre inconnu (*D*, p.216)

La solitude déforme les femmes en hermaphrodites qui croient au raisonnement et ne peuvent pas en user sans hurler de souffrance. (*D*, p.288)

Although the text's ideal, as we have seen in Chapter 1, is an abstract union of creation and procreation in the figure of the arch-mother, *L'Enchanteuse*, this proves to be too problematic on the level of the body. As in the case of Drieu's *Gilles*, embodiment is ultimately problematic even though it initially appears to coincide with the text's political ideal. The monstrous third sex of the free and creating female cannot be embodied for Weiss; an attempt to do so results in a composite body whose condition of existence is physical agony.

Drieu la Rochelle and Aragon link the procreating female body to politics in a way which differs from both Weiss's structure of substitution and Valet's structure of integration. Through the characters of Pauline, in *Gilles*, and Jeannette, in *Les Cloches de Bâle*, the maternal body is employed on the aesthetic level as a metaphor for a more general political suffering. Here there is no analysis of the sociopolitical aspects of maternity itself. Failed pregnancy surrenders up its own autonomous significance in order to represent something quite different. We cannot then speak of an imbrication of maternity and politics after the model of *Madame 60<sup>BIS</sup>*. But neither can we speak of separation and substitution, since the structure of metaphor implies at least some coincidence between the symbol and that which is symbolized.

The culmination of the political *Bildung* of *Gilles*'s eponymous hero is narrated within the account of Pauline's miscarriage and her own death (*G*, pp.564-608). Pauline exemplifies Bakhtinian 'pregnant death', but there is no trace of carnival laughter here. It is as if her physical death permits his political birth: this is the point at which 'Gilles

tombait des nues' (*G*, p.578) by recognizing fascism as the way forward. The February riots of 1934 provide the catalyst for his realization. Like Drieu himself, Gilles recognizes in this civil unrest both the possibility for courageous virile action and the potential vulnerability of the Republic to such forces.<sup>53</sup> Just like the French nation as Gilles sees it, Pauline's body is diseased and sterile: *embourgeoisée* and decadent, she is not capable of producing new life, but rather her body stands for the incapacity of the bourgeois nation to achieve positive productivity. Instead of 'cette pleine promesse de vie' which was her unborn child, her womb can only yield a cancerous growth, 'un énorme germe de mort' (*G*, p.567). Gilles is initially fascinated with Pauline's moribund body:

Il aimait encore son corps. Il l'aimait d'une autre manière qu'autrefois. Il s'en approchait maintenant comme d'un temple foudroyé, délabré où régnait un air troublant de désastre, de ruine, de stérilité. L'amour redevenu stérile tournait à la fascination du vide, à l'excès morne et enivrant, au charme de mort. (*G*, p.571)

However, his fascination with the decadent female body metaphorically represents his fascination with decadence (communism): it is Gilles's final act of political despair before his political 'rebirth'. Pauline's physical death functions as the symbolic 'death' of the French nation as it supposedly succumbs to the forces of decadence, refusing to embrace the potential for a new political life which the fascist forces of the February riots are deemed to represent. Both 'deaths' are for Gilles 'un acquiescement aux forces de destruction, aux forces de pourriture' (*G*, p.604); Gilles's unborn child is synonymous with the virile, fascist potential of the riots which is 'miscarried' because the body which

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<sup>53</sup> Soucy discusses Drieu's representation of the February riots in *Fascist Intellectual: Drieu La Rochelle*, pp.73-75.

contains it is rotten. From another perspective, Pauline's death, as a representation of the death of France, is perversely Rabelaisian: just as Gargamelle's death in childbirth is grotesquely life-affirming, so the death of the rotten body of the nation is, for Drieu, politically life-affirming in that it will allow for the establishment of a fascist European nation in its place.

Aragon's account of the Paris taxi strikes of 1911 and 1912 in *Les Cloches de Bâle* is often cited as an example of the text's dual historical perspective. In his introductory essay, 'C'est là que tout a commencé...', the author explains the sources of his account:

la grève des taxis parisiens de 1911-1912 [...] est entièrement décrite sur la grève analogue de décembre 1933 - février 1934 que j'ai suivie comme reporter pour *L'Humanité* où je travaillais, et les données historiques que j'y acquis directement du syndicat des chauffeurs et des survivants de la grève de 1911. (CB, p.21)

In the context of the present analysis, it is also noteworthy that this political analysis, in which the pre-First World War strikes are used to comment on post-war civil unrest which is also the source of the description, is framed by maternity. The account begins with a reference to the injuring of a mother and the death of her child during a strike; it ends with the miscarriage of the unborn child of Jeannette and Victor after they witness the murder of Bédhomme during the taxi strikes in 1912.<sup>54</sup>

The imagery deployed in the narrative establishes a clear link between Jeannette's miscarriage and Bédhomme's death. Victor watches the funeral cortège pass under the window:

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<sup>54</sup> See Emilien Carassus, *Les Grèves imaginaires* (Paris: Éditions du C.R.N.S., 1982), pp.139-60. Carassus refers to both incidents (p.149) but does not offer any commentary on this aspect of Aragon's representation of the strikes.

Victor, pâle comme un linge, regardait par la fenêtre de sa chambre le cortège et se drapeaux rouges [...] Il voyait la mer ouvrière des casquettes, endiguée à perte de vue par les maisons. Là-dedans s'avancait le corbillard, chargé de couronnes de lilas blancs. Jeannette gémissait.

Les femmes de grévistes, dans le cortège, marchaient ensemble et leur premier rang portait une énorme couronne barrée d'un ruban rouge comme le sang de l'assassiné. (CB, p.394)

Victor's face, as white as a sheet, and the white flowers, and the red of the ribbon and the blood, and the flowing sea of people are all reproduced in the description of the miscarriage:

Il se retourna: sur le lit, Jeannette étendue avait repoussé les draps. Et là, dans le linge ouvert, les oreillers mâchés, elle regardait avec désolation, sur ses cuisses écartées, un mélange de débris sanglants qui coulait. Victor mit un moment à comprendre. Puis, comme s'il fallait qu'il se convainquît, il vint près du lit et souleva la chemise. Cela venait bien du sexe. Il se mit à pleurer. (CB, p.395)

Jeannette's miscarriage symbolizes the danger that the strikes of 1934 will be abortive, like the strikes of 1912. Her *débris* are symbolically associated with Bédhomme's funeral as a manifestation of failure. The danger was real: according to Borne and Dubief, only 37% of strikes between 1930 and 1935 were successful.<sup>55</sup> Carassus notes that the aim of Aragon's dual perspective is to provide a warning to the workers of 1934 that is based on events in 1912:

Mais raconter un grève qui échoue peut avoir valeur militante [...] il met en garde les travailleurs: tout se tient, et les forces qui réduisirent les chauffeurs de taxis sont aussi celles qui, deux ans plus tard, conduiraient à la tuerie. En 1934, Aragon ne jugeait pas inutile de rappeler la leçon de 1912. Même quand il rapporte des événements antérieurs, c'est l'époque

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<sup>55</sup> Dominique Borne and Henri Dubief, *La Crise des années trente, 1929-1938*, 2nd edn (Paris: Seuil, 1989), p.38.

où écrit le narrateur qui est mise en question.<sup>56</sup>

The link which Carassus indicates between industrial and international unrest is noteworthy in this context, for only a few pages later, Aragon is to invoke the possibility of war (both in 1912 and in 1934) in terms of the 'geste des enfants qui sèment des fleurs' who will scatter 'des fleurs meurtrières, des grenades, avec ces mêmes mains' (*CB*, p.432).<sup>57</sup> The death of children, born and unborn, is for Aragon a powerful symbol of political failure.

Through the dual historical perspective and through the metaphor of failed maternity, Aragon the novelist expresses a fear for the revolutionary cause which does not emerge from the unsurprisingly optimistic accounts of the strikes which appeared in the pages of *L'Humanité* in 1934, on which Aragon the journalist collaborated. Leading articles such as '5,000 chauffeurs de taxi manifestent dans les rues', 'Deux heures de manifestation en plein centre de Paris', '25,000 chauffeurs en lutte! Soutien énergique du mouvement par tous les travailleurs!', 'Face aux scandales et aux divisions de la bourgeoisie l'admirable spectacle de la solidarité prolétarienne', '15,000 chauffeurs parisiens affirment dans de vibrants meetings leur volonté de lutte', attempted to rally the workers on a wave of enthusiasm; the 'valeur militante' of the failure which Jeannette's fate symbolizes is not headline material.<sup>58</sup> *L'Humanité* did however, during this period, make use of the metaphor of *fausse-couche* in a front-page cartoon, entitled 'Faux et usage de faux', depicting the paper's hostile view of the Stavisky affair and the infamous

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<sup>56</sup> Carassus, *Les Grèves imaginaires*, p.152.

<sup>57</sup> See Chapter 1, p.83.

<sup>58</sup> These leading articles appeared in *L'Humanité* on 30 January 1934, 31 January 1934, 3 February 1934, 5 February 1934, and 6 February 1934 respectively.



police chief, Chiappe.<sup>59</sup> The cartoon, and the examples of Aragon's Jeannette and Drieu's Pauline, suggest that the tragedy of the disruptive female body is deemed to be striking and effective as an image of political failure. However, Valet's text goes much further than this in investigating not simply the functioning of the female body as a social symbol, but the ways in which the physical functioning of that body is a socialized phenomenon. Her analysis of *la petite femme chétive*'s miscarriage certainly symbolizes the evil of capitalism as the text perceives it, but it also delves deeply into the ways in which politics and economics actually define a woman's experience of her own physicality.

### ***The stains of war: mutilation and malfunction***

*Madame 60*<sup>BIS</sup> maintains a constant focus on the ways in which social, political, and economic forces constrain women to experience their bodies in a particular way. But the text also broadens its focus to examine the ways in which, in a given social, political and economic environment, culture reads the experience of maternity and re-presents it to women in the form of discourse. The grotesque aesthetic constantly degrades discursive constructions of maternity on an overt, thematic level. The joy of maternity is revealed to be merely a discursive construct, and one which must be deflated, the text argues, if political progress is to be achieved : 'Ah, la joie des mères, le sacrifice des mères, l'honneur d'être mère! Comment résisterait-on à ces discours!' (*MSB*, p.179). The narrator sees clearly in the maternity ward that, brought down to its material level in both physical and economic terms, maternity ceases to be a joy:

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<sup>59</sup> *L'Humanité*, 28 January 1934.

Joie de la maternité? Mais ça n'a aucun rapport avec ce que je vois. Mots mystificateurs, duperies, mensonges. On nous dit cela pour que notre souffrance soit étouffée, pour que nous ne hurlions pas de notre douleur - pour que nous ne croyions même pas à notre douleur.

Menteurs! Menteurs! Est-ce de la joie quand nous ne savons pas comment nourrir notre petit? Est-ce de la joie quand pour aller travailler, il faut le laisser seul ou bien dans des maisons tristes et sombres où ils végètent dans l'humidité et l'ennui? (*MSB*, pp.179-80)

The danger of such discourses is that they are internalized by the female subject to her own detriment. For example, the Polish woman who is forced to give her baby up to *L'Assistance* because of economic hardship is seen by the other women as 'pas une femme': 'Oh, la misérable! elle n'a pas de cœur; elle n'a pas d'entrailles de mère! abandonner son enfant! Quelle chienne! on ne devrait pas lui donner à manger!' (*MSB*, p.137). When adherence to the dominant discourse is lacking, the maternal body itself is called into question. The culture which forces proletarian women to give birth in misery and pain is precisely the culture which feeds them the discourse of the joy of motherhood, so that they will not revolt against their condition, and their oppression will be perpetuated to the economic advantage of their oppressors.

The text offers an analysis of such discourses of maternity in terms of the specific political ends for which they are created. The most transparent example is that of the mobilization of soldiers. The discourse of the devoted and self-sacrificing mother who should proudly and willingly relinquish her sons to the war appears as an intentional and politically expedient manipulation of maternity through the agency of male-authored language:

Et enfin, quand 'ils' nous les enlèvent pour 'leurs' guerres? C'est à ce moment qu'il faut en dire des mots et des mots pour transformer en joie sublime la douleur des mères. On les étourdit, on les rend insensées à force de mensonges. On les précipite dans la folie. Drapeaux, discours,

musiques, médailles, - sacrifice, sacrifice - joie, joie - héroïsme! si l'on tue nos enfants, il faut encore que nous soyions joyeuses!' (*MSB*, p.180)

Such discourses are also internalized by the female subject:

Les plus nobles, les plus belles âmes, celles qui atteignent réellement au sublime, supplient leur enfant de se faire tuer en héros et de leur donner la suprême jouissance: l'auréole des mères martyres. (*MSB*, p.181)

The mutilation of the male body is to accord greater glory to the mother. She may not give her own life for the cause; her patriotic *jouissance* must therefore be derived from the filial body.

Politics then can only be inscribed on the female body by proxy. The female body is, as we have seen, generally considered to be inappropriate to politics: the physical inscription of patriotism by substitution is one example. Aragon, in *Les Cloches de Bâle*, offers a striking dramatization of the gendered nature of any political valorization of the mutilated body. Although events at this point in the novel are focused on class rather than international warfare, the same point is made. The death of the young striker at Cluses, which Catherine witnesses, forms the pivot of her political trajectory. Structurally, this episode is located at the exact centre of the novel. Catherine is fascinated by the mutilated corpse of which the physicality is stressed in the preceding half-page of description:

Deux balles l'avaient frappé: une dans la poitrine qui avait ensanglanté la chemise, l'autre dans le cou où béait une plaie horrible.  
Catherine ne pouvait détacher ses yeux de cette plaie. (*CB*, p.205)

The young man has been shot by the son of his employer during a demonstration demanding political rights for the workers: his murder comes to symbolize Catherine's

realization that her political sympathies lie with the proletariat against those at whose hands this young man has suffered. In suffering his own political commitment to be inscribed for ever on his body, the young striker also embodies Catherine's commitment. The experience which is central to female politicization is written not on Catherine's body but on a male body.<sup>60</sup> Significantly, no female bodies are injured in the demonstration: woman's role is to tend the injured and comfort the bereaved after the male business of protest is done.

This episode suggests that the privilege of fighting for the cause and proudly bearing the signifying scars is reserved for the male subject. The female subject is conventionally prohibited from expressing ideological resistance through her body: it is for this reason perhaps that the female hysteric has provided so much fertile material for recent feminist analysis.<sup>61</sup> Edith Thomas, in her memoirs, regrets that her own participation in the Spanish Civil War should be limited to intellectual pursuits. Because of her sex, journalism is 'la seule manière dont je pouvais servir une cause pour laquelle j'aurais donné facilement ma vie' (*TC*, p.61). Even a female subject who actively desires physical politicization is confined to the privileging of mind over matter.

In the discourse of maternal sacrifice, the mutilation of the male body is granted

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<sup>60</sup> Catherine's body does come to signify her politics later in the novel, but the sign is negatively charged, and, more importantly, there is no causal relationship between signifier and signified. She contracts tuberculosis which gradually weakens her body, just as her political potential is weakened by her commitment to anarchy. Her tuberculosis then functions metaphorically in the same way as Pauline's and Jeannette's miscarriages. In the case of Catherine, tuberculosis is an ending, the cutting short of her life and of her political potential.

<sup>61</sup> The most recent example is Elaine Showalter's *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). See also Showalter's *The Female Malady: Madness and English Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 1985). Wills's article, 'Upsetting the Public: Carnival, Hysteria and Women's Texts' addresses the question of hysteria in a specifically Bakhtinian context.

positive political significance.<sup>62</sup> It seems then that exceptionally, in a war situation, the usual hierarchy of mind/body is reversed, privileging the latter and realigning the masculine with the privileged term into the bargain. In war, the male subject becomes entirely occupied by the need to express ideological resistance through the body. However, we have seen in Chapter 3 in the example of Malraux's *L'Espoir* that the discourse of virile heroism must be marshalled to prevent the physical inscription of politics from being experienced as trauma. Thus, La Pasionaria's slogan, '*Il vaut mieux être la veuve d'un héros que la femme d'un lâche*' (*E*, p.456) must convince the male subject that the consequences of fleeing the physical inscription of politics are worse than death. La Pasionaria here asserts precisely the same discourse of politicization by proxy which Valet's text critiques. Here, wives are called upon to make the same sacrifice as mothers; the 'mères martyres' have the same political value as 'la veuve d'un héros'.

In this context, Malraux's representation of mutilated female bodies is noteworthy. The only example of positive female political commitment offered by *L'Espoir* is housed in the body of *la milicienne bossue* (*E*, p.263). Her body has not, however, been mutilated as a direct result of the war; her mutilation is rather a means of desexualizing the female body to allow the female subject access to politics. Even when female physical mutilation is a direct result of combat, the point made remains at the level of sexuality rather than of politics: 'Elle a le bras arraché, Juanita; vous croyez que son fiancé l'épousera dans cet état-là?' (*E*, p.453). Mutilation here is not the sign of an active participant but of a passive victim; it does not therefore inscribe the female body

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<sup>62</sup> Of course, the value ascribed to the mutilated body is ultimately determined by the relationship between the ideological encoding of the source of the mutilation and the political stance of the narrative. War wounds after all will not signify positively in a pacifist text: thus in *Délivrance*, Merri's death and Anselme's psychic scars signify the tragedy of a generation of young men sacrificed for no good reason and of young women thus deprived of marriage and motherhood.

with positive ideological significance. The final example is that of Spanish women giving blood for the war effort (*E*, pp.361-62). This donation is rather like giving their sons - in both cases the result is politicization by proxy. The 'heroine' who takes satisfaction from the sacrifice of her sons and lovers can also be proud that her own blood is coursing in the veins of the nation's recovering wounded, but not, of course, to the detriment of her own female body.

Malraux's text also supplies the perspective of the male subject regarding a wartime politics of the male body. In *L'Espoir*, it is clear that the discourse of heroism is effective in motivating men to fight for their political beliefs: thus Gonzales can equate physical danger with masculinity:

Il avance avec eux, soulevé par la même marée, par une exaltation fraternelle et pure. En son cœur, sans quitter du regard le tank qui vient vers lui, il chante le chant profond des Asturies. Jamais il ne saura davantage ce que c'est qu'être un homme. (*E*, p.275)<sup>63</sup>

However, the experience of the male subject once he is confined in a mutilated body is rather different. From Jaime's blindness to the manifestation of Manuel's anxiety as mutism, the mutilated physical body is experienced in terms of trauma rather than heroic pride. The discourse of heroism does not survive the reality of injury. In the famous descent from the mountain scene, Gardet's response to his injury is that his scarred face will render him impotent in the domain of attracting women, not that it will mark him as a hero (*E*, p.562). On one level, the very real horror of war wounds must not be diminished. But in terms of representation, could it not be argued that part of the trauma of physical mutilation for the male subject is that he is thereby endowed for ever with an

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<sup>63</sup> See Chapter 3, p.177.

unavoidably embodied identity, which, conventionally, contradicts both his masculinity and his politics? Joanna Bourke's analyses suggest some historical justification for such an interpretation. The mutilated body is imperfect, deformed, disabled - all terms which contradict the dominant fiction of male adequacy. Bourke argues that the sort of sentimentalized discourses which privileged the dismembered body of the ex-serviceman as a site of heroism, masculinity and even sexual allure did not survive into the 1930s. By this time, factors such as the disabled man's problematic access to employment and his evident uselessness in any forthcoming war contributed to a view of male dismemberment in terms of the inactivity and passivity usually reserved for the female subject. A view of such victims as less than men very soon replaced the immediate post-war tendency to view the war mutilated as 'real men'.<sup>64</sup> A mutilated body then places the male subject in a position which is conventionally apolitical and feminine. War can only rewrite the mind/body hierarchy temporarily. Men must after all be persuaded to set off for the front, just as mothers and wives must be persuaded to wave them on their way. But *Dulce et decorum est* can only guarantee the equation between heroic death and masculinity; no such guarantee covers the mutilated body.

Valet takes the analysis of the male subject's traumatized response to his war wounds even further. She describes the reinscription of the physical suffering of the soldier-male onto the body of the female subject, establishing a causal link between female death from tuberculosis and the war:<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, pp.56-75.

<sup>65</sup> Tuberculosis is a recurrent theme of inter-war women's literature. Milligan, in *The Forgotten Generation*, briefly considers Monique Saint-Hélier's *La Cage aux rêves* (Lausanne: de l'Aire, 1932) and Jeanne Galzy's *Les Allongées* (Paris: Rieder, 1923), both of which have a female tubercular patient as their central protagonist. The latter won the *Prix Fémina* in 1932. Edith Thomas's *La Mort de Marie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1934), which won the *Prix du Premier Roman* in 1933, treats the same subject. Mary Burgan's *Illness, Gender and Writing: The Case of Katherine Mansfield* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994) offers an Anglo-Saxon perspective.

Autrefois j'étais très costaud, seulement c'est mon frère qui m'a passé sa maladie. D'ailleurs, lui, il en a claqué. Figurez-vous qu'il est allé à la guerre et qu'il en est revenu tout patraque. Il avait respiré les gaz. Ce n'était pas de ma faute à moi. J'étais encore toute petite. Mais il était devenu méchant et il disait que les femmes n'auraient pas dû permettre qu'on assassine des gars de vingt ans. Il savait qu'il allait mourir, ça le rendait fou. Alors il s'est vengé sur moi. Il me soufflait dans la bouche et il crachait dans mon mouchoir. Je suis tombée malade avant qu'il meure, ses yeux brillaient de joie. C'est curieux comme ça peut changer un homme, la guerre. Autrefois il était si gentil, mon grand frère... (MSB, p.94)

Bourke suggests that the symbolic import of illnesses such as tuberculosis amongst the war wounded was even less than that of visible dismemberment in terms of the inscription of heroism and masculinity onto the body of the suffering soldier. The tubercular body was more likely to be treated with scorn than respect.<sup>66</sup> In Valet's text, tuberculosis also represents the blame ascribed to the female subject by the soldier-male for physical trauma inflicted upon him during the war.<sup>67</sup> The signs of embodiment must be returned to their rightful repository - the female subject. In Valet's example, the soldier, like Drieu's modernist fighter, 'a [...] besoin de voir le corps de la femme humilié et endolori comme fut le sien' (*G*, p.103). The brother perceives his illness to be a direct result of the war, and sees an opportunity to punish his sister for the prohibition of womankind's fighting for the cause, and for her willing sacrifice of her sons and lovers and husbands demanded of her by conventional discourses of maternity. The irony of which, in gender terms, is clear, since that prohibition and those discourses arose from male law and the male polity. There is no guarantee that adherence to accepted discourses of female physicality will protect the female subject. Mary Burgan takes the irony further. Noting Gilbert and Gubar's work on male envy of woman's supposedly

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<sup>66</sup> Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, p.59, p.177, p.249.

<sup>67</sup> Bard, *Les Filles de Marianne*, p.129; see Chapter 1, p.34.



safe and parasitic civilian identity,<sup>68</sup> she points out that a considerable number of women became ill or died having contracted tuberculosis as a result of their work in the munitions factories: '[t]hus, while young men died on the front, young women at home lived within the shadow of lung disease'.<sup>69</sup> However, there was of course no corresponding discourse of female physical heroism into which these deaths could be integrated.

For Edith Thomas, the motif of tuberculosis is subsumed into the conventional disembodiment of politics. In *Le Refus*, the disease is a positive beginning: Brigitte's illness is represented as a time of solitude and confinement which allows for profound reflection and therefore for intellectual and political development. Brigitte reads her illness as a punishment for ontological dormancy, 'du péché contre l'esprit, celui dont on ne parle pas, celui de n'avoir jamais rien aimé' (*R*, p.11). The reader is given to understand that Brigitte's period of exile in a sanatorium has permitted the development of a critical perspective on the bourgeois values of her family which is the root of her subsequent politicization and eventual conversion to communism.

The relationship between illness and politics is further developed in Thomas's text by her critique of the inscription of illness in bourgeois discourse. The reader learns that her departure for the sanatorium was delayed to allow her to attend her sister's wedding because, her father points out: 'Nous n'avons pas besoin, je suppose, de faire savoir à tout le monde qu'elle doit se reposer' (*R*, p.32). Burgan establishes that, in the early decades of the century, tuberculosis was shown scientifically to be caused by

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<sup>68</sup> Burgan is referring to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, 2 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), II, *Sexchanges*, p.262.

<sup>69</sup> Burgan, *Illness, Gender and Writing*, pp.124-25.

environmental factors such as poor housing and diet, as well as having a bacteriological source - it was therefore a disease of the poor.<sup>70</sup> M. Chevance will no more accept this chance coincidence of his daughter's body with that of the proletariat than he will the coincidence of her political perspective with theirs. His denial of her illness is echoed at the end of the novel when Brigitte's political pilgrimage to England to achieve *déclassement* and solidarity with the workers is represented by her family as a young lady's study trip to learn the language. The disruptive body, just like disruptive political opinions, cannot be admitted by the bourgeoisie.

There is also a sense in which Brigitte's tubercular body is imbricated with her potential for disruptive sexuality. Chapter 2 investigated the possible links between Brigitte's sexualized relationship with Anna and her commitment in terms of an attempt to disrupt the bourgeois value system. Dormancy is not the only sin 'dont on ne parle pas': the choice of vocabulary here suggests that Brigitte might have been exiled as much for her homosexual desire as for her diseased lung. Tuberculosis and homoeroticism seem to coincide again a few pages later in the brief episode where Annie wants to get into Brigitte's bed: does Brigitte refuse because of her lungs or because of her transgressive desire?<sup>71</sup> In the context of late nineteenth and early twentieth century discourses which were beginning to represent homosexuality in terms of sickness, the coincidence is not incongruous, however the theme is barely developed in Thomas's novel.<sup>72</sup> Brigitte also

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<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*, pp.123-25.

<sup>71</sup> See Chapter 2, p.100. n.27.

<sup>72</sup> On this point see *ibid.*, pp.46-49, and, for a detailed account, Antony Copley, *Sexual Moralities in France 1780-1980: New Ideas on the Family, Divorce and Homosexuality*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.135-54. Copley suggests the following summary: 'In broad terms the history of homosexuality in the modern period reflects a public shift in attitude from regarding homosexuality as a crime, to treating it as a sickness, to its eventual tolerance in law, and a private battle within the homosexual between guilt and self-acceptance' (p.99).

reads her recovery in terms of the possibility of finding Anna again, Anna who has provided her with a reason to resist death. It is Anna's refusal to resurrect what is still encoded as a sexual relationship with Brigitte which forces the latter to go further down the road of self-discovery, beyond the sexual and into the political.

Whether or not, in the final analysis, the reader allies homosexuality and tuberculosis in *Le Refus*, the symbolic function of the female body is the same in political terms. It is the possibility of recovery, described as resurrection, that is, in the final analysis, allied with positive politicization: 'Peut-être sa mort était-elle nécessaire pour qu'elle s'éveillât' (*R*, p.10). Brigitte must vanquish the body, be it sexual or sick, in order to achieve communist commitment, on the one hand through an assertion of her autonomy from Anna, or on the other through recovery from her illness. Illness functions in *Le Refus* as a form of political apprenticeship only insofar as the body must be overcome, rather than positively asserted, to allow for the political affiliation recommended by the text to be fully achieved. The sick body is privileged as a site of politicization, but only temporarily. The political logic of the text therefore still points to disembodiment.

A point of comparison suggests itself here with Paul Nizan's *La Conspiration*, where the sick body functions in the same way in political terms. Laforgue's illness, which concludes the text, is encoded as a *rite de passage*:

La maladie intervint dans la vie de Laforgue et remplit pour lui l'office de sorcier. On ne pense presque jamais que les maladies arrangent tout, qu'on se transforme, qu'on médite dans ces fuites et ces sommeils où tout est suspendu dans l'attente du retour, du réveil. (*C*, p.303)

Like Brigitte's, Laforgue's recovery is a resurrection and a rebirth:

Il songeait qu'il venait de naître, que sa maladie avait été sa seconde naissance, la naissance qu'il avait passionnément espérée. Tout était consumé, son enfance, son adolescence, il existait, il avait commencé à exister pour la première fois à la seconde même où il s'était réveillé dans la nuit de la clinique sous la lumière bleue. (C, p.307)

His illness has aroused a consciousness of his own mortality which represents the physical maturation necessary for his subsequent political maturation: 'Tout commençait, il n'avait plus une seconde à perdre pour exister rageusement; le grand jeu des tentatives avortées avait pris fin, puisqu'on peut réellement mourir' (C, p.307). The days of the abortive conspiracy are over, and everything points at the end of the novel to Laforgue's communist commitment. Unlike Pluvinage and Rosenthal, who remain trapped in the somatic, Laforgue has overcome the body, and with it intellectual and political immaturity.

The foregoing analysis of episodes of illness and injury in political narratives brings us back to the tendency to ascribe a fundamentally disembodied character to politics. The example of combat suggests a paradox whereby both masculinity and politics, conventionally disembodied, are brought up against the realities of the body which the male subject is ultimately unwilling to embrace. Unlike Thomas, whose politicized female subject is similarly unwilling to embrace embodiment, Valet celebrates a uniquely female mode of embodiment but refuses the conventional mutual exclusivity of that embodiment and politics. It remains then to examine the political possibilities of Valet's female somatic aesthetic.

## III

*Political possibilities*

Friedman suggests that a childbirth-creativity metaphor which expresses what she terms 'woman's doublebirthing potential' is a possibility.<sup>73</sup> Such a use of the metaphor is, according to Friedman, exemplified by the work of Cixous. In her 'The Laugh of the Medusa', the female (maternal) body and writing are one:

By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display - the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time.

Write yourself. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth.

a woman is never far from 'mother' (I mean outside her role functions: the 'mother' as nonname and as source of goods). There is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink.

Oral drive, anal drive, vocal drive - all these drives are our strengths, and among them is the gestation drive - just like the desire to write: a desire to live the self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood.<sup>74</sup>

Valet's representation of the maternal body is comparable to Cixous's concept of a female power which arises directly from the maternal body in all its overt physicality, its swelling and bleeding. In the scene of the narrator's labour, the birthing body is clearly identified as a source of power. Reproductive potency is in a continuum with political

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<sup>73</sup> Friedman, 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor', p.58.

<sup>74</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Hemmel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1981), pp.245-64 (p. 250, p.251, p.261). The essay first appeared in *Signs*, Summer 1976, and is a revised version of 'Le Rire de la Méduse', which appeared in *L'Arc*, 1975, pp.39-54.

potency:

Mais moi je ne veux pas défaillir. La force que je veux garder, lucide et volontaire, est justement de celles qui s'effondrent: je ne la retrouverais plus après certains pleurs.

Je reste immobile, tendue, toute entière occupée à résister. (*MSB*, pp.147-48)

Et pourtant je me sens forte, je respire à pleine bouche [...] Oh! Quelle force! Je pourrais soulever un monde! La force implacable me traverse et de toute ma force j'y contribue. Mon corps est emporté par une fatale tempête - c'est moi-même - et mon enfant... (*MSB*, pp.234-35)

In the first quotation, resistance is precisely an attitude of the *body*, in the second, a description of the narrator's labour, her own power is joined with an external abstract power in a storm of force. However, her analysis does not remain on this abstract level. Grotesque representations of the birthing body such as the account of the miscarriages of *la petite femme chétive* permit a level of direct socio-political critique, and also facilitate consideration of the female 'role functions' which are elided in Cixous's discourse. Toril Moi offers the following reservations about Cixous's particular mode of feminism:

It is just this absence of any specific analysis of the material factors preventing women from writing that constitutes a major weakness of Cixous's utopia. Within her poetic mythology, writing is posited as an absolute activity of which all women *qua* women automatically partake. Stirring and seductive though such a vision is, it can say nothing of the actual inequities, deprivations and violations that women, as social beings rather than as mythological archetypes, must constantly suffer.<sup>75</sup>

Valet's text on the contrary focuses very closely on the material factors which prevent women from politicizing their bodies, whilst at the same time offering a more

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<sup>75</sup> Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London: Routledge, 1985), p.123.

‘mythological’ vision of female solidarity based on the procreating female body. This political critique is evident in the space between the text’s grotesque imagery and the narrator’s response to the grotesque, and in the refusal of the majority of the women in the Hôtel-Dieu to embrace the political potential suggested by their birthing bodies. The text contains an autocritique in this acknowledgement that it is difficult to persuade women of their own political potential. Valet does not elide the manifest socio-cultural limitations to her model of female politicization/creativity. Nonetheless, the *revue* demonstrates that even among the sceptical and the mystified, the grotesque birthing body can create free laughter and solidarity, which represents political progress.

*Madame 60*<sup>BIS</sup> also makes progress in terms of contesting powerful mythical discourses concerning the female body. The *revue* demonstrates this demythologizing intention. Here, women’s bodies appear differently than in conventional discourses:

Que les décadents, les érotiques, les esthètes qui s’excitent aux mots ‘une femme’, ‘une femme nue’ viennent donc les voir, les femmes, leurs corps et leur nudité, et ce qu’on a fait! On: les dévorants, ceux qui vivent de la vie des autres, ceux dont plus tard on parlera comme d’étranges génies malfaisants et puissants qui ont tenu la terre dans leurs mains. (*MSB*, p.65)

The *dévorants* have consumed the reality of women with the discourses they have created: they stand for a generalized male subject, responsible for creating discourses which idealize the female body and have little to do with the reality of its physical form as Valet’s narrator sees it in the Hôtel-Dieu. The *décadents* would be surprised at the realities of female carnality. They stand for the male Look, *le Regard*, the male subject taken in by discursive production about the female body. Valet’s aim is to make the usually elided aspects of the female body visible in textual terms. Grotesque imagery then

is offered as a critique of the mystifying work of conventional representations of female physicality. Valet is Bakhtinian here in her acknowledgement that the idealization of the female subject is equally as damaging as overt misogyny: Wayne C. Booth points out that Bakhtin's defence of Rabelais's feminism relies on the latter's refusal to ally himself with 'a simplified debasement of women in the misleading form of idealization'.<sup>76</sup> However, Booth goes on to assert that Bakhtin's argument is doomed to failure because the Rabelaisian source text is a male-authored narrative which creates for itself a male readership. Here of course Valet's feminist credentials are, by contrast, impeccable: the *revue* is exclusively female in both 'authorship' (the women who conceive of and perform the *revue*) and 'readership' (the narrator who spectates). Valet goes much further than even Bakhtin can take Rabelais in rereading discourses of femininity through the grotesque. Mary Russo asks how it might be possible to use the category of the female body as grotesque in a positive way in order to 'destabilize the idealizations of female beauty or to realign the mechanisms of desire'.<sup>77</sup> It seems that Valet's text provides one plausible suggestion.

Through the culmination of grotesque images in the *revue*, the text attacks the specularly of conventional representation. The *revue* is after all a performance, or rather a participation, since there is no audience present: here then, textual celebration mirrors Bakhtin's carnival celebration in the street. Ann Jefferson argues convincingly for a conception of carnival as alternative, rather than anterior, to conventional representation. For her, this constitutes its potential for transgression:

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<sup>76</sup> Booth, 'Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism', p.162.

<sup>77</sup> Mary Russo, 'Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory', in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. by Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp.213-29, ( p.221).



Crucially, what carnival reveals is that relations of representation can be reconstituted as relations of participation, or at the very least that the specular basis of classical representation can be transformed into one which implies an involvement with representation, its objects and its recipients.<sup>78</sup>

In this context however, Valet's narrator remains an ambiguous figure. Although female and pregnant like the other women, she acts as a commentator on the *revue*, judging the relative sizes and shapes of the protruding bellies. Thus she remains within the structure of specularity, able to *see* what the other women cannot see, occupying a position of greater lucidity. Whilst valorizing the solidarity permitted here by the grotesque, Valet is also asserting some necessity for distance and reflection. A clear contrast is nonetheless drawn between women *entre elles* and the representation of women in idealizing discourses. Perhaps it is the reader who is present symbolically at the *revue* in the person of the narrator, a reader who is encouraged both to adopt a position of radical solidarity and of individual critical reflection.

Valet's distrust of the structure of specularity has its roots in the questioning of the inside/outside demarcation which is central to the text's political possibilities in general terms. *Madame 60 BIS* shows how society and culture conventionally draw distinctions between inside and outside: for example, between the Hôtel-Dieu and the city of Paris, between the exclusively female world of childbearing and the public sphere of political and social action. Valet's aesthetic implies a desire for transgression of such boundaries. We have seen that for Bakhtin, the grotesque aesthetic is founded precisely upon the transgression of the inside/outside demarcation: the central images of the grotesque body are concerned with the body's orifices and its consumption and expulsion

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<sup>78</sup> Ann Jefferson, 'Bodymatters: Self and Other in Bakhtin, Sartre and Barthes', in *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, ed. by Hirschkop, pp.152-77, (p.164).

of material, all of which takes place on the boundary between self and world, inside and outside. Valet's text constructs the 'inside' as a site of female power, but it also envisages the possibility of this power productively taking its place in the 'outside'. Inside, women *entre elles* can access a power which resembles Bakhtin's carnival crowd, 'organized *in their own way* [...] outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization'.<sup>79</sup> Inside the Hôtel-Dieu the women are precisely outside conventional coercive political organization. Valet takes the confinement which might be interpreted precisely as an example of such coercive social organization, and invests it with radical potential. For within this female inside, the solidarity, expressed in terms of the body, which the presence of the male gaze prohibits can find full expression:

Ici, plus de pudeur, pas de gêne [...] Loin des regards des hommes, il n'y a plus ni de jalousie, ni désir, ni admiration, ni dégoût. Nous sommes toutes confondues. Personne ne songe à regarder. (*MSB*, pp.13-14)

Comme presque toutes les femmes, dès qu'elles sont loin des regards des hommes, la pruderie qu'on leur a apprise est mise de côté avec une sorte d'ivresse. Elles adorent qu'on s'occupe de leur corps, qu'on en parle et que prenne une si grande importance officielle ce qu'elles cachent d'habitude. En vacances, la pudeur! C'est une sorte de détente. (*MSB*, p.142)

The women form a carnivalesque celebrating crowd, illustrating Bakhtin's assertion that 'the grotesque ignores the impenetrable surface that closes and limits the body as a separate and completed phenomenon'.<sup>80</sup> *Ivresse* and *détente* and a new focus on corporeality suggest carnival also. The path is laid for the liberating laughter of the *revue*

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<sup>79</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p.255.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid*, p.318.

which arises from the solidarity of being a part of one continuous grotesque female body which is life-affirming and power-giving. Their laughter expresses a new freedom from patriarchal constructions of their identities.

When the male gaze penetrates the female inside, by contrast, the female reverts to the conventional position of object in the gendered structure of specularity:

Sous les draps, de loin, elles s'offrent à la visite, corps tendu, jambes déjà écartées. Il y a une espèce de concurrence; on jalouse celles qui sont regardées longuement par le patron et ses internes. (*MSB*, pp.26-27)

La venue de quelques futurs toubibs calme cette fureur. Des étudiants reviennent dans les salles, aussitôt que le patron est parti, pour examiner quelques femmes.

Des femmes? Non. Des utérus. Pour eux les malades sont des objets, des monticules, sur lesquels ils promènent gravement leur stéthoscope et dans lesquels ils fouillent. Non seulement les femmes se laissent faire, mais elles s'offrent. Poings sous les hanches, elles soulèvent bien haut leur ventre tendu et écartent généreusement les cuisses en regardent d'un air vainqueur les voisines: 'Ma petite, c'est moi, hein!' Cette humiliation est transformée en puérole vanité. (*MSB*, p.30)

Repairing an omission of which Taylor accuses Bakhtin, Valet shows that the carnival crowd might also be complicit with the hierarchy against which it sets itself. She does not fall into Bakhtin's trap of assuming the 'people' or the carnival crowd to be an unproblematically revolutionary and homogenous entity.<sup>81</sup> In representing both female separatist solidarity and the disunity and impotence which complicity with the objectivizing male gaze produces, Valet dramatizes the contrast between a Bakhtinian *degradation* which is joyful and productive and female-focused, and a self-degradation before the male gaze which is oppressive.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Taylor, 'Bakhtin, Carnival and Comic Theory', pp.34-41.

<sup>82</sup> Ruth Ginsburg, 'The Pregnant Text. Bakhtin's Ur-Chronotype: The Womb', in *Bakhtin, Carnival and Other Subjects*, ed. by Shepherd, pp.163-75, (p.167).

Despite Valet's assertion of the power of female solidarity, hers is certainly not a uniquely separatist politics:

Pas épiées par les yeux des mâles perspicaces et durs, profiteurs de toutes les faiblesses; les voilà abandonnées, trop nues, vraiment trop nues. L'autre force manque ici, bouleversante et rude et nécessaire, la force virile, l'autre pôle de l'amour. (*MSB*, p.217)

Sequestered away from the possibility of the male gaze for ever, women are powerless. The power afforded by the solidarity of the separatist inside must ultimately be taken *outside*, exposed to 'l'autre force' if it is to be of any use. As Clair Wills asserts, political efficacy depends on communicability:

I have argued that for Bakhtin, carnival must be brought into dialogue with official forms through the medium of literature, in order to be politically effective: analogously, the 'lawlessness' of the witch, the hysteric and the proletarian woman must be brought within the public sphere, conforming to some extent with its norms, if it is to become a language which can engage politically with the 'official' language.<sup>83</sup>

For Valet, the power of female solidarity and female-focused grotesque *degrading* laughter must communicate with the outside if it is to be politically effective. Accordingly, the inside does not completely sever its links with the outside. The world of the Hôtel-Dieu is ambiguous:

Plus vrai que l'autre, celui du dehors, et faux cependant, puisqu'il y manque les ferments qui tout en apportant la confusion et les mensonges et en obligeant aux précautions, apportent aussi le tourment et le tourbillon des passions et des actions véritables.

Le monde réel vient se révéler ici. Ici mes compagnes montrent ce qu'on a fait d'elles 'là-bas'. Et pourtant quel lieu étrangement factice et

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<sup>83</sup> Wills, 'Upsetting the Public: Carnival, Hysteria and Women's Texts', p.138.

irréel! (*MSB*, p.217)

The Hôtel-Dieu is both true and false, it is outside the city and yet penetrated by 'le monde réel', it transgresses the inside/outside boundary itself. Because it is characterized by holes, that which it takes into itself can also be expelled back to the outside. The narrator's post-natal re-entry into the city reads like a symbolic birth: she leaves via a long corridor; it is a struggle to emerge from the inside; and then finally reaching the boundary she finds that '[l]a porte cochère énorme est ouverte' (*MSB*, pp.240-42), just like the 'corps béants' and the 'chairs ouvertes' of the labour room. And yet when she was first incarcerated, it was the city outside which the narrator envisaged as a body, a body from which the Hôtel-Dieu was to separate her:

Je pressais le pas, j'étais ivre de ma force, je bousculais les passants sur les trottoirs dans les rues étroites. J'étais alors une cellule de cet immense corps, la ville, un point mouvant et vigoureux dans la masse. Maintenant je suis enfermée, à l'écart. (*MSB*, p.34)

From body to body, boundaries are constantly transgressed in this text. These representations of the Hôtel-Dieu and the city suggest the possibility of a politically productive transfer between these areas. The female solidarity achieved via the grotesque within the hospital is seen to have a place in the polity; inside and outside ultimately become simply a question of perspective.

Nonetheless, Valet does not lose sight of the political obstacles to such a symbolic transfer. She remains fully aware that female exclusion from the public 'outside' is a very real socio-cultural phenomenon. This is precisely the exclusion against which grotesque female solidarity must militate. This is dramatized with characteristic grotesque humour in the episode where the women look out from inside the Hôtel-Dieu, over the river and

onto the Hôtel de Ville outside:

- Dites donc, propose la boniche. On va grimper sur les montants des lits et regarder par les lucarnes ce qui se passe dehors.

Heureuses de cette diversion, les voilà qui se hissent, le corps plaqué au mur, les mains collées au plafond; elles tendent le cou, les têtes sortent par la lucarne. La toiture doit se trouver fleurie d'un rang de têtes curieuses et hilares. (*MSB*, p.191)

The undoubtedly hilarious image of a row of heads poking out of the roof of the Hôtel-Dieu is a striking metaphor for the inaccessibility for the female subject of the dominant political institutions which the Hôtel de Ville exemplifies. The women of course do not comprehend the gendered opposition between political participation and spectatorship which the text makes clear for the reader. They are unaware of the oppressive nature of the structure of specularity to which their female bodies both condemn them and provide a symbolic alternative:

- C'est vraiment beau La République. Ça doit être le président que je viens de voir passer; tout le monde a enlevé son chapeau et en avant la musique. Il est fait comme tout le monde. Vous voyez bien, c'est l'égalité. Et c'est la liberté aussi puisqu'on a le droit de les regarder! (*MSB*, pp.194-95)

These women are taken in by the myth of the Republic and its discourses of *liberté* and *égalité* which the text exposes as duplicitous and deceiving. They do not question why the Republic is characterized exclusively by *fraternité*, excluding *maternité*, or perhaps *sororité*? Sisterhood is a word which can hardly be spoken in the French language; it is certainly not a characteristic of politics.

Valet asserts that any female political resistance must attack not only patriarchy but female collusion with it. The narrator's question, 'que leur dire?', and her avowed

aim to 'eveiller en elles la révolte' implies an aim to encourage the women to progress politically. The experience of the female body and of female solidarity permitted by pregnancy function as symbols of female political possibility without denying social and cultural obstructions to that possibility. Through the women's collusion with their oppression, and through the narrator's lucid, but not infallible, reading of their situation, the text suggests that, until modes of representing women to themselves and to culture at large have changed, 'que leur dire?' remains an unanswerable question.



According to Maroussia Hjukowski-Ahmed, '[a] resisting discourse cannot be mistaken for a politically subversive act; nor does it transform social practices unless the subject has access to an interpretive community and to power'.<sup>84</sup> Valet's grotesque female body is a resisting discourse; its aim must be to transform discursive practice through the power accorded to it by the interpretive community of readers. The need for externalization is clearly dramatized in the text by the movements between inside and outside. These movements exemplify what Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have termed 'displacements between *sites* of discourse'. They argue:

The grouping together of sites of discourse, the acceptance and the rejection of place, with its laws and protocols of language, is at once a coding of social identity.

Only a challenge to the hierarchy of *sites* of discourse, which usually comes from groups and classes 'situated' by the dominant in low or marginal positions, carries the promise of politically transformative

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<sup>84</sup> Maroussia Hjukowski-Ahmed, 'The Framing of the Shrew: Discourses on Hysteria and its Resisting Voices' in *Bakhtin, Carnival and Other Subjects*, ed. by Shepherd, pp.176-96, (p.194).

power.<sup>85</sup>

Valet challenges sites of discourse by allowing the inside to be a place of power, by suggesting that a place characterized by the proletarian female procreating body, which in terms of both gender and economics is situated as marginal, can have positive political potential.

Valet achieves this by constantly establishing a causal link between the female body and politics. Thus she achieves a somatic politics which goes far beyond the more usual literary technique of using the female procreating body as a symbol for politics without establishing any necessary link between that body and politics. The somatic politics of *Madame 60*<sup>BIS</sup> stands in contrast to a marked representational tendency towards a disembodied politics whereby femininity is associated with the body in opposition to politics. The work of Nizan exemplifies this tendency; Aragon, Thomas and Pelletier all concur with it in their disembodiment of the female politicized subject. The work of Drieu and Malraux is less categorical in that both *Gilles* and *L'Espoir* testify to a certain desire for a politics of the male body; nonetheless, both also affirm that the embodiment of the male politicized subject is highly problematic. Similarly, Weiss's text points to a politics of maternity whilst suggesting that a politics of the maternal body is problematic.

Terry Eagleton has suggested:

There is a pressing need for what we might call a 'political somatics', a study of the historical body that attends not only, in negative fashion, to its past and present imprintings, but which may learn from such sources

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<sup>85</sup> Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, p.194, p.201.



as Bakhtin something of is revolutionary potential.<sup>86</sup>

Valet's *Madame 60<sup>BIS</sup>* provides a wealth of material for such a 'political somatics'; this chapter has attempted, by drawing on the work of Bakhtin, to make progress in responding to this need in the context of 1930s literature.

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<sup>86</sup> Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, p.150.

## CONCLUSION

All the texts in this study point incontrovertibly to the conclusion that politicization - personal commitment, public activism, writing about politics and so on - was a gendered activity in 1930s France. This gendered nature of politicization has a tendency to hide behind a presumed equivalence between masculinity and politics, a masculinity which is manifested in various forms, and which does not speak its name, but rather presents itself as universal and all-encompassing. In representational terms, the tendency towards the disembodiment of politics contributes to this masking. More tangibly, the general invisibility of female-authored novels in the political genre, both in terms of the non-availability of their texts and of the absence of critical analysis of their work, also play their part. The study of female-authored texts which deal with politicization points up this gendering with particular clarity, although, equally, it emerges from close readings of the representation and function of masculinity and femininity in texts written by male authors. The critical silence which has been maintained as regards the female contribution to the genre of political fiction has not permitted a thorough evaluation of the full extent of the gendering of politicization manifested in such aesthetic production. I hope that this study has gone some way towards repairing the omission.<sup>1</sup>

The exclusive association of the male with the realm of politics, and the consequent view of politics as an inappropriate sphere for the female, was, in 1930s France, the status quo; this was illustrated most fundamentally by women's exclusion

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<sup>1</sup> The scholarly context for this sort of gender-focused revisionist approach is provided by the work of historians and cultural historians such as Christine Bard, Siân Reynolds, Paul Smith and Mary Louise Roberts to which I have referred in detail; the political literature of inter-war France has not been the focus of such revision.

from suffrage. All the female novelists acknowledge, in the final analysis, that female emancipation and politicization are predicated upon radical change of both society and of women themselves. However, beneath this surface of homogeneity, various different stances as regards the status quo of gender identifications emerge.

Thomas and Pelletier both suggest that, in the specific socio-cultural environment in which they find themselves, femininity is so much imbued with negative associations of dependency, passivity, and sentimentality as to render it an impediment to politics. For them, culture has defined 'woman' in certain ways which real women must now resist and reject. Their aim then is an escape from conventional femininity. Both Pelletier and Thomas have faith that gender neutrality will lead to equality. Thus, the sexless narratee of Thomas's memoirs indicates a desire to be free of the constraints of gender. In Pelletier's work however, neutrality is transformed into an alignment with the male.

Weiss and Valet by contrast testify to a desire to retain something of the 'feminine' in their politics. For Valet, this desire finds expression in an exploration of the political possibilities of the procreating female body. Valet is the only author of the corpus I examine who integrates embodiment into a positive relationship with politics. This is achieved through the manipulation of the grotesque aesthetic, which prevents the text from slipping into an essentialist conflation of woman with procreation. Maternity, in *Madame 60<sup>BIS</sup>*, is an identity which is privileged as offering the potential for female solidarity and for a nascent awareness of the nature of social, economic and gender oppression. Such an awareness ultimately has the potential to allow women access to a whole gamut of identities, once they are emancipated and politicized, which will release them precisely from essentializing definitions of selfhood. Thus Valet achieves an approach to politics which can combine heterogeneity with equality, whilst avoiding

essentialism: precisely the sort of gendered politics recommended by Anne Phillips.<sup>2</sup> For Weiss, the link between politics and femininity is also maternity, but, in *Délivrance*, the reader discovers a symbolic, disembodied maternity which functions as a model for politics. Weiss and Valet then both attempt to extract some transformative potential from prevailing norms of femininity - in this case, the patriarchal definition of woman solely in terms of her reproductive function. It would perhaps be possible to argue that, in their use of the motif of maternity, Weiss and Valet are taking account of 'the paradoxically productive aspects of patriarchal ideology [...] as well as [...] its obvious oppressive implications', as Toril Moi argues feminism should.<sup>3</sup> Valet's text may be as radical as Moi suggests this approach to be; in the case of Weiss however, I detect a certain nostalgia for the roles of conventional wife and mother, roles precluded by politics, which is less than feminist.

None of the female-authored novels examined in this study analyse in any detail the question of male politicization. There is a tendency instead to approach masculinity as an obstacle to female politicization. However, this does not imply an advocacy of female separatism. Inter-war Paris offered a context for separatism in the celebrations of womanhood which characterized the Paris Lesbos group, centred around the American expatriate Nathalie Barney and including other Anglo-American women as well as, most famously, Colette.<sup>4</sup> It seems that women writing in the political genre, as this study understands it, did not engage with Barney's approach to sexual politics. On the contrary, Weiss and Pelletier both admit sympathetic males into their analysis, through the

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<sup>2</sup> Phillips, *Engendering Democracy*, p.168. See Chapter 1, p.66 above.

<sup>3</sup> Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p.64.

<sup>4</sup> See Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris 1900-1940* for an exhaustive account of this aspect of early twentieth century women's history.

characters of *L'Enchanteur* and *Saladier* respectively: neither then is hostile towards male participation in female politicization. Valet too stresses the need for the female solidarity of the *Hôtel-Dieu* to be taken out into the 'male' city. Thomas's suspicion of all-women political organizations clearly indicates her preference for integration.

Thomas's view of such organizations is representative of the problematic nature of female political solidarity. Valet offers the only extended vision of female solidarity to be found in this corpus. For Pelletier, it is precisely women's inability to organize themselves into coherent groups that is as much an obstacle to their liberation as the patriarchal ideologies which marginalize and oppress them:

Marginalized by society, women as a group deserve the slave-like position that is accorded to them. They only know how to groan when the male yoke is too painful. If they showed greater dignity, if they knew how to organize themselves better, if they campaigned with greater energy, they would long since have attained political and sexual equality.<sup>5</sup>

Although the characters of Pelletier's and Weiss's novels encounter individuals prepared to offer help and an escape from solitude, they certainly do not provide a female equivalent to the fraternity that governs the politics of Malraux and Nizan. In Thomas's fiction the theme of solitude dominates and is seen to be the inevitable result of female politicization.

It is through the question of solidarity that Nizan investigates male politicization. *La Conspiration* considers the difficulties the immature male subject might experience in coming to politics, but masculinity is never seen to be incompatible with politics. In the same way, the male political apprenticeship is presented as problematic in *Gilles*, however, politicization is always compatible with the achievement of successful

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<sup>5</sup> Gordon and Cross, *Early French Feminisms, 1830-1940*, p.167.

masculinity. Again in Malraux's novels, politicization and masculinity go hand in hand. His work however nuances the notion of the coupling of masculinity and politics which, in the work of Drieu particularly, appears as natural and homogenous. I have shown in Chapter 3 that, through the motif of virile heroism, Malraux's texts exhibit a more self-conscious awareness of the need to ensure the coincidence of masculinity and politics. This results from Malraux's focus on combative politics: it is particularly when fighting is involved that the myth of the virile hero must be asserted at all costs if the threat of trauma is to be avoided. The question of combat brings us back to the difficulties surrounding an embodied politics: war does not, ultimately, positively politicize the male body because, as I have demonstrated in Chapter 4, the mutilated body stands in contradiction to the dominant fiction and cannot signify male adequacy.

Drieu's seamless association between adequate masculinity and positive politicization excludes women and femininity completely. The novels of Aragon, Nizan and Malraux by contrast all express, in varying degrees, some desire that women should approach politicization. *Les Cloches de Bâle*, with its avowed aim to present 'la femme de demain', '[l]'égale' (CB, p.437) expresses this hope most unambiguously, but not in fact most successfully, since Clara Zetkin represents an example of optimistic idealism rather than a sustained investigation into the real problems of female politicization. Malraux's May certainly represents progress in relation to Drieu's misogyny, yet the dependance of her identity and commitment on the male, and the alignment of that commitment with a politics which is not that recommended by the text's thesis, precludes an interpretation of this character as an ideal. Amongst the male-authored female characters, Nizan's Catherine is endowed with the most potential as regards female politicization; her positive political *Bildung*, largely ignored, as Pascal Ory points out,

in analyses of *La Conspiration*, is particularly radical since it also represents a politicization of female sexuality.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, that potential is not fulfilled: one can only speculate as to the possibilities for the development of Catherine in the never-completed sequel to *La Conspiration*.

Sexuality plays an important part in all the novels of this corpus. A focus on representations of sexuality underlines the fact that, whilst expressing an easily identifiable political *thèse*, these texts are also concerned with the identities and decisions of fictional characters and thus with the interaction of ontological or existential concerns with that *thèse*. None of the novels in this study presents a positive coincidence of female sexuality and politics. In the female-authored novels, such a coincidence appears to be desirable, in terms of the experience of the politicized female subject, but it proves impossible in the contemporary socio-cultural environment; politics is ultimately privileged over sexuality. Furthermore, female sexuality and politics are never integrated on the level of representation. In Chapter 4, Part III we have seen that even Valet's politicization of female physicality cannot integrate a desiring, desirable body into its vision of political progress, leaving the sexualized body as a creation of idealizing discourses which does not correspond to the evidence of empirical observation.

The female novelists do not, predictably, reproduce the coincidence of male sexuality and politics which constantly emerges from the texts of Drieu, Nizan and Malraux. In their novels, male sexuality functions unproblematically both as a metaphor for politics, and as an important aspect of the male politicized subject's ontological experience. The caveat is, however, that the dangers of embodiment must always be avoided: the privileging of virile fraternity in these texts must be protected from slippage

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<sup>6</sup> Ory, *Nizan: Destin d'un révolté*, p.158.

into homoeroticism. Drieu's *Gilles*, in its combination of an uncompromising rejection of femininity and female sexuality with a sexualization of politics cannot escape the symbolic homoeroticization of fascism, which is nonetheless distinguished from the embodied homosexuality which Drieu always labels as decadent. Homosexuality does not function as a positive political motif in any of the texts in question, although same-sex desire lurks just beneath the surface in the texts of Pelletier, Weiss and Thomas, as well as in *Gilles*. The overt politicization of homosexuality which has characterized the later years of the twentieth century is not foregrounded in any way by these inter-war political novels.<sup>7</sup>

It only remains then to situate the propositions of this synthesis in relation to a more theoretical framework. In a recent article, Morag Shiach points to a distinction between gender experience and gender identity which offers a useful way of categorizing the attitudes to gender and politics which emerge from these novels.<sup>8</sup> Gender experience concerns the question of how the individual lives as a gendered subject in the world. Gender identity concerns rather the ways in which gendered subjectivity is constructed. The texts which address the question of female politicization are all concerned with gender experience: they are outward-looking, investigating the consequences of the conventions of the socius for the individual. Since Aragon must be included in the list as well as Thomas, Weiss, Pelletier, Valet, it is necessary now to rethink the categorization of novels according to the sex of the author. However, such categorization cannot be said to be irrelevant, since male and female subjects are positioned so differently in relation to politics. Aragon is perhaps a case in point: though radical in addressing the subject of

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<sup>7</sup> On the development of discourses of homosexuality in France, see Copley, *Sexual Moralities in France 1780-1980*.

<sup>8</sup> Morag Shiach, '“Gender” and cultural analysis', *Paragraph*, 17.1 (March 1994), 27-37.



female politicization, he does not share the insights of the female novelists into the problems of politicization. Catherine Simonidzé's political apprenticeship is predominantly presented in terms of class. Nonetheless, to a certain extent, the work of Aragon shares with that of Thomas, Weiss, Pelletier and Valet the expression of a conflict between the experience of the individual, and cultural definitions of gender. Their texts acknowledge that culture defines femininity as excluding politics, whereas the experience of their protagonists includes politics. Their approach then is overtly and deliberately 'anti-essentialist', according to Shiach's definition of anti-essentialism as 'a belief that existing attitudes, behaviours and social roles associated with gender are socially and culturally constructed'.<sup>9</sup> The texts which address the question of male politicization - those of Drieu, Malraux and Nizan - tend rather to be concerned with gender identity: they are inward-looking, investigating the nature of the political consciousness. This focus on the male political consciousness often leads to the production of essentializing discourses of female subjectivity. Here the politicized subject is not placed in a situation of conflict between his experience and the cultural definitions of his gender, and therefore gender experience almost goes without saying. He is free to meditate upon the role of politics in the construction of his (masculine) gender identity. Where there is a conflict between social expectation and empirical evidence, gender experience becomes the central problematic. It is because this conflict exists for the politicized female subject that the female-authored novels tend to expose the gendering of politicization particularly clearly. Where this conflict is absent, the role of gender in politicization is masked, or taken for granted. That which goes without saying - the supposed appropriateness of politics to a male gender identity - is made explicit in the

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p.28.

texts which envisage female politicization.

Women's contribution to the political genre which has come to be so closely associated with French inter-war literature is considerable. To study that contribution is not only to fill in some more of the gaps in the literary history of what Jennifer Milligan has termed the 'forgotten generation', but also to inform the study of their better-known literary brothers. Fiction was fertile ground for the investigation of political identities and ideologies for both the enfranchised and the disenfranchised.

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