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The Subjectivity of the Colonial Subject
from Olympe de Gouges to Mme de Duras

Mary Jane Cowles

In the discourse surrounding the abolitionist project during the Revolutionary period and the early nineteenth century in France, white French women played a major role in focusing attention on colonial black subjects, with the aim of effecting a change in consciousness and in society. It may well be, as Françoise Massardier-Kennedy suggests, that “women authors of this period were, perhaps because of their cultural position, sensitive to the plight of Africans and opposed slavery textually in ways that their male counterparts (canonical writers such as Hugo or Merimée) did not or could not.” Women writers, such as Olympe de Gouges, the early feminist and author of the Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne, and the salonnière Madame de Duras created independent heroes and heroines, both subjects of action and subject to the law of the colonizer. While de Gouges and Duras stand out as pioneers in their efforts to speak for black Africans, the narratives they tell demonstrate very different levels of the expression of subjectivity. Nonetheless, in both de Gouges’s drama L’Esclavage des noirs and Duras’s short novel Ourika, the problem of subjectivity revolves around the fate of a black woman’s body.

There are two fundamental notions that underwrite Europeans’ attempt to portray colonial experience in literature: the question of the subject and that of representation. Several aspects of these terms necessarily come into play. First, the colonial subject is a ‘subject’ in the sense that the people of a kingdom are subjects of the king; the colonized are the ‘subjects’ of the colonizing power. In an almost antithetical meaning, the word ‘subject’ can refer to agency, as in the subject of an action, “the cognizing agent; the self or ego” (OED, 1971). This last meaning, as the self or ego, passes from agency to its former state of subjection as the ‘subject of analysis’ in psychoanalytic discourse. Yet in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the concept of the ‘subject’ is further complicated by Lacan’s distinction between the conscious self, developed through identification with others, and the subject of the unconscious, which speaks through dreams, slips of the tongue, obsessions, and desires. This unconscious subject “governs behavior (action), discourse, and ‘personality’ in reference to a savoir that, paradoxically, determines and transcends the human subject as being” (Ragland 3). Thus

the patient of analytic treatment bears within himself the 'subject' of the unconscious, which governs his very being. The conscious self is 'subjected' to an unconscious agency and is alienated from it, principally because consciousness is mediated through language.

Insofar as literature is an artistic form that represents forms of subjectivity, we also need to question the nature of that representation. In a critique of "Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze," Gayatri Spivak points out that in their discussion of power, desire, and interest, the two philosophers neglect the role of ideology and "reintroduce the undivided subject into the discourse of power." In response to Deleuze's statement that "There is no more representation; there's nothing but action," Spivak writes: "Two senses of representation are being run together: representation as 'speaking for,' as in politics, and representation as 're-presentation,' as in art and philosophy" (275). In her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?," the problem for Spivak revolves around "the possibility of speaking of (or for) the subaltern woman" (271). Her essay ends with the example of an Indian woman's suicide, a politically motivated gesture that is radically misread as a case of illicit love. Spivak concludes soberly that "The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read. [...] The subaltern cannot speak. [...] Representation has not withered away" (308).

Olympe de Gouges and Madame de Durã§s explore the question of the 'subject', both from the perspective of the colonized subject imagining personal autonomy and thereby acquiring subjecthood (in L'Esclavage des noirs) and from that of the colonized unconscious caught between conscious identification with the colonizers and the real of the body (Ourika). They also both attempt at the same time to portray (re-present) and speak for (represent) colonial black subjects in a way that gives voice to the subaltern position.

**Becoming Conscious: L'Esclavage des noirs**

Olympe de Gouges's play L'Esclavage des noirs (presented to the comité de lecture of the Théâtre-Français in 1783 but not performed until 1789) is considered to be among the first theatrical critiques of slavery in French, written five years before the founding of the "Société des Amis des Noirs." It is also, according to Chalaye and Razgonnikoff, the first play "à mettre en scène des esclaves noirs qui soient de vrais personnages avec une réelle prise de parole sur leur condition" (vii). Slaves or Africans who appear in plays prior to Gouges's Esclavage des noirs are either the slaves of classical antiquity, the exotic slaves of Oriental princes or good-hearted and playful servants, utterly devoted to their masters (Chalaye and Razgonnikoff, xiii, xvi).
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As de Gouges’s play opens, the escaped slaves Zamor and Mirza have taken refuge on an island in “les Indes” off the coast of a large colonial city, of which M. de Saint-Frémont is the French governor. They have fled captivity because, as we learn in the first few lines, Zamor has accidentally killed the governor’s intendant while defending Mirza and will surely be executed for his crime if he falls into the colonists’ hands. Witnessing a shipwreck, Zamor and Mirza save a French couple, but are soon recaptured by “L’Indien,” the slave overseer. The “Indien” brings the slaves back to the colonial city, where M. de Saint-Frémont feels obligated to make an example of Zamor, despite his paternal feelings for the slave. The slaves of the colony threaten to revolt on behalf of Zamor, and the colonial judge warns the governor that only a swift execution will reestablish order. Although the French couple intercedes to save Zamor, he is in fact pardoned only after M. de Saint-Frémont learns that the young Frenchwoman, Sophie, is his own long-lost illegitimate daughter. Moved to pity at the chorus of entreaties to which his daughter adds her voice, M. de Saint-Frémont finally spares Zamor’s life.

The portrayal of all the slaves, with the exception of those sent to recapture Zamor and Mirza, is sympathetic throughout the play. Madame de Saint-Frémont’s domestic slaves Betzi and Azor, for example, fail to understand fully the implications of their enslavement, but their spontaneous laments while imaging a time and a place where Africans are free are designed to elicit the sympathy of French spectators. More conscious of her plight, less passive than the domestic slaves, Mirza questions the inequities of the system of slavery, representing an intermediary position between resignation and revolt. She also embodies two of de Gouges’s own major preoccupations: the desire for instruction (de Gouges’s education was largely neglected in her childhood and “sa vie durant elle souffrit du manque d’instruction”) and her belief, as a disciple of Rousseau, in the salutary effect of nature as model, teacher, and guide. For Mirza, the desire for instruction gives birth to a greater understanding of her own condition and that of her fellow slaves.

MIRZA—Le peu que je sais, je te le dois, Zamor; mais dis-moi, pourquoi les Européens et les habitants ont-ils tant d’avantages sur nous, pauvres esclaves? Ils sont cependant faits comme nous, nous sommes des hommes comme eux: pourquoi donc une si grande différence de leur espèce à la nôtre? (1:1, 27)

Whether it is because of her naïve charm that inspires a natural generosity or because of her nascent sense of solidarity with others, Mirza admires Zamor’s willingness to risk his own life to save Sophie’s: “À présent que je suis malheureuse, je sens mieux combien il est doux de soulager le malheur
des autres” (1:ii, 28). Marie-Pierre Le Hir describes a later scene (1:vii) in which Mirza admires Sophie’s pretty hand while both Sophie and her husband Valère, saved from the shipwreck, exclaim over Mirza’s beauty. Mirza and Sophie, she writes, “recognize each other as humans, and therefore as equal, and yet as different. […] Empathy, compassion, the instinctual desire to recognize others as human and to help them, is for Gouges what constitutes Mirza, Zamor, Valère, and Sophie as human beings” (72). More significant still is Mirza’s remark at the beginning of the scene: “Je vous aime bien, quoique vous ne soyez pas esclave” (29, my italics). Not only does this sentiment demonstrate the acceptance of difference, but it supposes, in its concession of difference, that loving one’s fellow slaves is the norm, and that only fellow slaves are worthy of love. If the colonial French believe that they are superior beings, objects of admiration, and that devotion to them and love for them is their natural due, Mirza’s statement that this is exceptional holds up a truer mirror of the relation between master and slave. Indeed, it is not their status as French, but rather their suffering, gratitude, and obvious dependence on the two slaves that inspire Mirza’s affection for Sophie and Valère. The portrayal of these sentiments defies the stereotypes of African slaves in plays prior to de Gouges’s *Esclavage de noirs*.

Although nature has a role in this “instinctual desire to recognize others as human and to help them” (Le Hir 72), it is education—particularly in the case of Coraline and Zamor—that permits the fullest expression of race consciousness and subject autonomy in the play. In response to Mirza’s question about the differences between the races, Zamor explains:

Cette différence est bien peu de chose; elle n’existe que dans la couleur, mais les avantages qu’ils ont sur nous sont immenses. L’art les a mis au-dessus de la nature; l’instruction en a fait des dieux, et nous ne sommes que des hommes. […] La plupart de ces maîtres barbares nous traitent avec une cruauté qui fait frémir la Nature. Notre espèce trop malheureuse s’est habituée à ces châtiments, ils se gardent bien de nous instruire. Si nos yeux venaient à s’ouvrir, nous aurions horreur de l’état où ils nous ont réduits, et nous pourrions secouer un jug se cruel que honneurs: mais est-il en notre pouvoir de changer notre sort? L’homme avili par l’esclavage a perdu toute son énergie, et les plus abusés d’entre nous sont les moins malheureux. (1:i, 27)

According to Zamor’s analysis, the possibility of freedom depends on the education of the slaves, which would spark self-consciousness and the awareness of their condition. The perpetual degradation of the slaves ensures that their energies are focused on sheer survival. Though these words appear to advocate revolt, Zamor maintains the hope of change in Europe: “Les hommes éclairés jettent sur nous des regards attendris: nous leur devrons le retour de cette précieuse liberté, le premier trésor de l’homme, et dont des
The character of Coraline was added to the 1792 edition of the play; she appeared neither in the 1788 edition nor in the play as it was performed in late 1789 (Chalaye and Razgonnikoff xxiii). She figures only in three scenes and doubtless was added to fill out the second act, which had been streamlined (with the elimination of several characters) and simplified in the 1792 edition to focus the action better. Although she refers less explicitly to her own education than does Zamor, she has clearly benefited from an education, reads books, and has reflected on the situation of the slaves. Despite her limited appearance, she functions as the female counterpart to Zamor and is generally assumed to give voice to the author’s ideas (Chalaye and Razgonnikoff xlv; Le Hir 73). Thanks to her education and through education, Coraline, too, foresees an end to slavery:

J’ai lu dans un certain livre, que pour être heureux il ne fallait qu’être libre et bon cultivateur. Il ne nous manque que la liberté. […] Que les maîtres donnent la liberté, aucun esclave ne quittera les ateliers! Insensiblement, les plus sauvages d’entre nous s’instruiront, reconnaîtront les lois de l’humanité et de la justice, et nos supérieurs trouveront dans notre attachement, dans notre zèle, la récompense de ce bienfait. (2:ii. 32)

Coraline presents a less violent vision of the end of slavery than does Zamor, and, appearing as she does in the middle of the play, she better prepares the paternalistic discourse of M. de Saint-Frémont to the assembled slaves at its conclusion: “Sachez que l’homme, dans sa liberté, a besoin encore d’être soumis à des lois sages et humaines, et sans vous porter à des excès répréhensibles, espérez tout d’un gouvernement éclairé et bienfaisant” (3:xiii. 41). But the melodramatic happy ending cannot fully obscure the mechanism that sets the drama in action. If the main reason for the play’s short run (just three performances) is probably the cabal organized by the anti-abolitionist Club Mas- siac,11 the play was also severely criticized for making the unpunished murderer of a white man into a hero. At the root of all these reflections on the injustice of slavery is the overseer’s lust and the harsh retribution caused by his being spurned. Ultimately, Zamor flees captivity not because of abolitionist principles, but because the overseer’s desire for a black woman’s body is the origin of both his and Zamor’s crime. The threat of sexual exploitation serves to make more palpable the victimization of slavery for the play’s spectators.

If Zamor’s education has brought him closer to the god-like status of the white man, it has also brought him closer to civilized feeling and to duty towards the defenseless. While the overseer’s love makes him “féroce,” Zamor tells Mirza that his education “ajoutait à la sensibilité de mes mœurs
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sauvages, et me rendait encore plus insupportable le despotisme affreux qui me commandait ton supplice” (1:1, 27). Thus, as Verdier points out, sexual tyranny is equated with political injustice (200). The marriage of Zamor and Mirza with which the play ends provides for the reintegration of the unwitting criminal into stable family structures. It also reassuringly exorcises any threat of miscegenation in a utopian vision of happy servitude to an enlightened master. Yet it reminds us that the stakes in this theoretical battle over questions of human dignity really amount to one’s rights to a black woman’s body, whose possession serves as a metaphor for self-determination.

**Becoming Unconscious: Ourika**

In the context of a play, character traits are necessarily revealed primarily through action. The characters of *L’Esclavage des noirs* seem all of a piece; they do not truly evolve. The obstacles they face are external; recognition (of Sophie as Saint-Frémont’s natural daughter) and reversal (the pardon of Zamor’s crime) are closely linked to plot and reveal little of the characters’ inner lives. The characters’ subjectivity becomes manifest through their sense of responsibility for others, their desire to become educated, their analysis of their condition in slavery. The confessional narrative form of *Ourika*. Claire de Duras’s short novel of 1823, on the other hand, allows for a closer exploration of personal subjectivity. Because of the African protagonist’s unique position as both integrated into French society—by her education and adopted social status—and irrevocably other, this exploration brings us closer to the insights of a post-colonial perspective.

*Ourika* tells the life-story of a young African woman, rescued from slavery at the age of two by a French aristocrat and raised by his aunt Mme de B. Similar to Chateaubriand’s *René*, the novel constitutes a confession made to a privileged listener, in this case, the doctor who comes to treat Ourika in the convent where she is wasting away from an unknown disease. Her act of confession, as in *René*, is supposed to have a therapeutic effect. The doctor, whose brief narration presents and frames Ourika’s story, notes that she bears “la trace de bien longues souffrances.” While Ourika affirms that she is currently happy, she also admits that it was not always so. “[S]’il est ainsi,” the doctor responds, “c’est le passé qu’il faut guérir.”12 Analogous to an analytic discourse, the narrative, by exposing the source of illness, hopes to effect a cure. Unfortunately, the therapeutic effect of the confession does not occur, and Ourika dies.

To understand Ourika’s failure to heal—and her relation to language and speech—we must first examine the identifications she establishes with others,
the mirrors in which she sees herself reflected, beginning with the image of her body. Ourika’s body is experienced from the inside, but not truly seen from the outside; it is at once veiled and present over the course of a reasonably happy childhood. She spends her early years in Mme de B’s salon, “aimée d’elle, caressée, gâtée par tous ses amis, accablée de présents, vaniée, exaltée comme l’enfant le plus spirituel et le plus aimable” (7). Indeed, according to Kadish (citing Woodward), young Africans like Ourika were commonly acquired as objects of prestige and treated like pets.13 At this point, Ourika is not aware of race and does not see herself as different from those around her. Even if she describes herself as “pensive avant de penser,” her pensive quality more likely describes her contemplation, or even absorption, of the beloved Mme de B.14 Ourika is truly “captée par l’image”15 of her adoptive mother: “J’étais heureuse à côté de Mme de B.: aimer, pour moi, c’était être là, c’était l’entendre, lui obéir, la regarder surtout; je ne désirais rien de plus” (8). Here, Ourika exists only through a dyadic relation with the other. This essentially narcissistic relation is close to what Lacan calls the “mirror stage,” in which the child, seeing her reflection in the mirror, recognizes herself and incorporates this external image which structures a primordial form of the self,16 a form that Lacan, following Freud, calls the “je-identité” (Écrits 94).17 It is important to emphasize that this image of the self remains external to the body itself. The nascent identification is constituted in and through space, as much through the process of giving a coherent wholeness to a body previously perceived as separate body parts as through the distance between the body and its image traversed by the gaze.

This first image of the self (“le moi”) serves as the foundation for the relation to the other, which appears as another totalized image of the body perceived from the outside and initially conceived as narcissistic. Thus, says Lacan, “La manifestation naturelle de ce monde clos à deux nous image la conjonction de la libido objectale et la libido narcissique. En effet, l’attachement de chaque objet à l’autre est fait de la fixation narcissique à cette image” (Séminaire I, 158). At the same time, Lacan argues, “l’individu est tellement captif du type que, par rapport à ce type, il s’anéantit.” Even though the identification Lacan refers to here comes from the animal world, the process is the same for Ourika. She exists only through the image of the other: “je ne pensais qu’à plaire à Mme de B.; un sourire d’approbation sur ses lèvres était tout mon avenir” (9).18 Mme de B. is, in fact, the idealized mirror of Ourika, who is entirely subjugated by her charm: “en la voyant, on l’écoute, on croyait lui ressembler” (8).

A few days after a ball at which Ourika dances an African dance, oblivious to the gaze of the Other upon her, she overhears by chance a conversation
which, she recounts, “ouvrit mes yeux et finit ma jeunesse” (11). Indeed, the inclusion of this overhead conversation within the narrative represents the first time direct speech occurs in the text. While Ourika remains hidden behind a screen, the marquise, a friend of Mme de B., speaks of the young girl’s future: “elle est pleine de talents, elle est piquante, naturelle; mais que deviendra-t-elle? [...]—Hélas! dit Mme de B. [...] je ferai tout pour la rendre heureuse; et cependant, lorsque je réfléchis à sa position, je la trouve sans remède. Pauvre Ourika! je la vois seule, pour toujours seule dans la vie!” (12). It is indeed a matter of Ourika’s position in the world, of her place, as the marquise seems to take pleasure in repeating: “Ourika n’a pas rempli sa destinée: elle s’est placée dans la société sans sa permission; la société se vengera” (13).19

Moreover, as Bertrand-Jennings has shown, Ourika’s position relates specifically to her place in the system of exchange that constitutes marriage. Again, education proves to have both an integrating and an alienating function: “[A] qui la marierez-vous, avec l’esprit qu’elle a et l’éducation que vous lui avez donnée?,” asks the marquise (13). A man of similar education and social background would not agree to marry her, and whoever would marry her for money would necessarily be of an inferior social class. Mme de B. bemoans Ourika’s fate, saying “elle ne peut rien contre les maux qui viennent d’avoir brisé l’ordre de la nature” (13). Of course, it is not a question of the order of nature, but rather of the Symbolic order, so transparent, so inflexible, that it passes for a natural force. That order determines not only her place in society through marriage, but more generally her place in the chain of signification.

The intervention of speech which reveals Ourika’s social position to her constitutes a violent break in her lived experience. Suddenly, she can see herself and see herself as different. She finally realizes the state of alienation inherent in the mirror stage: the whole image of the self is perceived outside of the body, in the other who is her reflection or with whom she identifies: “Il me serait impossible de vous peindre l’effet que produisit en moi ce peu de paroles; l’éclat n’est pas plus prompt; je vis tout; je me vis nègresse, dépendante, méprisée. sans fortune, sans appui, sans un être de mon espèce à qui unir mon sort” (12).

At the same time that Ourika becomes conscious of the difference between her imaginary “moi-idée!” and her position in the world, she accedes to the Symbolic through language. Language, too, is imposed from the outside, from the Other, and it is not by chance that this particular instance of the Symbolic manifests itself as a disembodied voice: Ourika is behind the screen
and does not see the two women speaking. The Freudian super-ego is introjected, integrated into the self in the form of a censuring voice (Lacan I, 220). The distinguishing feature of speech ("la parole"), according to Lacan, is that it represents and designates a place in the signifying chain. The price of the integration of speech is a split within the self. "Si ça parle dans l'Autre [...] c'est que c'est là que le sujet [...] trouve sa place signifiante. La découverte de ce qu'il articule à cette place, c'est-à-dire dans l'inconscient, nous permet de saisir au prix de quelle division (Spaltung) il s'est ainsi constitué" (Écrits, 689).

But the double alienation caused by the recognition of her body as other and by her necessary submission to the law of the Symbolic order reveals to Ourika that the place assigned to her in the signifying chain is a non-place. Her awareness of the Symbolic order imposes the recognition of her absolute solitude: "l'isolement surtout; cette conviction que j'étais seule, pour toujours seule dans la vie. Mme de B. l'avait dit; et à chaque instant je me répétais, seule! pour toujours seule!" (14).

This realization is inscribed on the body in a hysterical reaction. From its status as lived experience, the body becomes symbol: "Une affreuse palpitation me saisit, mes yeux s'obscurcirent, le battement de mon cœur m'ôta un instant la faculté d'écouter encore" (12). The fracture in the specular relationship between oneself and the other reawakens the phantasms of the dismembered body. Ourika is no longer the reflection of that imago of perfection. Her entry into the Symbolic leads her into the bodily disintegration represented by the illness from which she will suffer until her death, and by the image of isolated body parts: "ma figure me faisait horreur, je n'osais plus me regarder dans une glace; lorsque mes yeux se portaient sur mes mains noires, je croyais voir celles d'un singe" (15).

Further, the perception of racial difference causes the unconscious alienation from the self to become conscious. David O'Connell has traced the way in which Ourika anticipates the findings of Franz Fanon's Peau noire, masques blancs, specifically the "psychological disintegration" of Ourika:21 "le nègre infériorisé va de l'insécurité humiliante à l'auto-accusation ressentie jusqu'au désespoir."22 For Fanon, the alienation is such that "Il y a chez l'homme de couleur tentative de fuir son individualité, de néantiser son être-là" (48). The black person's consciousness with respect to the hegemonic European world always implicates the body: "La connaissance du corps est une activité uniquement négatrice" (89). The fundamental problem for the French West Indian, as for Ourika, is that the imposition of French culture on the colonial subject also causes an alienating split in the self: "Aux Antilles, le jeune Noir,
qui à l'école ne cesse de répéter 'nos pères les Gaulois', s'identifie à l'explorateur, au civilisateur, au Blanc qui apporte la vérité aux sauvages, une vérité toute blanche. Il y a identification, c'est-à-dire que le jeune Noir adopte subjectivement une attitude de Blanc” (120).

It is only by feeling useful that Ourika can experience some relief in her solitude, because in so doing she does occupy a meaningful place in her social group. Significantly, she articulates her consciousness of the Symbolic order, represented by family relations, in terms of language: "Les liens de famille surtout me faisaient faire des retours bien douloureux sur moi-même, moi qui jamais ne devais être la sœur, la femme, la mère de personne!"; and in speaking of Mme de B.: "Je n'enviais pas sa tendresse à ses petits-fils, [...] mais j'aurais voulu pouvoir dire comme eux: Ma mère!" (17). Later in her narrative Ourika imagines how her life might have been: "Je serais la négresse esclave de quelque riche colon [...] mais j'aurais mon humble cabane pour me retirer le soir; j'aurais un compagnon de ma vie, et des enfants de ma couleur, qui m'appellerait: Ma mère!” (38). The terms of sister, wife, and especially mother establish a place while naming it, but Ourika's fate deprives her of these relations. The upheaval of the Revolution and the new order it seems to promise is only a brief dream that soon becomes a nightmare for Ourika and Mme de B's family.

The role of language in Ourika's attempts to create a place for herself in the Symbolic order is particularly poignant in her relationship with Mme de B's grandson Charles. During the Terror and the period that follows, Ourika has the impression that "tous les liens s'étaient resserrés par le malheur: j'avais senti que là, du moins, je n'étais pas étrangère" (24). And during this period, too, her friendship with Charles deepens, especially during their walks in the forest at Saint-Germain:

Il ne me cachait rien, et il ne se doutait pas qu'il me confiait quelque chose. Depuis si longtemps il comptait sur moi, que mon amitié était pour lui comme sa vie; il en jouissait sans la sentir; il ne me demandait ni intérêt ni attention; il savait bien qu'en parlant de lui, il me parlait de moi, et que j'étais plus lui que lui-même: charmé d'une telle confiance, vous pouvez tout remplacer, remplacer le bonheur même! (26)

Here we find the same effect of the mirror, with two differences: first, there is an equivalence between language and being; at the same time, language has taken the place of a spatially-related identification. By saying that she is more him than he himself, Ourika finds herself yet again in the same position of mirror reflection that she experienced as a child with Mme de B.23 Yet since these confidences are not mutual, since Ourika does not give away
anything of herself, she seems doomed to the same threat of non-existence she experienced when forced into the Symbolic order. The naïve self-centeredness of Charles, who is concerned only with himself, underscores the apparent non-existence of Ourika as subject behind the accommodating self-reflection she throws back to him.

Of course, this identification through language cannot last. Like the mirror of bodily identification, the mirror of words is destined to shatter. As feelings of love develop between Charles and his young fiancée Anaïs, Ourika finds herself stripped of that all too virtual place that she occupied through their exchanges. "Un jour [...] il me parla de la manière dont il voulait vivre avec elle: 'je veux obtenir toute sa confiance, me dit-il, et lui donner toute la mienne; [...] je veux qu'il y ait entre elle et moi une confiance comme la nôtre, Ourika.' Comme la nôtre! Ce mot me fit mal" (30-31).

At first, it seems that Ourika retains a place in the heart of her adoptive 'brother', even if he fools himself by thinking these confidences are fully shared. Yet a few weeks later, Ourika loses even that small place. Charles, who spends less and less time with his grandmother and Ourika, catches up with them on one of their walks through the forest and engages Ourika in conversation. When Ourika comments that they are conversing just like old times, Charles exclaims:

Comme autrefois! [...] quelle différence! avais-je donc quelque chose à dire dans ce temps-là? Il me semble que je n'ai commencé à vivre que depuis deux mois. Ourika, je ne vous dirai jamais ce que j'éprouve pour elle! Anaïs! Quelquefois je crois sentir que mon âme tout entière va passer dans la sienne. [...] Je serai pour elle le père, la mère qu'elle a perdues; mais je serai aussi son mari, son amant! [...] Quelles délires, Ourika, de penser qu'elle sera la mère de mes enfants. [...] Qu'ai-je fait, ô Dieu! pour mériter tant de bonheur. (31-32)

By rejecting the confidences of the past—"avais-je donc quelque chose à dire dans ce temps-là?"—Charles is denying Ourika the one place she had clung to. When Charles says that he feels his soul pass into his fiancée's, he destroys beyond repair that second identification in which Ourika has taken refuge. She can no longer be more him than he himself. She no longer exists: all the titles which define a place—the titles of sister, wife, and mother to which Ourika aspires—are claimed by Charles (father, mother, husband, lover) to be attributed to another.

Faced with this broken mirror, this refusal of identification that annihilates her, Ourika has a reaction similar to that of the earlier scene. It is her body that bears the mark: "Je me sentis fléchir, je tombai sur les genoux, mes yeux se fermèrent, et je crus que j'allais mourir" (32). Further, as Bertrand-Jennings

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has observed, the split in the self is made manifest through language by a confusion between the first and third persons: “Grand Dieu! vous êtes témoin que j'étais heureuse du bonheur de Charles: mais pourquoi avez-vous donné la vie à la pauvre Ourika?” (third person, italics mine).

Existing neither in the reflection of another (Mme de B.) nor in the other’s language (Charles), Ourika becomes the image of the abject as Kristeva defines it.34 “[L']abject, objet cher, est radicalement un exclu et me tire vers là où le sens s'effondre. Un certain ‘moi’ qui s’est fondu avec son maître, un sur-moi, l’a carrément chassé. Il a été débarqué, hors de l’ensemble dont il semble ne pas reconnaître les règles du jeu. Pourtant, de cet exil, l’abject ne cesse de déferler son maître” (9-10). Ourika has identified first with her adoptive mother, then with the Symbolic order which excludes her because of her body. She tries in response to reject the real of her body, but to no avail. According to Kristeva, the abject is that which disrupts identity, a system or an order, which is precisely the drama of Ourika’s presence in society. Eventually, “Las de ses vaines tentatives de se reconnaître hors de soi, le sujet trouve l’impossible en lui-même: lorsqu’il trouve que l’impossible, c’est son être même, découvrant qu’il n’est autre qu’abject” (11).

“Las de ses vaines tentatives de se reconnaître hors de soi”: in the different mirrors held up by those around her, Ourika discovers in the end that her very being is impossible. Already, at the end of the Terror when Mme de B. begins to reopen her salon, Ourika suffers from the disdain of the new guests: “J’étais poursuivie, plusieurs jours de suite, par le souvenir de cette physionomie dédaigneuse; je la voyais en rêve, je la voyais à chaque instant, elle se plaçait devant moi comme ma propre image” (28). In this passage, we can see not only the alienation inherent in any recognition of one’s reflection, but the substitution of a maleficient Other in the place of the idealized Other. The “moi-ideal” has become a deformation of the self, but it is a mask that Ourika ultimately puts on. She is other.

When the marquise who served as the agent of Ourika’s discovery of her own alienation comes to reveal that her source of her illness is her guilty love for Charles, Ourika seems to accept this verdict despite her initial refusal: “Ce désir de tenir ma place dans la chaîne des êtes, ce besoin des affections de la nature, cette douleur de l’isolement, c’étaient des regrets d’un amour coupable! […] Et cependant, je ne sais quelle voix crie au fond de moi-même, qu’on a raison, et que je suis criminelle” (41-42). Here again is the voice of the law of the Symbolic order, now completely internalized and ready to pronounce its judgment. Ourika’s refuge in the convent constitutes the final stage of this self-alienating internalization. At the beginning of her narrative,
Ourika cannot imagine that “les chagrins fussent des fautes” (16). Later, the fleeting feeling of vengeance she experiences at Charles’s seeming indifference to her suffering shows her that “si la douleur n’était pas une faute, s’y livrer comme je le faisais pouvait être criminel!” (36). Finally, in the last pages of her story, a priest tells her: “c’est à vous seule que vous avez fait du mal; mais vous n’en êtes pas moins coupable” (43). To expiate her crime, Ourika gives herself entirely to the law of the Symbolic, represented by religion: “Dieu […] me fit connaître sa loi: cette loi me montre tous mes devoirs” (44). Still, there is no escape: the law that makes her responsible for her suffering can neither pardon nor alleviate it.5 The alienated subject, now subject to God’s judgment, finds herself, according to Kristeva, in the final image of the abject: “La chrétienté mystique a fait de cette abjection de soi la preuve ultime de l’humilité devant Dieu” (13).

What conclusions can we draw from the confrontation of these two very different yet thematically linked texts? First, we can observe that education of a black protagonist plays a central role in the portrayal of his or her subjectivity. The black protagonist’s education proves effective because it solicits identification on the part of the white reader. Further, education is both a cause for the protagonists’ necessary alienation from the condition of slavery and a partial compensation for it. Indeed, one could say that the black protagonist’s education serves above all to educate the readers about his or her inherent worth.

Second, in these two works the black woman’s body is the site upon which the crucial values of the text are founded and to which the readers’ moral identifications are bound. Either as the focus of an external struggle or as the locus of the abject, the black woman’s body is doubly enslaved. Finally, we should note that both de Gouges and Duras have assumed a stance of re-presentation and representation, to recall Spivak’s terms. For de Gouges, the voices of her dramatic characters are re-presented as relatively unmediated, their emotions always externalized. De Gouges uses them as vehicles for her own ideas while also pleading the case of abolitionism. In the case of Duras, her novel was initially published anonymously, and the claims of representing the voice of a black woman are variously mediated. The anonymity of the novel as well as the framing device of the doctor’s narrative may allow for more tentative claims of representing an alienated subjectivity. But both authors attempt to give voice to bodies that could not, in the context of Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary France, speak for themselves.

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Notes


7. Although the play was intended to portray conditions of slavery in the West Indies, the actors of the Théâtre-Français, reluctant to perform in blackface, force de Gouges to rework the text as an Indian play (see Chalaye and Razognikoff, xix). Different versions retain some confusion between the West Indies and the “Indes orientales.”


13. These young Africans were often unceremoniously placed into domestic service later in life. See Doris Y. Kadish, “Translation in Context,” in Translating Slavery, 49.


15. See, for example, Lacan, Le Séminaire XI, 106.


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