



# OUR DARK SIDE

A HISTORY OF PERVERSION

ÉLISABETH ROUDINESCO



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## A History of Perversion

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Translated by David Macey

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# Acknowledgements

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This book began life as a lecture given on 25 August 2004 at the opening session of the annual symposium of the International Federation of Psychoanalytic Societies in Belo Horizonte. The symposium was devoted to the many faces of perversion. The lecture was given in French (with simultaneous translation into several languages) at the request of the organizers, who wished to honour the French language at an event attended by members of the French Society, founded in 1962 and made up of the Psychoanalytic Societies of several countries, with the exception of France. My thanks are due to them for having asked me to discuss this subject on that day, which marked, as they knew, the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Paris.

I then returned to the same theme in the academic year 2005–6 in my seminar at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, which was devoted to the history of the perversions.

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# Introduction

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Many books, including learned dictionaries of sexology, eroticism and pornography have been devoted to the sexual perversions, but there is no history of the perverse. As for the word, structure or term ‘perversion’, it has been studied only by psychoanalysts.

Taking his inspiration from Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault planned to include in his *History of Sexuality* a chapter on ‘perverse people’, or in other words those who are so designated by human societies that are anxious not to be confused with their accursed share. He said in substance that, because of the inverted symmetry between them and the exemplary lives of famous men, the lives of the perverse are unnameable: they are infamous, minuscule, anonymous and wretched (Foucault 1981; 1980; cf. Michon 1984).

As we know, these parallel, abnormal lives are not talked about and, as a rule, are mentioned only to be condemned. And when they do acquire a certain notoriety, it is because of the power of their exceptional criminality, which is deemed to be bestial, monstrous or inhuman, and seen as something alien to the very humanity of human beings. Witness the constant reworking of the stories of great perverse criminals, with their terrible nicknames: Gilles de Rais (Bluebeard), George Chapman (Jack the Ripper), Erzebet Bathory (the Bloody Countess) and Peter Kürten (the Vampire of

Dusseldorf).<sup>1</sup> These accursed creatures have inspired plays, novels, stories and films because of our continued fascination with their strange, half-human, half-animal status.

That is why we will enter here into both the world of perversion and the parallel lives of the perverse via the universal themes of metaphor and animality. We will enter them not so much via the epic poems that relate how men were transformed into animals, fountains or plants as by plunging into the nightmare of a never-ending infinite reassignment that reveals, in all its cruelty, what human beings try to disguise. Two characters in European literature created in 1890 and 1914 respectively – Dorian Gray and Gregor Samsa – exemplify perversion; one in order to challenge mental medicine by revealing the sparkling grandeur of the perverse desire that lay at the heart of an old-fashioned aristocracy that would rather serve art than power, and the other in order to unmask the abject nudity that lay at the heart of bourgeois normality.

Identified with his dazzlingly beautiful portrait, Dorian Gray indulges in vice and crime while living a life of luxury. Although he still has the features of his eternal youth, the metamorphoses undergone by his subjectivity are transcribed in the painting, like the emblems of some accursed race. As for Gregor Samsa, his drastic mutation into a giant insect reveals, in contrast, the grandeur of his soul as it thirsts after affection. But, because the sight of his disgusting body makes his family hate him, he lets himself rot, be stoned by his father and then be thrown out like some piece of rubbish.

Where does perversion begin, and who are the perverse?<sup>2</sup> That is the question we will be attempting to answer in this book,

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<sup>1</sup> Kurten was the model for Fritz Lang's German film *M* (1931). Peter Lorre plays the role of the murderer who is sentenced to death by a court of crooks who are as criminal as he is and who resemble Nazis.

<sup>2</sup> Derived from the Latin *perversio*, the noun 'perversion' first appears in French between 1308 and 1444. The adjective '*pervers*' is attested in 1190, and derives from *perversitas* and *perversus*, which is the past participle of *pervertere*: to overturn, to invert, but also to erode, to subvert, to commit extravagant acts. Anyone afflicted with *perversitas* or perversity (or perversion) is therefore perverse; there are several nouns but only one adjective. (Cf. O. Bloch and W. von Wartburg, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue française*, Paris: PUF, 1964). See also Émile Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, tome 5, Paris:

which brings together hitherto distinct approaches by combining an analysis of the notion of perversion not only with portraits of the perverse and an account of the main sexual perversions, but also with a critique of the theories and practices that have been developed, mostly from the nineteenth century onwards, to theorize perversion and to name the perverse.

The course of this history will be traced in five chapters dealing, successively, with the Middle Ages (Gilles de Rais, the mystical saints and the flagellants), the eighteenth century (the life and work of the Marquis de Sade), the nineteenth century (mental medicine, its descriptions of the sexual perversions, and its obsession with the masturbating child, the homosexual and the hysterical woman), and, finally, the twentieth century that saw, thanks to the rise of Nazism – and especially Rudolf Hoess's Auschwitz confessions, the most abject metamorphosis of perversion. 'Perversion' is currently used, finally, to describe a personality disorder, a state of delinquency or a deviation, but it still has multiple facets, including zoophilia, paedophilia, terrorism, transsexuality.

Often confused with perversity, perversion was once – especially from the Middle Ages to the end of the classical age<sup>3</sup> – seen as a particular way of upsetting the natural order of the world and converting men to vice,<sup>4</sup> both in order to lead them astray and to corrupt them, and to avoid any confrontation with the sovereignty of good and truth.

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Gallimard-Hachette 1966: 'The transformation of good into evil. The perversion of morals. *Pica* perverts the appetite, and *displopia* perverts the sight. (*Pica* is a medical terms derived from *pie* [magpie], a bird that eats all sorts of things.) It describes a perversion of the sense of taste characterized by an aversion from ordinary foodstuffs and a desire to eat non-nutritious substances such as coal, chalk or roots. *Displopia* is a form of distorted vision, or an inability to focus that makes one see two objects rather than one.

<sup>3</sup>By which time psychiatry will regard it as an illness.

<sup>4</sup>The famous seven deadly sins, as defined by Catholicism, are in reality vices or excesses, and therefore an expression of the excesses of passion and the delight in evil that characterize perversion. They are also described as 'cardinal' because they are the source of other sins. A separate figure of the Devil is associated with each of them: avarice (Mammon), anger (Satan), envy (Leviathan), greed (Beelzebub), lust (Asmodeus), pride (Lucifer) and sloth (Belphegor).

The act of perverting presupposed the existence of a divine authority. And the only destiny of someone who set himself the task of leading the whole of humanity to self-destruction was to see in the face of the Law he transgressed a reflection of the singular challenge he had thrown down to a god. He was both demonic and damned. He was a depraved criminal and torturer, a debauchee, a falsificator, a charlatan, a wrong-doer, but he was above all a Jeekyll and Hyde figure who was at once tormented by a figure of the Devil, and obsessed with an ideal of good which he constantly profaned in order to offer up to God, who was both his master and his executioner, the spectacle of his own body, which had been reduced to filth.

Although we live in a world in which science has taken the place of divine authority, the body that of the soul, and deviancy that of sin, perversion is still, whether we like it or not, synonymous with perversity. And whatever form it takes and whatever metamorphoses it has undergone, it still relates, as it always has done, to a sort of negative image of freedom: annihilation, dehumanization, hatred, destruction, domination, cruelty and *jouissance*.

Yet perversion also means creativity, self-transcendence and greatness. In that sense, it can also be understood as giving access to the highest form of freedom, as it allows the person who embodies it to be both executioner and victim, master and slave, barbarian and civilized man. Perversion fascinates us precisely because it can sometimes be sublime, and sometimes abject. It is sublime when it inspires the Promethean rebels who refuse to submit to the law of men, even if it means their exclusion from society (cf. Rey-Flaud 2002), and it is abject when, as under the most savage dictatorships, it becomes the sovereign expression of the cold destruction of all genealogical bonds.

Be it a delight in evil or a passion for the sovereign good, perversion is the defining characteristic of the human species: the animal world is excluded from it, just as it is excluded from crime. Not only is it a human phenomenon that is present in all cultures; it presupposes the existence of speech, language, art, or even a discourse on art and sex. As Roland Barthes (1997: 156–7) writes: ‘Let us (if we can) imagine a society without language. Here is a man copulating with a woman *a tergo*, and using in the act a bit of wheat paste. On this level, no perversion.’

Perversion exists, in other words, only to the extent that being is wrenched away from the order of nature. It uses the speech of the subject, but only to mimic the nature from which it has been extirpated so as to parody it all the more. That is why perverse discourse is always based upon a Manichaeism that appears to exclude the dark side to which it owes its existence. Absolute good, or the madness or evil, vice or virtue, damnation or salvation: such is the closed world in which the criminally perverse move, fascinated with the idea that they can escape time and death (cf. Millot 1996).

While no perversion is thinkable without the establishment of the basic taboos – religious or secular – that govern societies, no human sexual practice is possible without the support of a rhetoric. And it is precisely because perversion is, like murder, incest or excess, desirable that it has to be designated not only as a transgression or anomaly, but also as a nocturnal discourse that always utters, in its self-hatred or in its fascination with death, the great curse of boundless *jouissance*. That is why – and Freud was the first to take theoretical stock of this – it is present, obviously to different degrees, in all forms of human sexuality.

Perversion is, as the reader will have realized, a sexual, political, social, psychic, transhistorical and structural phenomenon that is present in all human societies. And while every culture has its coherent divisions – the prohibition of incest, the definition of madness, terms to describe the monstrous or the abnormal – perversion naturally has its place in that combinatory. But, because of its psychic status, which pertains to the essence of splitting, it is also a social necessity. It preserves norms, while ensuring the human species of the permanence of its pleasures and transgressions. What would we do without Sade, Mishima, Jean Genet, Pasolini, Hitchcock, and the many others who have given us the most refined works imaginable? What would we do if we could no longer scapegoat, or in other words pervert, those who agree to translate into strange acts the inadmissible tendencies that haunt us and that we repress?

No matter whether the perverse are sublime because they turn to art, creation or mysticism, or abject because they surrender to their murderous impulses, they are part of us and part of our humanity because they exhibit something that we always conceal: our own negativity and our dark side.

# 1

## The Sublime and the Abject

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For centuries, men believed that the universe was governed by a divine principle and that the gods made them suffer to teach them not to think of themselves as gods. The gods of Ancient Greece therefore punished men who were afflicted with overweening pride (*Hubris*).<sup>1</sup> And reading the great stories of the royal dynasties – the Atrides or the Labacides – is the best way to understand how the hero, who is a demi-god, alternates between being a despot who is drunk on power, and a victim who is subject to an implacable destiny.

In such a universe, all men were both themselves and their opposites – heroes and bastards – but neither the gods nor men were perverse. And yet, at the heart of this system of thought, which defined the contours of the Law and its transgression, norms and their inversion, any man who had reached the pinnacle of glory was in constant danger of being forced to discover that he was perverse, or in other words monstrous and abnormal, and to lead the parallel life of an abject humanity. Oedipus is the prototype. Having been the greatest king of his day, he was reduced to living in filth – his face bleeding and his body broken – because he had, without knowing it and through the fault of a ‘lame’ genealogy – committed the worst of all crimes: he had married his mother, killed his father, was both the father and the

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<sup>1</sup> ‘*Hubris*’ means excess, overweening pride and insolence.

brother of his own children, and was condemned to have his descendants held up to public obloquy. Nothing could be more human than the sufferings of a man who, *despite himself*, is responsible for, and therefore guilty of, a destiny ordained by the gods.

In the medieval world, man belonged body and soul, not to the gods, but to God. Torn between his fall and his redemption and with a guilty conscience, he was destined to suffer as much for his intentions as his acts. For God was his only judge. And so, having become a monster through the fault of the Demon who had tempted him and given him a taste for vice and perversity, he could once more become as human as the saint who accepted the punishments sent by God, if his faith was strong enough or if he was touched by grace. Such was the fate of the man who submitted to the power of God; through his sufferings or martyrdom, he allowed the community to unite and to designate what Georges Bataille (1988–91) calls its ‘accursed share’ and what Georges Dumézil, in his analysis of the story of the god Loki, defines as the heterogeneous place that is essential to any social order.<sup>2</sup>

If we look at the mystics who gave their bodies to God, or the flagellants who imitated the passion of Christ, or we study the bloody and heroic trajectory of Gilles de Rais – and no doubt many other stories – we find, in different guises, the alternation between the sublime and the abject that characterizes our dark side at its most heretical, but also its the most luminous: voluntary servitude seen as the greatest of freedoms.

In the striking commentary he made, in 1982, on the destiny of a fourth-century idiot-girl, as recorded in the *Lausiac History*,<sup>3</sup> Michel de Certeau sketches the structure of the nocturnal side of our humanity.

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<sup>2</sup> Loki is one of the Scandinavian world’s gods. He is profoundly amoral, lacking in dignity, offensive, a trouble-maker and a transvestite, and is guilty of having been sodomized. He represents none of the three functions (sovereignty, war, fertility). Although he has been excluded from the community of the other gods, he is still indispensable: they need his services, even though they distrust him and make him ‘spin’. See Dumézil (1986).

<sup>3</sup> The *Lausiac History of Palladius of Galatia* (late fourth century AD) records hagiographic legends of monks and ascetics.

In those days, the hagiography tells us, there was a young virgin living in a convent who simulated madness. The other nuns took an aversion to her and dismissed her to the kitchen. Her head covered with a dish cloth, she began to do everything she was asked to do, and ate crumbs and peelings without complaining, even though she was beaten, abused and cursed. Alerted by an angel, a holy man visited the convent and asked to meet all the women, including the one they called ‘the sponge’. When he was introduced to her, he fell at her feet and asked for her blessing, surrounded by the other women, who were now convinced that she was a saint. But ‘the sponge’ left the convent and vanished for ever because she could not bear being admitted by her sisters.

‘A woman, then’, writes Michel de Certeau [. . .] ‘can survive only when she has reached the point of abjection, of the “nothing” to which they take an aversion. That is what she prefers: being “the sponge” [. . .] She takes upon herself the humblest bodily functions and becomes lost in an intolerable, sub-linguistic realm. But this “disgusting” piece of filth allows the other women to share meals, to partake of the vestimentary and bodily signs of election, and to communicate in words: the woman who is excluded makes a whole circulation possible’ (Certeau 1982: 51).

While the term abjection now refers to the worst kinds of pornography,<sup>4</sup> to sexual practices bound up with the fetishization of urine, faecal matter, vomit or body fluids, or even to the corruption of all taboos, it cannot, in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, be divorced from its other facet: the aspiration to sanctity. There is therefore a strange proximity between wallowing in filth and being elevated to what the alchemists used to call ‘the volatile’, or in short between inferior substances – the groin and dung – and higher substances – exaltation, glory and self-transcendence. It is based upon denial, spitting, repulsion and attraction. Immersion in filth, in other words, governs access to something beyond consciousness – the subliminal – and to sublimation in the Freudian

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<sup>4</sup>‘Pornography’: the term originally referred to any discourse pertaining to prostitution or venal love. It now refers to various representations of the sex act that are meant to shock, provoke, hurt or horrify. Cf. Folco (2005). See also Julia Kristeva’s classic *Powers of Horror* (Kristeva 1982).



sense.<sup>5</sup> And suffering and debasement therefore lead to immortality, which is the supreme wisdom of the soul.

‘Let the day perish wherein I was born / And the night in which it was said / There is a man child conceived / Let that day be darkness / Let not God regard it from above / . . . Why died I not from the womb / Why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly?’ (Job III: 3–4; 11–12). The hero of a Semitic tradition, Job was an upright man who feared the Lord and lived a rich, happy life. But God allowed Satan to test his faith. Suddenly taken ill and having lost his fortune and his children, he lay down on a dung heap, picking at his wounds and bemoaning the injustice of his fate. When three friends came to him as he lay in his filth and told him that his punishment was the inevitable result of his sins, he proclaimed his innocence without understanding that a just God can punish an innocent man. Without giving him an answer, God restored his fortune and his health.

In this story, man must persist in his faith, put up with his sufferings, even if they are unfair, and never expect any answer from God, for God frees him from his fall and reveals to him his transcendence without listening to any of his pleas. The story of Job thus gives the lie to the tradition that teaches that rewards and punishments can sanction the virtues or sins of mortals in this world. Thanks to its literary power and the strength with which the hero, while deploring his sufferings, incorporates the injunction of the divine world. This parable inverts the ancient norm of the sacrificial gift, and replaces it with a new norm that is deemed to be superior: Yahweh, the absolute Being – ‘I am that I am’ – never has any debt to honour.

From this perspective, man’s salvation lies in the unconditional acceptance of suffering. And that is why Job’s experience paved the way for the practices of the Christian martyrs – and even more so the women saints – who transformed the destruction of the physical body into an art of living, and the filthiest practices into an expression of the most perfect heroism.

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<sup>5</sup> We owe the word ‘subliminal’ to Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776–1841), who used it to describe those atoms of the soul that were repressed at the conscious level. In 1905, Freud conceptualized the term ‘sublimation’ to describe a type of creative activity that derives its strength from the sexual drive insofar as it cathects socially valued objects. Cf. Roudinesco and Plon, (2006).

When they were adopted by certain mystics,<sup>6</sup> the great sacrificial rituals – from flagellation to the ingestion of unspeakable substances – became proof of their saintly exaltation. The destruction of the physical body or exposure to the sufferings of the flesh: such was the rule that governed this strange desire to undergo a metamorphosis that was, it was said, the only way to effect the transition from the abject to the sublime. While the first duty of male saints was, following the Christian interpretation of the Book of Job, to annihilate any form of desire to fornicate, women saints condemned themselves to a radical sterilization of their wombs, which became putrid, either by eating excrement or by exhibiting their tortured bodies. Be they men or women, the martyrs of the Christian West were therefore able to outdo one another in horror thanks to their physical relationship with Jesus Christ.

This is why *The Golden Legend* (Voragine 1985),<sup>7</sup> a work of piety that relates the lives of saints, can be read as prefiguring Sade's perverse inversion of the Law in *The One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom* (Sade 1990). We find in both the same tortured bodies that have been stripped naked and covered in filth. There is no difference between these two types of martyrdom. The Marquis adopts the model of monastic confinement, which is full of maceration and pain, removes the presence of God, and invents a sort of sexological zoo given over to the combinatory of a boundless *jouissance* of bodies (Boureau 1984).

Seen as impure because she was born a woman, the martyred saint must purify herself: blood that should have been a sign of fertility undergoes a metamorphosis that turns it into sacrificial blood that is offered to Christ. But, unlike a male saint, she must, if she is to be able to 'marry' Christ, never have been defiled by the

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<sup>6</sup>The adjective 'mystical' originally referred to that which is hidden, and which therefore 'pertains to the mysteries'. The noun-form appeared in the first half of the seventeenth century. 'Mystical' now came to refer to an initiatory linguistic experience that allowed a subject to have a direct knowledge of God, and therefore to a revelation or illumination that transcended and threatened the discourse of established religions. 'Mystical' also referred, however, to the study of all forms of mysticism, idealization or exaltation in defence of an ideal.

<sup>7</sup>This famous collection of the lives of the saints was composed in the mid-thirteenth century by Jacobus de Voragine (1230–98).

sins of the flesh. It is thanks to her virginity that she becomes a soldier of God, once she has abolished within her the difference between the sexes. 'How does one go from being a virgin to being a soldier?' asks Jean-Pierre Albert (1997: 101). 'The marks of both sexes remain, of course. Whereas the young virgins who are sacrificed have usually been Christian from birth, the soldiers are suddenly converted and are immediately martyred. This difference between the precocious vocation of women and the later conversion of men runs through the entire history of sainthood.'

The physical body, either putrefied or tortured, or intact and without any stigmata, therefore fascinated both the female and male saints, who were all excited by abnormality. This peculiar relationship with the flesh presumably has to do with the fact that Christianity is the only religion in which God takes the form of a human body so as to live and die as a human victim (Gélis 2005: 106–7). Hence the status that is accorded to the body. On the one hand, the body is regarded as the tainted part of man, as an ocean of wretchedness or the soul's abominable garment; on the other, it will be purified and resurrected. As Jacques Le Goff writes (2004: 407), 'The body of the Christian, dead or alive, lives in expectation of the body of glory it will take on if it does not revel in the wretched physical body. The entire funerary ideology of Christianity revolves around the interplay between the wretched body and the glorious body, and is so organized as to wrest one from the other.'

More so than any other, the body of the king was marked by this twofold destiny. And that is why the bodily remains of monarchs were for centuries, like those of saints, the object of a particular fetishism with pagan overtones that appeared to invert the great Christian principle of the metamorphosis of 'the wretched body' into a 'glorious body'. When Louis IX died in Tunis on 25 August 1270, at the beginning of the eighth crusade, his companions had his body boiled in wine mixed with water so as to strip the flesh, or in other words 'the precious part of the body that had to be preserved, from the bones' (Le Goff 2004: 427).<sup>8</sup> Once the bones had turned white, his limbs and internal organs were dismembered so that the entrails could be given to the King of

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<sup>8</sup>The technique of embalming was not known at this time.

Sicily. As for the bones and the heart, they were deposited in the basilica at Saint-Denis. After 1298, when Louis IX was canonized, these relics – true or false – were scattered as the belief that they had miraculous powers began to take shape.

When Philippe le Bel was crowned, the royal head was transferred to the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, while the teeth, chin and jaw were left to the monks. The skeleton continued to be fragmented over the next two hundred years, but the heart was never found. The holy entrails remained in Sicily until 1868, when the last of the Bourbons carried them into exile and entrusted them to the White Fathers of the cathedral in Carthage (Le Goff 1004: 427–38). After many tribulations, the internal organs therefore returned to the place where the king had met with his death at the very time when the secular principle of respect for the integrity of the human body was beginning to emerge in Western society.<sup>9</sup>

The fetishism of relics is now regarded as a pathology related to necrophilia – and therefore as a sexual perversion. For its part, the law bans the dispersal of and the trade in human remains.<sup>10</sup>

Michel de Certeau (1982: 13) emphasizes that the mystical configuration that prospered from the thirteenth century until the eighteenth, when it came to an end with the Age of Enlightenment, took the confrontation with the fading image of the cosmos to extremes. Based upon a challenge to the idea that the unity of the world could be restored at the expense of the individual, the literature of mysticism therefore displays all the features of what it is fighting and postulates that ‘The mystics were wrestling with the dark angel of mourning.’

Hence the idea that mysticism is an ordeal involving the body, or an ‘experimental science’ involving otherness in the form of the absolute: not only the other than exists within us, but the forgotten, repressed part on which religious institutions are built. That unknowable part is bound up with initiation. Its place is therefore an ‘elsewhere’, and its sign is an anti-society. To put it another way, we define as mystical ‘that which departs from normal or

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<sup>9</sup>Jacques Le Goff points out that Pope Boniface VII had (in vain) forbidden such practices on the grounds that they were barbaric and pagan as early as 1299.

<sup>10</sup>The same problem now arises with the human remains that are left after cremation (Sueur 2006).