

Sexual Atheism

A Conversation

Philippe Sollers and Alain Kirili

Alain Kirili: *We have often discussed a French spirit, a French tradition that marks my mature sculptures and appears throughout your novels. At present I have the impression that this tradition is not adequately understood or appreciated, and that any understanding of it is discouraged and obscured by the interests of the international art world. Indeed, such an attitude seems to threaten us with the provincialization of cultural capitals, despite the cosmopolitan self-images they cultivate. New York risks provincialism when it loses sight of the originality of a foreign artistic tradition, the French tradition in our case. France is surprisingly exotic for New York. But when one ignores the origins of another culture's identity, its way of life, the characteristics of its language, its particular set of moeurs, then provincialism sets in: a failed cosmopolitanism is the result when one exhibits Europeans without understanding the sources of their identity. These relations between identities were far more profoundly lived in pre-war Paris, for example, if only between Braque and Picasso. But this is equally true for Calder, Brancusi, González, Miró . . . I recall your remark to the effect that a Frenchman in the world today is always too French, and I would like to ask you to comment on your statement that the Frenchman is a sort of Southerner, but worse.¹*

Philippe Sollers: That formulation is intended for Americans. My idea about this is fairly simple: beginning with the revolution that is called French, but which was secretly transformed into something quite different. Germany began a kind of global expansion that has continued uninterrupted up to the present. This must be understood as part of a historical movement that begins at the end of the 18th century. During the 19th and 20th centuries, we see a systematic inversion of what constituted the French genius during two admirable centuries, the 17th and 18th, and I refer to this inversion as the generalized German counterrevolution. As concerns the United States of America, this still badly analyzed struggle between North and South develops in classical form in the crucial Civil War, a war "of Secession" between a North that is composite but nonetheless dominated by German elements, and a South of multiple elements. Witness Louisiana and New Orleans, which in Faulkner's *Pylon*, for example, is presented with a maximum of French names. Clearly, an event that occurred in Europe at the end of the 18th century has been generalized on a worldwide level, and this includes the United States. When I say *too French*, I'm speaking about a fascination with the French that is at once fascinated and negative. I say that the Frenchman is a Southerner, but worse, because one can still imagine the Southerner's integration into this predominantly German civilization, whereas the Frenchman remains unintegratable. He is all the more embarrassing because, in analyzing

reactions to him, it becomes apparent that he represents a sort of unconscious secret standard, or marker, for the value of *jouissance*, for sexual value.

And jouissance, of course, is a word that remains untranslatable in English.²

The Frenchman is a sort of specter who continually reappears and reminds them that they really have no idea of how to go about *jouissance* [*que ça ne sait pas vraiment comment jouir*]. In addition, it must be made clear that, contrary to the press releases of current history, Germany was not defeated: on the contrary, it was victorious, despite the Second World War.

Philippe, can you specify what you mean by "German counterrevolution"? I ask this because Americans generally think less of Germany than of a "Frenchification" of contemporary culture, represented by such names as Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, or Baudrillard.

With the exception of Foucault, the theoreticians whose names you cite, if one examines the basic determinations of their thought, are all products, to varying degrees, of German philosophy. In the wake of the French Revolution, the formation of Germany as a politico-philosophical force acts in the 19th century and—Oh how powerfully!—in the 20th against the spirit of the Enlightenment. I think that an entity like Germany, which arrives at the National Socialist Revolution, is a counterrevolution directed against the spirit of the Enlightenment. It calls itself a revolution in the same way that in [Vichy] France Pétainism referred to itself as a national revolution. There is a usurpation of the term *revolution*, therefore, even as counterrevolutions multiply: Stalinism, the counterrevolution in China, the counterrevolution of Islamic fundamentalism. These phenomena of counterrevolution are rarely appreciated as regressions. They involve a grave loss of energy, of knowledge, and of freedom, if one considers the 19th century in comparison with the French 18th century.

Today in America there is an excessive valorization of the professorial medium and media [*le médiatique professorale*], which are essentially German. There is a strong reluctance to envisage art or literature without the mediation of the university. A student will know something about deconstruction or Derrida without being aware of what Valéry wrote.

The epigraph of your novel Femmes³ reads: "Born male and a bachelor from an early age . . . Owns own typewriter and knows how to use it." Why these lines from William Faulkner?

"Bachelor," in this citation, should not be taken in Duchamp's sense, but it's certain that an artist cannot be coupled with just anyone. Here, for example, one touches on the problem of widows in the history of art, and on the way society,

through an artist's marriage, gains a hand in the management of what the artist creates. And finally, "owns own typewriter and knows how to use it" is a marvelous Faulknerian formula to metaphorically designate the sex that writes.

In the statement on the back cover of your novel Portrait du joueur (Portrait of the Player or Portrait of the Actor),⁴ you refer to Nietzsche's remark that Mozart represents faith in the South. What is the relation between these Nietzschean and Faulknerian formulas?

The real differences are not East-West, but North-South—a North and South that are poetic, not geographic. England, for example, is oriented toward the South in relation to a Franco-Russo-German axis. The French exist in a sort of continual polemic, an incessant civil war between North and South. This South is not merely a sunny location, a Club Méditerranée, but rather a sort of coalescence of symbolic practices in a certain number of countries. Nietzsche, for example, has had enough of being German; he goes so far as to say that he should be considered Polish. He never stops fighting Wagner. He is convinced that the appearance of Wagner is a sign that something extremely ominous is on the way. And the 20th century has proved it. Nietzsche's formula about *faith in the South* in reference to Mozart, then, is a kind of regret that we have come to this, this terrible syncretic cult of Wagner, evoking elementary, repressive, howling forces . . .

A veritable delirium of death?

The delirium of death that was identified by the executioner Sanson during the French Revolution⁵ and which has been taken up, I believe, by Germany. This is what Nietzsche means toward the end of his life—it's what drives him mad, in a sense—when he observes the increasingly negative and tragic spread of this German domination over the rest of the world.

In postwar art, a difference in artistic and ethical traditions that has been extremely determinant for me is revealed in the way that the nude is represented. In German neo-expressionist painting and sculpture alike, the nude is linked to morbidity. It is quite precisely in relation to sexuality that the violent and irreconcilable differences appear. To compare erotic drawings, for example, observe the difference between the nudes of Rodin and those of Beuys or Kiefer. Formally and superficially, Rodin's erotic drawings are a great influence, but Rodin's eroticism without morbidity—and fundamentally his eroticism pure and simple—is never understood. This is why I think that the book of Rodin's erotic drawings we published together is fundamental for the comprehension of contemporary cultural tensions and their motivations.⁶ This volume, moreover, has now appeared in Japanese, in Italian, and in German, but, extraordinarily, not yet in English.

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This would suggest that the United States is more Germanophile than the Germans themselves.

To pursue this question of symbolic geography in postwar art, what do you have to say about de Kooning, a Northern painter who is nonetheless responsible for injecting a "Southern" sensuality into American art?

Yes, absolutely, he produces this injection vis-à-vis a puritanical American art that tends to remain within the sphere of German influence. The Spanish, the violently Spanish Holland of de Kooning undoubtedly represents a Southern element. One finds this element in Belgium and in Holland by way of the wars of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. This enormous influence of Spanish art seems to me quite manifest in de Kooning's *Women*: it's Velázquez erupting against the stony puritanism that confronts him.

This stone-like puritanism is also related to an ideology of American purity, or in other words to the notion that an American art could develop autonomously today. The Whitney Museum describes itself as a museum "of American Art" and has a charter that excludes all foreign artists. This discriminatory charter is unworthy of a great democracy. Imagine an analogous museum "of French Art" in Paris, which would have to exclude Brancusi, Picasso, Man Ray, Calder, González, Miró, Mondrian, Picabia, Chagall, Soutine, Max Ernst . . . This puritanical exclusion, this obsession with a pure, glorious, and autonomous American art is a dangerous ostracism; artists and intellectuals should not endorse such a situation but, on the contrary, should denounce and condemn it. This exclusionary principle threatens the future of American art with provincialization and a loss of its illusory strategic advantages. I myself, I regret to say, witness this problem every day. The future of New York, in all its museums, necessarily involves the prestigious acceptance of the responsibility for honoring and taking account of the dynamism of contemporary art. It is only on this basis that the symbolic force of New York will join that of pre-war Paris. Turning again to the French 18th century, I found that the reaction to the Fragonard exhibition in New York was significant. There was often a kind of uncomfortable rejection. At your talk at Columbia University as well, there were surprising feminist reactions to your presentation of slides of Fragonard's paintings. They thought you were showing women's backsides

*rather than paintings. They were extraordinarily unconcerned with the art of the painter.*⁷

I find it very revealing that, at the end of the 20th century, showing paintings by Jean-Honoré Fragonard arouses reactions that are more violent than those that would greet pornographic photographs. Although we're dealing with a highly developed, extremely refined, allusive art that is full of ostensible [*supposée*] jouissance, it is the art of Fragonard, and not the photographs, that is found to be pornographic. What remains intolerable is the sexual movement in action, taken directly into the pictorial symbolization. In all of the Puritan countries, one finds a massive, religious, sexual repression on the one hand, and a completely open market in pornography on the other.⁸

Let's come back to an extremely important event, the revelation of the painting The Origin of the World, which was shown before the public for the first time during the Brooklyn Museum's Courbet exhibition. What is the meaning of Jacques Lacan's strange act of censure in effectively forbidding this painting's very existence? For Lacan, possessing this painting was a means of suppressing it. There seems to be a very grave—and to my mind unacceptable—revelatory sign in all this.

This affair—which takes place around a painting that was hidden behind a sliding painting by André Masson—is quite strange. So behind this Masson would finally be *that*. This is a strange way of proceeding, as if this were the end of things, as if this were indeed *The Origin of the World*. A female body is not the origin of the world. It is the origin of so-called human bodies that are founded by this body, but it is not the origin of the world. It is not the origin of galaxies or the cosmos. To call it *The Origin of the World*, in fact, is proof of a very curious overestimation of the female body. And Lacan played this game of a strange overestimation of sexual representation. The more sexual overestimation there is, one should say, the more repression there is as well. I am certain, for example, that artists like Fragonard, Rodin, Matisse, or Picasso attain a sort of *real atheism with regard to sex*. It is very rare that one obtains atheism with regard to sex, very rare! The Frenchman represents this great sexual atheism.

Sade, for example, is the great atheist of sex.

Quite evidently—and contrary to what one usually thinks—the French genius, far from being obsessed with sex, is actually the first to achieve detachment from it.

Yes, but ironically, tenderly!

Not necessarily with cruelty, but with every possible feeling. Detachment is absolutely necessary, however. A fabulous art of living was elaborated over two centuries, yet lucidity about sex implies an impracticable situation.

Lacan demonstrated an excessive religiosity with regard to sex!

Yes! I agree entirely. The residue of religiosity he showed on this subject always troubled me, and this is why I opposed him, in a text entitled "Letter from Sade," which appeared in *Theory of Exceptions*.⁹ It's a criticism of Lacan's text, "Kant avec Sade."¹⁰ Why, then, should Kant be put with Sade? Lacan thought that Sade was totally lacking in humor. I contested this notion, for Sade displays considerable humor; he is also a great writer from this perspective.



Auguste Rodin, *Nereid*, Lead pencil and watercolor on cream paper, 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ ".
© 1987 Musée Rodin.



Auguste Rodin, *Nude*, Lead pencil, stump, and watercolor on cream paper, 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ ".
© 1987 Musée Rodin.

“When you sculpt you are forced to take up the clay as if it were a head, in order to change it into something else. There is an immediate physical confrontation.”

For me this question of the religiosity of sex is particularly important, because I am a sculptor and my art is a question of living bodies, in other words bodies in a state of jouissance!

The sculptor encounters these problems immediately. When you tell me that even when you are doing charcoal drawings you confront the dimension of your body and are forced to make a leap, or that when you sculpt you are forced to take up the clay as if it were a head, in order to change it into something else, then the problem has to do with the body. There is an immediate physical confrontation. It's not so easy to get rid of one's body!!

The problem of the body is so important that it affects the dimensions of my drawings, as it does my bronze sculptures called Grande Nudité, which we went to see on Fifth Avenue. These are about two meters in height, which is the maximum amplitude of gestural force that I am able to summon in the execution of either drawing or modeling. This is also the reason why I do not want these bronzes to be enlarged, for the change in size would entail a loss of their gestural truth. The bronze represents an exact version of what I executed in clay.

As concerns the twelve terra cotta pieces that you titled *La Vague* (*The Wave*), and to go straight to the historical significance of what you've done there, I see in them the contradiction between heads that are also female sex organs and at the same time the coiffures on those decapitated heads. They're pieces of feminine sex like Courbet's *The Origin of the World*, presented on top of metal tubes in such a way that one clearly deciphers the conflict between [the tubular metal elements and] the sensuality of these pieces of meat in shaped and opened clay that is both sex and the coiffures of the ancien régime, from the time when there was a lot more *jouissance* than is generally believed. On the other hand, there is the terrible law of iron, of steel, which is that of the modern world. Thus I proposed to you—since I came to give an address at Columbia on the continuation of the French Revolution, in which I recalled the great founding massacres, the immense tortures that people would like to hide from us—I proposed that you call this sculpture: *Against the Supreme Being: against the immortality of the soul and Madame du Barry 12 times rather than once*. It would be 12 little impaled du Barrys. There's an entire little novel in this work, and I believe that this title would help people see what you have done. Madame du Barry did not believe in the immortality of the soul. She believed in the sole reality of her living body. According to



Willem de Kooning, *Untitled*, c. 1969, Charcoal on paper, 42" x 42".
Courtesy Lang & O'Hara.

the testimony of the executioner of the Revolution,¹¹ she rebelled when she was brought before the scaffold, unlike those who went to their deaths one after the other in the belief that they could do without their physical body. Something else—the Supreme Being, God—guaranteed their reality. Any metaphysical representation of the body justifies the perpetrators of massacres and the dictators.

On the level of some very serious contemporary events, I would say that the wish to suppress the body of a writer, Salman Rushdie, by means of a death sentence, is something that cannot be explained or banalized by considerations on the nature of blasphemy. As if creation could be anything other than a blasphemy.

The clergy's solidarity on this point is astonishing, from the Rabbi of Jerusalem to the Cardinals. And it is very revealing that this solidarity should be directed at a writer. There was a particularly fine statement on Rushdie that recalled the well-known lines from Donne that Hemingway uses as an epigraph in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*: "Never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." What's taking place is the negation of all individual, symbolic activity. Therefore every artist, every writer, painter, sculptor, is directly concerned, and I would even say directly condemned to death along with Rushdie.

The artist as an individual is threatened by a vision that is collective, religious, and politically dogmatic.

There have already been great lessons on this topic. Hitler made an effort, and Stalin as well. But today we're in a third phase in which the condemnation is no longer directed at collectives, such as the Jews, or the Bourgeoisie . . . It now concerns the one, a single person. Now the masses, the millions, come together to condemn an individual.

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There is a sociology, a historicist overdose that is dominant today . . .

A loss of the sense of excellence.

Can you be more specific about this sense of excellence?

Excellence is the tradition, and this is the reason that tradition is always revolution.

In other words, artists who transform a tradition that they have inherited profoundly. In this sense, there is none of the historical amnesia that characterizes so many artists today. What occurs is not a rupture with tradition, but a jouissance of the tradition.

Excellence is the jouissance of a tradition as it occurs in Cézanne, Rodin, Picasso, or Matisse, all of whom are perfectly at home in the Metropolitan Museum. They are not modern; on the contrary, they spend their time heroically rediscovering the tradition. That's why they're revolutionary. □

Translated from the French by Philip Barnard

¹¹Sollers's parodic phrase "too French" (always said in English) was initially developed in an essay of the same title in his *Théorie des exceptions* (Gallimard, 1986). This essay also introduced his contention that the American literary establishment perceives the French artist as "a Southerner, only worse."

¹²The term *jouissance* combines the senses and connotations of active enjoyment, pleasure, delight, satisfaction, well-being, voluptuousness, orgasm, and joy in a manner that has no English equivalent.

¹³Gallimard, 1983; translated by Barbara Bray as *Women*, Columbia University Press, 1990.

¹⁴Gallimard, 1984.

¹⁵Charles-Henri Sanson was the chief executioner who oversaw the day-to-day maintenance and operation of the guillotine during the Revolution. His extensive memoirs, recently republished (*The French Revolution Seen by Its Executioner, Charles-Henri Sanson*; Editions de l'Instant, 1989), were discussed by Sollers in an address delivered at Columbia University not long before this conversation.

¹⁶Philippe Sollers and Alain Kirili, *Rodin: dessins érotiques* (Gallimard, 1987). This volume contains an important selection of Rodin's erotic drawings, with introductory essays by Sollers and Kirili.

¹⁷Kirili refers to reactions to Sollers's address on the French Revolution at Columbia on March 30, 1989. During the questions and discussion following the address, for example, one member of the audience objected to Sollers's use of a slide of Fragonard's *Bagatelles* and, before walking out in protest, exclaimed, "I don't see what's so revolutionary about showing a woman's ass. . . ."

¹⁸Sollers has made extensive statements on the relations between pornography and art, politics, and religion in two previous interviews. See M.-F. Hain and G. Laponche, *Les Femmes, la pornographie, l'érotisme* (Seuil, 1978), 159-67, and "Réponses," in *Misère 17* (Editions de Minuit, 1976), 2-25.

¹⁹*Théorie des exceptions* (Gallimard, 1986).

²⁰In Lacan's *Écrits* (Editions du Seuil, 1966).

²¹i.e., Charles-Henri Sanson.

Philippe Sollers is a novelist whose work translated into English includes The Park, Event, and Literature and the Experience of Limits, as well as Women, to be published in December by Columbia University Press. Alain Kirili is a sculptor who shows with Holly Solomon Gallery, New York, and Galerie Daniel Templon, Paris.