

Subject and Space in Catherine Millet's "La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M."

Author(s): Nathalie Morello

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## SUBJECT AND SPACE IN CATHERINE MILLET'S *LA VIE SEXUELLE DE CATHERINE M.*

When *La Vie Sexuelle de Catherine M.* was published in France in spring 2001, initial discussion of the book predominantly centred around the question of how Catherine Millet could have written, and published, such a work; that is, why a well-known female art critic in her fifties would chose to present publicly a frank and detailed account of what she terms her 'singularité sexuelle'.<sup>1</sup> It cannot be denied that Millet's textual exhibition of her own sexual personality and life was, and remains, a striking novelty, even in a social and literary context of increasing sexual exhibitionism. Both the unexpected content (what can seem like a relentless succession of sexually explicit, if not pornographic, scenes that strangely appear simultaneously varied and similar) and the remarkable tone (notably detached and clinical considering the intimate and—normally—private nature of the subject-matter) combine to offer an extraordinary representation of female sexuality. While this debate can be seen to be relevant (although some might question its very *raison d'être* and its subtext), and while some aspects of it have proved pertinent and provocative (even though it also inspired a worrying quantity of subjectively moralistic, even sexist and misogynistic judgements), it has dominated media coverage of the text, and also been the starting-point of a growing body of scholarly work. The main critical focus so far has been to interpret the textual display of a (public) woman's sexuality, and to raise various issues pertaining to the questioning of categories such as real/representation, pornographic/erotic, literary/non-literary, personal/impersonal, public/private. The interrogation of these well-established categories has also led to debates about how to situate Millet's  *récit* within a history of writing of (female) sexuality, writing the self, and/or women's writing.<sup>2</sup> The concentration of critical work on the most immediately noticeable aspect of the book is understandable, but has also meant that other potentially interesting features of the writing have been overlooked, even though they might also be central to the narrative, including the distinctive reliance on 'space', that is markedly entwined with the representation of the narrator's sexual life. The word 'espace' is given prominent importance in the

<sup>1</sup> Catherine Millet, *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.*, Points, 1008 (Paris: Seuil, 2002), p. ii. Subsequent page references will be given in the main text, and relate to this edition, which includes as an introduction the text 'Pourquoi et comment', first published in *L'Infini*, 77 (Winter 2002), 3–46. Page references in lower-case roman numerals, as here, refer to this introductory text.

<sup>2</sup> Among the more pertinent contributions, see Martine Delvaux, 'Catherine Millet: l'archive du sexe', in *L'Esprit Créateur*, 44.3 (Fall 2004), 48–56; Shirley Jordan, 'Close-up and Impersonal: Sexual/Textual Bodies in Contemporary French Women's Writing', *Nottingham French Studies*, 45.3 (Autumn 2006), 8–23; J.-P. Guichard, '“La mariée mise à nu par . . .” : corps de femmes, regards de femmes dans la littérature au tournant du siècle', *Sites*, 6 (2002), 103–08; Nathalie Morello, 'La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.: A Case of Truth or Dare?', *Romanic Review* (forthcoming); Alain Roger, 'Le Phallangélus de Millet', *Critique*, 655 (December 2001), 911–28. For a more sceptical reading that argues that Millet's representation of female sexuality is more conservative and conformist than original and subversive, see Sandrine Garcia, 'La réception de *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.*', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 42 (2005), 22–35; Christine Détérez and Anne Simon, *A leur corps défendant* (Paris: Seuil, 2006).

titles of Chapters 2 and 3 (respectively 'L'espace' and 'L'espace replié'), and is used countless times in the course of the narrative, along with its many derivatives. There is an abundance of spatial images and metaphors, most strikingly of rigid and/or fluid boundaries and thresholds, which are tightly and consistently woven into the narrator's description of her sexual specificity. Language and concepts of space, both abstract and concrete, are manifestly the tools that the narrator privileges in her aim to offer the most accurate representation of her sexual self.

The aim of this article is to explore Millet's elaborate play on the theme of space, in particular the emphasis placed on boundaries. After briefly considering their presence and role in descriptions of physical space, I shall proceed to examine their relevance and function in the representation of the self, which will lead to an analysis of the narrator's treatment of the inside/outside, self/other dichotomies that underlie the traditional conception of subjectivity. I contend that behind an apparent celebration of ideal being, both actual and representational, that espouses a postmodern conception of subjectivity, with its emphasis on the breaking down of rigid boundaries that typify the humanist subject and its promoting a shifting, fleeing, and fractured subject, *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* ultimately reveals a stronger pull towards characteristics associated with the Cartesian/Enlightenment model.

Subject and space are two concepts that have consistently been closely brought together since the advancement of the Cartesian/Enlightenment model of subjectivity. With its emphasis on unity and coherence, knowledge and reason, autonomy and self-determination, the humanist subject is represented in spatial terms as a fully closed circle, an autonomous whole defined by an impenetrable boundary that clearly delimits the inside from the outside, and the bounded self from all the other islands of being around it. Psychoanalysis later challenged the idea that the ego is the sole basis of meaning and consciousness as it posited the fundamental role of the unconscious. The closed circle that previously unified the subject started to lose its impermeability, and further broke down as the subject underwent a marked shift towards increasing permeability between the first topographic model of the mind that Freud presented in 1923 and his revised version published ten years later.<sup>3</sup> Didier Anzieu highlights the two main differences that distinguish both models, one being the introduction of the Superego within the Ego, thus opening the subject to its own alterity, and the other: 'l'ouverture vers le bas de l'enveloppe, qui entourait complètement l'appareil psychique en 1923. Cette ouverture matérialise la continuité du Ça et de ses pulsions avec le corps et les besoins biologiques, mais au prix d'une discontinuité dans la surface. Elle confirme l'échec du Moi à se constituer en enveloppe totale du psychisme (échec déjà noté en 1923)'.<sup>4</sup> The weakened, discontinuous line that still partly defined the later Freudian subject continued to disintegrate further as a result of structuralist/postmodern practices. The

<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (1923) and *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1933), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953–74), XIX (1961), 1–66, and XXII (1964), 5–182 respectively.

<sup>4</sup> Didier Anzieu, *Le Moi-peau* (Paris: Dunod, 1995), pp. 108–09.

very relevance of the subject in the creative process was dismissed altogether when Barthes famously declared 'la mort de l'auteur' in 1968,<sup>5</sup> and the classical idea of the subject, accused of being responsible for oppression and exclusion of the other (non-Western white male), has since been further undermined, as much emphasis has been put on its diffraction and instability, and the need to break down boundaries that normally serve to fix meanings, supposedly to facilitate understanding. There is no sign of any hint of a line around the post-modern subject, but the terminology of space still prevails to evoke a concept of self that stresses and values fragmentation and multiplicity, dislocation and indeterminacy.

Just as the subject—real, writing, and written—was deemed to be dying, the literary genre of self-writing started to develop, and has grown considerably since the early 1980s. As Colin Davis and Elizabeth Fallaize note, though, writers of the self during the Mitterrand years did not simply regress to a pre-psychoanalytic/postmodern view of the subject, but set out to explore instead 'an unconscious subjectivity sensed only obliquely through our anxieties and desires'.<sup>6</sup> In *Les Fictions singulières*, Bruno Blanckeman comments thus on a genre that evades definition as it is characterized by a constant shift towards more blurring of more boundaries:

Une matière vive, qui appelle des glissements de terrain: ainsi pourrait-on définir une discipline dont la morphologie s'enrichit mais la géographie s'embrouille. Des formes autobiographiques alternatives fertilisent la littérature, font bouger ses seuils autant que ses catégories internes, lui apportent une légitimité culturelle nouvelle. Elles intègrent le document intime ou le reportage en situation de vie, aussi bien que le discours poétique, la fiction romanesque, la voix théâtrale.<sup>7</sup>

The use of more spatial terminology and metaphors is fitting to describe a considerable diversity of contemporary representations of the self, many of which use the trope of space to draw attention to fragmentation and confusion, reflexivity and fluidity, with varying degrees of success and/or originality. Not all could indeed be said to be 'déconcertantes', as Dominique Viart describes literary works that interrogate both language/form and expectations/meanings, and thus 'échappent aux significations préconçues, au prêt-à-porter culturel'.<sup>8</sup> But 'déconcertant' is certainly an apt word to describe *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.*, not necessarily in Viart's subjective sense (although it fits his arguably wide-encompassing description), and not just because of the original treatment of female sexuality (as often stated by many critics), even though it does contribute to setting Millet's *récit* apart from the myriad other examples of *écriture de soi*. More significantly here, its disconcerting effect can be attributed to the rich and complex play with spatial concepts, images, metaphors, and language used to render a wide range of position and positioning of a sexual being who ultimately appears impossible to grasp. The result for readers can be an overwhelming impression of disorientation and confusion, provoked by what can

<sup>5</sup> *Le Bruissement de la langue* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), pp. 61–67.

<sup>6</sup> *French Fiction in the Mitterrand Years: Memory, Narrative, Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 13–14.

<sup>7</sup> Blanckeman, *Les Fictions singulières* (Paris: Prétexte Éditeur, 2002), p. 115.

<sup>8</sup> *La Littérature française au présent* (Paris: Bordas, 2005), pp. 10–11.

be perceived as an overload of sophisticated spatial references. It now remains to argue that, although Millet's take on the space/subject-matter appears to be in line with the postmodern concept and expression of subjectivity, it does ultimately point towards the need for a more unified self.

The narrator's preoccupation, or even fascination, with space is explicitly and emphatically rooted in the circumstances of her upbringing. The rigid spatial limitations that she experienced in childhood, both material and psychological, are represented as motivating her quest for a sensation of openness and fluidity, in a physical as well as spiritual sense. The two-bedroom house she shared during her formative years with her parents, younger brother, and grandmother offered no space that she could consider her own:

On comprendra que j'aie à ce point associé l'amour physique à une conquête de l'espace quand on saura que je suis née dans une famille qui logeait à cinq dans un appartement de trois pièces. La première fois que j'ai fui cet endroit, j'ai donc baisé pour la première fois. (p. 130)

Not only did she have to share a bedroom with her brother and mother, but, more significantly, she had to lie every night next to the latter, who, unhappy in her marriage, had left the marital bed. This unwelcome and unavoidable physical closeness sparked a strong yearning for a sense of freedom, for the feeling of limitless potential that can be experienced when contemplating open spaces.

As well as fleeing a stifling physical space, the narrator explains how she also escaped from a psychologically close and inhibiting environment, dominated by a mother who, as well as not allowing any personal space, was intent on bringing up her daughter according to the strict rules that define traditional femininity. It included imposing constraining old-fashioned underwear destined to restrict her daughter's body (and of course mind), not discussing sex, and punishing any manifestation of sexual behaviour:

A quelle dextérité paradoxale n'ai-je pas dû m'entraîner pour réussir à me donner du plaisir dans une quasi-immobilité, presque en apnée, afin que le corps de ma mère, qui me touchait lorsqu'elle se retournait, ne ressent pas que je vibraï! [. . .] Malgré tout, ça n'a pas manqué: il est arrivé que ma mère me secoue en me traitant de petite vicieuse. Lorsque j'ai accompagné Claude jusqu'à Dieppe, je ne couchais plus dans le même lit que ma mère, mais j'avais gardé—j'ai gardé longtemps—l'habitude de me masturber, le corps en chien de fusil. Finalement, je pourrais dire que, lorsque j'ai ouvert mon corps, j'ai appris, avant tout, à le déplier. (pp. 132–33)

The flight from her oppressive home with its overbearing matriarchal influence leads to the narrator losing her virginity and embarking on a new life as a sexual being. Strong spatial images and metaphors of both openness and enclosure, fluidity and fracture, mark the description of this rite of passage from childhood and adolescent onanism into adult sexuality. The scene of sexual defloration takes place in a very small tent, with its flimsy canvas offering a fragile boundary between the inside space of intimacy which allows for an exploration of her sexuality, and the outside space of social and moral constraints and expectations, characterized in this instance by a neighbouring older female camper complaining to her husband that the young couple never come out of

their hideaway. To reinforce the point further, the narrator establishes a parallel between the canvas of the tent and the sheet that she would use in the bed she shared with her mother in a desperate attempt to create an impression of privacy where she could explore her sexuality without her stern mother knowing. The description of this defining episode also mentions that the tent is pitched on the edge of a beach, a bounded space bordering a horizontal liminal space that both separates and links two very different spaces, the solid land and the open sea. Vertical borders also feature in this description, as the narrator adds that she later realized that the beach and the campsite were 'entièrement barrés par une falaise perpendiculaire à la mer' (p. 135).

The emphasis on boundaries—both rigid and fluid, horizontal and vertical—which emerges from this brief description of real space is typical of the narrator's use and treatment of space in relation to her attempt to represent the specificity of her sexual self. Descriptions of real space (landscape, location, place), whether urban or rural, indoor or outdoor, do vary considerably as they range from the smallest possible receptacle that can accommodate the body to *l'infiniment grand*, but most draw attention to various types and characteristics of boundaries.

The text regularly focuses on strong and rigid borders that clearly demarcate and divide space. Whether natural (such as cliffs and precipices) or man-made (such as clear or opaque partitions, and, more prominently, walls, of varying height, width, and depth), these imposing lines of spatial division emphasize the notion of rupture and obstacle. This impression is further reinforced by the attention paid to hard and cold surfaces—rough cement benches in outdoor locations, heavy wood tables in people's homes, the sliding bonnet of a car, or the ridged metal floor of a van. Alongside these images of solid spatial divides, the text also includes many descriptions that highlight the blurring of boundaries, and emphasize fluidity and openness. Open, half-open, and sliding doors and windows are recurring features, as are many mentions of various thresholds. 'Sur le seuil' (p. 130) is not only the subheading chosen to announce the stepping into sexual adulthood, but also links to numerous images of in-between spaces that isolate as well as unite two different areas such as a beach, the space at the side of a road or path, the area around a field or wood, the road that surrounds a town or city. The narrator includes many examples of what she refers to, quoting Marc Augé, as 'non-lieux' (p. 106), all these transient and anonymous places such as airport lounges, railway platforms, tube corridors, car parks, and hotel halls.<sup>9</sup> The text also features various examples of semi-public places, such as building entrances, staircases, landings, and other examples of the 'zone indéfinie' (p. 104), such as wasteland or roundabouts. 'Je campe vite le décor' (p. 128), the narrator notes, and it is true that concision and precision tend to prevail over extensive and ornate developments. Brevity, however, does not equal negligence, and these descriptions of physical space leave the distinct impression that great care and also pleasure has gone into recreating settings, but more significantly into exploring the many possible spatial features and characteristics. Descriptions can either draw clear spatial distinctions or

<sup>9</sup> See Augé, *Non-lieux: introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (Paris: Seuil, 1992).

bring opposites together, and even contrast and join them concurrently. The constant shift of perspectives has the effect of engendering a loss of bearings, and thus provoking a questioning of both position and positioning vis-à-vis the physical space. Among various examples of this practice, the unusually lengthy description of the garden high-perched above the sea where the narrator first experienced group sex appears eloquent, with its focus on the play with horizontal and vertical, strong and inflexible boundaries, establishing them while at the same time introducing an optical effect that contributes to blurring them:

Quelqu'un qui aurait survolé l'endroit se serait diverti, ainsi qu'on le fait en avion, de la juxtaposition de spectacles contrastés. [ . . . ] Au-dessus de Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, on aurait pu voir un petit groupe humain agglutiné à l'écart d'une grande maison énigmatiquement abandonnée, mais tout près d'une route où se croisaient de façon ininterrompue les voitures filant vers le cap et celles qui en revenaient. On n'aurait discerné qu'avec peine la frontière qui rendait ce groupe et ces voitures si mutuellement indifférents. Le muret de pierres grises qui terminait le jardin, très bas, jetait peu d'ombre, et il aurait été difficile d'apprécier que la route se trouvait à plusieurs mètres en contrebas. (p. 107)

It is against this background of carefully crafted inscriptions of real space and boundaries, which regularly draw attention to contrasting and/or confusing distances and scales, shape and volume, characteristics and configurations, that the narrator foregrounds the unique traits of her sexual personality. Following on from the exploration of spatial duality in relation to physical space, the representation of the narrator's sexual self relies on a multi-layered and multi-faceted play on the dialectics of inside/outside that underlie the traditional model of subjectivity, conventionally spatially configured as a closed circle, as previously noted, with strong boundaries separating self from both the other and the limitless space around. Within the securely bounded subject, another clear line is drawn that delineates two distinct spaces: that of the body and the mind.

In her detailed account of her sexual specificity, Millet's narrator appears to take this conventional figuration as a starting-point, and proceeds to explore its potentially infinite variations. Catherine M.'s sexual subjectivity is represented metaphorically as a continuous process of negotiation between three changeable spaces—the space of the body, the space of the mind, and the outer space—resulting in a multitude of configurations featuring a variety of boundaries. Each of these three spaces takes many different shapes, volumes, and consistencies, depending on the specific contexts offered by both the other and the environment. Since different people and different places inspire different ways of being sexually, the range and number of possible combinations is limitless.

The body is at times characterized by its hermetic and rigid boundaries clearly delineating inner and outer spaces, particularly when it is represented metaphorically as 'un noyau' (p. 18), 'une coque' (p. 172), 'un paquet' (p. 208). But the body is also represented in places as being extremely malleable, equated to 'une boule de pâte à pain' (p. 207), a bounded space still, but one that is adjustable and adjusted ad infinitum to meet partners' needs. The body is also experienced as changing volume, either shrinking when feeling 'vidé de substance comme un fruit qu'on a laissé se racornir' (p. 153), or on the contrary

expanding: 'l'habitable corporel se dilate à l'infini' (p. 120). The narrator is surprised to see it on a video film resembling 'un reptile qui s'étire, se rétracte' (p. 231). Its permeability is highlighted every time the narrator describes various fluids, or solids, which either penetrate into, or escape from, its various orifices. Finally, the body is also described as losing its materiality altogether at times; it then feels 'évanescent' (p. 232), and is no more than 'un souffle d'air' (p. 230).

The psychic space is depicted as being equally changeable, capable of recoiling or expanding depending on circumstances. Impermeable and isolating boundaries are emphasized when it is represented metaphorically as 'un enclos personnel auquel les autres [. . .] n'ont pas accès' (p. 64). At other times, though, boundaries collapse, and consciousness appears to seep out of its bounds and to merge with the outer space.

Finally, the outside space is also experienced in many different ways. It can appear to feel open and limitless, but is also described as being contained in what resembles an air bubble, the outer limit of which can in turn be fixed and/or impermeable, flexible and/or permeable so as to let the air be either evacuated or absorbed. Above all, the narrator enjoys the feeling that space is elastic, as can be seen, for example, in the description of the physical pleasure of overtaking a lorry while riding a motorbike ('Un appel d'air se produit et votre torse subit un double mouvement de torsion' and gives the impression of being 'au cœur d'un espace qui s'ouvre et se referme, s'étend et se rétracte' (p. 143)), or in a more metaphorical sense when recalling one particular night when a car crash on a nearby roundabout momentarily interrupted an episode of outdoor group sex: 'Comme si l'espace à l'intérieur du bosquet avait été élastique, le cercle s'est reformé et les acteurs ont repris la scène là où elle avait été interrompue' (p. 25).

The representation of the sexual self is further problematized by the addition of a doubling effect, wherein the narrator experiences the feeling of being both participant and observer in a given situation involving sexual activity, that is associated with the narrator's experiencing sexual dissatisfaction when she reached her late thirties. In the same way that strong spatial images and metaphors accompany the descriptions of both the narrator's loss of virginity and her first experience of group sex, they feature prominently when narrating this other turning-point in the sexual life of Catherine M., which prompted her long journey towards self-awareness. This instance of rupture is presented as the result of a displacement process, a stepping outside from the centre of a bounded space to its periphery, which resulted in an impression of dissociation. This process of decentring is described first as a physical phenomenon; the narrator recounts how, while participating in another of many sessions of group sex, she suddenly witnesses the circle of men forming a protecting boundary around her shift away to attend another woman, before commenting:

J'ai pensé que cette femme occupait une place centrale qui jusqu'alors était la mienne et que je devais en être jalouse, mais ma jalousie était tempérée. Pour la première fois je marquais une pause [. . .]. Et cette pause, je l'appréciais au même titre que lorsque je me repliais sur moi-même. (p. 85)



The narrator no longer identifies with an 'araignée active au milieu de sa toile' (p. 22), but suddenly feels like a 'minuscule satellite tout à coup sorti de l'orbite' (p. 91). This physical move from centre to margin allows for a mental shift from indifferent central participant to intrigued outside observer.

This displacement also marks a shift in the narrative approach, noticeable at the level of both content and style. As the narrator explains how this episode caused her to become less promiscuous and more attentive to her sexual desire and pleasure, the succession of two-dimensional images that dominate the representation of sexual self in the first chapter slows down. A third dimension is added, with a growing exploration of the crossing of boundaries between inside and outside, and the distance that is created as consciousness detaches itself from the limit of the internal space of the body to float in the external space and look back at the self. The notion of distance is further increased as the narrator includes descriptions of visual images of herself, as observed on numerous photographs and video films featuring her body in sexually explicit contexts. Various comments on her own reflections in mirrors contribute to accentuating the doubling effect, as illustrated in the following extract:

lorsque au hasard d'une vitre ou d'un miroir je rencontre mon reflet, j'ai l'air d'autre chose que ce que je crois être dans cet instant: mon regard est vague, entrant en lui-même ainsi qu'il le ferait dans un espace sans bord, mais confiant, y cherchant, mais sans insistance, quelque repère. (p. 116)

All these images of self as other are inserted into the text as pieces of a jigsaw that add diversity and plurality, and also ambiguity and even detachment, to the representation of the narrator's sexual specificity.

The rich and complex play on the distance in relation to the self introduces another paradoxical dimension in the representation of the sexual self that does not escape the narrator's attention. As noted above, the last three chapters distinguish themselves from the first in that they adopt an increasingly reflexive approach. The choice of titles—from the first, 'Le nombre', that highlights the impossibility of putting a limit to an indeterminate number, to the next three, respectively entitled 'L'espace', 'L'espace replié', and 'Détails'—suggests the narrator's desire to zoom in towards her self, a process expected to have the effect of diminishing, even possibly abolishing, the distance experienced then, and explored in the text. This reading appears to be substantiated by the increasing use of the present tense, which suggests that the distinction between the 'I' of 'then' and the 'I' of 'now' is gradually dissolving, that the former is being brought closer to the latter. The very last sentence of the text can also be cited to support this view, as it emphasizes the narrator's pleasure at feeling whole and undivided during sexual intercourse with Jacques: 'j'étais déjà pleine de la coïncidence de mon corps vrai et de ses multiples images volatiles' (p. 234). This final sentence suggests that a welcome sense of unity and plenitude has finally been reached. However, it is clear that the narrator's comment applies not to her real self, but to video images of herself that she is attentively watching on a screen, hence the use of the imperfect. It is no coincidence that the zooming effect ends with the close examination of, not just one image of self as other, but a collection of them gathered in a section

entitled 'Visionnages'. The distance that both separates and links the narrator from her self, the object of the narrative and the subject of writing, is therefore maintained. It is in fact progressively increased in the course of the narrative as a result of the writing process, as the narrator remarks: 'écrire un livre à la première personne relègue celle-ci au rang de troisième personne. Plus je détaille mon corps et mes actes, plus je me détache de moi-même' (p. 197). It is this very paradoxical effect of detachment and identification that is prefigured in the title: even though the text encourages identification between the narrator and Catherine Millet, the choice of the alternative 'Catherine M.' emphasizes this dominant play on distance and proximity, unity and plurality, sameness and difference.

Among these many spatial images and metaphors of position and positioning vis-à-vis real and symbolic boundaries, the narrator repeatedly equates the ideal state of being to the feeling that all boundaries break down. *Jouissance* comes from the feeling that self and other/s become one—'J'aimerais, moi, le noir total, à cause du plaisir que je trouverais à me laisser engloutir dans une nappe indifférenciée de chair' (p. 103)—and merge with the limitless expanse of space beyond. This pursuit of symbiotic belonging is presented as fulfilling a psychic need to 'suturer la coupure entre l'intérieur et l'extérieur de mon corps' (p. 162), to experience 'l'illusion d'ouvrir en moi des possibilités océaniques' (p. 69). Hence the narrator's predilection for nudity, for removing any added barrier that contributes to reinforcing the separation between inside and outside, self and other, self and world. This exhilarating feeling of openness and fusion explicitly recalls the oceanic feeling as defined by Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents*, 'a sensation of "eternity", a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded, something "oceanic"', 'a feeling of indissociable connection, of belonging inseparably to the external world as a whole'.<sup>10</sup> The narrator's fond evocation of 'le basculement dans cet anéantissement qu'on appelle la petite mort' (p. 120) also echoes the notion of dissolution of the self through fusion with the other during sexual orgasm explored by Georges Bataille, whose name is mentioned in a passing comment in the text (p. 52). This 'sentiment euphorique d'être un soi psychique illimité', to quote Gaston Bachelard's version of a similar theme, is most likely to be approached during sexual activity, as the intensity of feelings provides the propitious psychic conditions for dissolution of all boundaries and a unique sense of superlative plenitude.<sup>11</sup> This *jouissance* is represented metaphorically as a double movement, as Michel Bozon rightly observes;<sup>12</sup> a movement inward towards what appears to be the limitless depths of the most intimate self, a place of complete isolation and solitude to which the narrator likes to retreat and in which she finds solace; this plunge inward then allows for a movement outward that offers an extremely pleasurable illusion of fusion with the other, the world, the universe. It should be noted, though, that while frequently and emphatically celebrating the ecstatic feeling

<sup>10</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: Jonathan Cape & Harrison Smith, 1930), pp. 8–9.

<sup>11</sup> Bachelard, *La Poétique de l'espace* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1957), p. 55.

<sup>12</sup> 'Littérature, sexualité et construction de soi', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 42 (2005), 6–21 (p. 11).

of abandonment and fusion, the narrator also states, noticeably in the present tense: 'Je ne me laisse pas aller facilement et, dans les moments censés être d'abandon, je suis encore, souvent, aux aguets' (p. 202). She does not explain the reason for her alertness, but, anticipating the conclusions that will be drawn later, I suggest that reluctance, rather than inability, explains her maintenance of boundaries and control.

It is not at all surprising that Millet should choose the theme of space as a framework for the representation of the narrator's sexual being, since she is an established art critic who is very familiar with the richness and complexity of this topic, as both raw material and analytical apparatus. She manipulates with ease and confidence the tools of her own trade, and includes in her text comments on the aesthetic and conceptual specificity of real artists, mainly painters (all male), whose works demonstrate an original and challenging treatment of space. She makes several mentions of the particular skills required in her line of work, in particular an indispensable 'don d'observation' (p. 202) that allows her to memorize, assimilate, and analyse promptly abstract and concrete spatial representations. Her decision to build her representation on the theme of space can therefore be comprehended as resulting from her personal and professional interest and competence in this particular subject-matter.

Some feminist literary critics would argue that Millet's heavy reliance on the theme and terminology of space is not particularly surprising, as they observe a long tradition of women writers who have often used spatial language and imagery in their representation of female subjectivity. It has also been argued that, because of the limited and peripheral place that women have been allowed to occupy in society, female writers tend to use metaphors of imprisonment and escape, centre and periphery, in different ways, and for different purposes, compared with male writers.<sup>13</sup>

From a related but different perspective, Millet's preoccupation with space and boundaries and her celebration of openness and fusion could be regarded as being illustrative of a number of models of female development that have been explored by various psychoanalytical theorists on both sides of the Atlantic. Works published in America such as Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* and Jessica Benjamin's *The Bonds of Love*, and in France (most notably Luce Irigaray's 'Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un' and 'La mécanique des fluides', as well as Julia Kristeva's interest in the *chora* and the dynamic interplay between the semiotic and the symbolic), all emphasize pre-Oedipal relationships and interpersonal connectedness rather than autonomy and impermeable ego boundaries.<sup>14</sup> Although these theorists present different models

<sup>13</sup> See, among the most prominent texts, Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (New York: Anchor, 1976); Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of their Own* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977); Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, *Landscapes of Desire* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1978); Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon, 1988); Irigaray, 'Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un' and 'La mécanique des fluides', in *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Minuit, 1977), pp. 21–32 and 103–16 respectively; Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1974).

of female development and subjectivity, which are anchored in different schools of thought (respectively object-relation theories and self psychology for Chodorow and Benjamin, French and poststructuralist thought for Irigaray and Kristeva), their theories support a similar collapse of the inside/outside and self/other dichotomies which they associate with an oppressive and exclusive model of male subjectivity, and promote instead continuity and fluidity.

As well as evoking feminism's interest in space and boundaries, Millet's spatial take on the representation of her sexual self can also be seen as reflecting wider contemporary debates surrounding concepts of identity. As remarked earlier, postmodern thought and culture make abundant use of the terminology and concept of spatiality to argue for a breakdown of rigid boundaries. In order to do away with the much-vilified conventional model of individuality, the aim is to attack the system of binary oppositions that underlie it—male/female, active/passive, subject/object, self/other, mind/body, inside/outside, centre/margin, etc.—with a view not to reversing the hierarchy, as this would maintain the schema of mutually exclusive antinomies, but to questioning and displacing it.

It would seem that Millet's representation of her sexual self presents much matter and focus in common with some contemporary intellectual trends, whether feminist or not. With its succession of multiplied and contrasting images, its recurrent play with binary oppositions and paradoxes, and its marked interest in boundaries, *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* appears to favour a representation of the sexual subject that is fractured, decentred, and slippery, one that cannot be easily pinned down. It is shown to change constantly, not only in the course of time, as suggested by the clearly delineated stages in the narrator's sexual life, but also at any given period in her life, depending on circumstances, especially interpersonal and environmental. The narrative structure appears to confirm this view: rather than following the chronological and causal progression that characterizes a more traditional narrative of the self, the text privileges thematic and temporal fragmentation, jumping from one scene to the next, from one point in time to another, switching from past to present tense, not necessarily in synchrony with temporal logic, while providing no date or other clear temporal point of reference. The overall impression is of fragmentation and multiplicity, which, mixed with an argument for fusion and openness, produces a representation that highlights paradoxes, contradictions, and conflicts, and could be described as displaying recognizable signs of deliberately resisting a coherent and unifying analytical discourse.

On the other hand, the emphasis on, and value of, fusion and openness that result from dissolving constraining boundaries characterizes only the representation of the narrator's *sexual* specificity, which is presented as coexisting with her *cerebral* specificity, both being experienced as clearly separated entities that operate independently of each other, as suggested in the following comment: 'Plus je projette [le] cul en arrière, plus je lui accorde fantasmatiquement l'autonomie qu'on attribue à sa tête, parce que celle-ci est le siège de la pensée qui vit sa vie, affranchie du reste du corps; et mon cul est alors le pendant de ma tête' (p. 116). This clear distinction between body and mind, often metonymically reduced to 'le cul' and 'la tête' respectively, explicitly and positively espouses the Cartesian model, as does the narrator's celebration

of what she considers her cerebral qualities—rationality, rigour, application—which allow her to compartmentalize various aspects of her real and fantasized self and life.

And although celebrating an ideal psychic state of boundlessness, the narrator does tell the story of her realization of the dangers associated with sexual indifference and indifferentiation, and her subsequent quest, with the help of psychoanalysis, for a stronger sense of self, with more defined and solid boundaries that can contain and unify it. It is through verbally exploring her sexual specificity that she has managed to separate her needs and desires from those of others, and as a result to improve her sense of well-being. The necessity and benefit of developing self-awareness are not only confirmed by the text, they are also its very *raison d'être*, if we are to believe Millet. She explains in 'Pourquoi et comment' that she wrote the book as a 'témoignage' aimed at women (p. iv), to encourage discussions among them, especially between mothers and daughters, so as to raise sexual awareness. Both her personal and literary projects can therefore be interpreted as a rehabilitation and reassertion of boundaries between inside and outside, self and other.

It can also be argued that the search then, in the psychoanalyst's room where 'il n'était plus question de baiser mais d'en parler' (p. 86), and the search now, at the moment of writing, for a discourse capable of circumscribing her true sexual self, support the humanist view that individuals are capable of knowing, and articulating the truth about, their core self. In comments made in the text, and reiterated in numerous post-publication statements of intention, she expresses her desire to "dire la vérité sur tout ça" (p. 93, with quotation marks in the text). And it is made clear, both within the boundaries of the text and beyond, that great care was taken over linguistic accuracy, with the constant aim of ascertaining the truth, as this comment taken from 'Pourquoi et comment' illustrates: 'Ensuite, je me suis livrée à la recherche opiniâtre des mots exacts. Cette recherche conduit à explorer plus profondément ses impressions et ses souvenirs; c'est en corrigeant ses phrases qu'on éprouve son honnêteté' (p. vii). Contrary to postmodernist claims, language is deemed an appropriate and reliable medium through which to reach, and communicate, the truth.

The formal construction of the narrative can be said to reinforce further the value of strong dividing boundaries. The text is structured around four thematic chapters, each bearing a very brief title chosen for its synthesizing appeal as it provides, according to Millet, 'le résumé le plus succinct que je pouvais faire de moi-même' (p. vii); each of these four chapters is divided into subheaded sections that are clearly marked (typographically isolated and printed in bold); each of the sections is in turn organized around paragraphs, at times clearly separated by a gap. It can also be suggested that the textual space reproduces the concept that boundaries are necessary, with the two central chapters that explicitly and extensively explore spatial fluidity and elasticity—'L'espace' and 'L'espace replié'—being bordered on each side by one 'enveloping' chapter, providing a solid framework that safely contains a predilection for limitless expanses of self. Despite its apparent random ordering of scenes and images, the dominant overall impression upon reading the whole text is that the narrative structure has been very carefully planned and meticulously elaborated. All in

all, both the nature of the narrator's project and its execution suggest a patent preference for, and belief in, order, rigour, and coherence as the most effective and appropriate way to 'fixer par écrit', as the narrator puts it, what makes her true—in her view—fixable, self (p. 112).

In her book *Indifferent Boundaries*, Kathleen M. Kirby examines, in a chapter entitled 'Vertigo—Postmodern Spaces and the Politics of the Subject', some French postmodern critics' defence of the blurring of the space of the subject as a positive political strategy to change the dominant order. She proceeds to highlight what she perceives to be the potentially serious drawbacks of their arguments, and even dangers—not just idealism and elitism (although that as well), but ultimately political paralysis—and reaches the conclusion that: 'Conventional though they may be, it may prove necessary to preserve the bounds of the subject.'<sup>15</sup> Boundaries can undeniably be overwhelming when inflexible and oppressive, as they can prevent motion and growth; but the absence of boundaries can be equally paralysing as it negates the possibility of experiencing movement and progress, and can imprison the subject in a state of inertia and desolation.

With its critical account of both the stifling frustration of her bounded upbringing and the disabling malaise of her adult unbounded sexuality, *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* leads us to a similar conclusion. Poised between the mutually exclusive humanist and postmodern paradigms that pull the representation of the self in two opposite and apparently incompatible directions, Millet's take on the subject ultimately abandons the tension and vacillation associated with a postmodern *sujet-en-procès*, and endorses a more conventional model. It transpires from her text that it is necessary to establish and maintain forms of boundaries, as long as they are perceived as being at the same time malleable, so as to allow for a salutary degree of adjustability according to circumstances, and dependable, so as to guarantee a sense of self and its safe keeping.

SWANSEA UNIVERSITY

NATHALIE MORELLO

<sup>15</sup> Kirby, *Indifferent Boundaries: Spatial Concepts of Human Subjectivity* (New York and London: Guildford Press, 1996), p. 119. Her chapter focuses on the works of Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.