

by FRED INGLIS

Our Dark Side: a history of perversion by Elisabeth Roudinesco

Translated by David Macey
Polity Press, 188pp
ISBN 978-0-7456-4592-6 (hb) 4593-3 (pb)

Sex is a subject much discussed in the official literature of French intellectual life. The works of Georges Bataille, Jean Genet, Michel de Certeau, Michel Foucault towering above them all, bear voluble witness to the imperturbable attentiveness with which the grand *maitres à penser* will calmly analyse the much mentioned unmentionables of carnal knowledge, taking due intellectual pride in counting in such knowledge as part of the natural purview of the inclusively human sciences. The genteel Anglophones can't touch them.

Now the masters are joined by a *maitresse* and one intimately schooled in the mysteries of that Freudian psychoanalysis which is the *de rigueur* training in inwardness of the *Ecoles Normales* for whom the outward half of thought is built out of Marx's dark materialism.

Elisabeth Roudinesco is, however, far less Olympian an authority than Foucault, not at all a serene determinist of discourse, and less a historian than an exasperated spirit, admonishing on a decidedly grand and unevenced scale a humankind disfigured by the hideous enormities of the past and rendered irredeemably trivial by the antinomian self-indulgence of the present.

Her brief book – too brief, surely, for so giant and extended a topic – starts out by handing conceptual centrality to that elusive, untranslatable and here untranslated word 'jouissance', which has locked in its jewelled depths something of pleasure, of enjoyment, of desire, of voluptuous excess. Whatever it is, it drives perversion and, Roudinesco promises us, we are all perverts, glad with all our hearts to find our indecorum get an airing from Paolo Pasolini, Alfred Hitchcock, or *Last Tango in Paris*.

Perversion being always with us, she first goes back to the Middle Ages and summons up a revolting cavalcade of flagellants, coprophages, self-mutilants, pus-drinkers, all culminating

in the appalling biography of Gilles de Rais, Joan of Arc's lieutenant and a child-violator and murderer of obscene proportions.

Roudinesco's account of these spectres taxes one's credulity beyond the limit, since her casual faith in some historically doubtful-sounding sources seems not, to say the least, well-founded, and surprisingly she takes at face rather than psychoanalytic value the self-justifications of those tormented women who defiled themselves so horribly in the name of their holy spouse.

The central and monster character in the book, as I suppose (a bit tiredly) he must be, is the Marquis de Sade. Yet here too Roudinesco does hardly more than retell Sade's desperately boring and repetitive fantasies, and endorse the implausible claim that de Sade's crazy regime presages Nazi vileness in the extermination camps.

For it is for Auschwitz that we are inevitably heading and, having reached the platform of that hideous railway station, the ghastly morons – Adolf Eichmann, Rudolf Hoess, Joseph Mengele and company – are arraigned once more, and the tedious fascination of their horrible iterations rehearsed under Hannah Arendt's wholly unilluminating catchall, 'the banality of evil'. Of course Roudinesco expresses due revulsion but she is as baffled as the rest of us by the being of these unspeakable beings, and wavers above Adorno's notorious wafflings as to what one can or cannot use reason to think about after Auschwitz.

By this stage of the book one is not only wishing that our author got out more, but also that she might learn (as might some of her preferred authorities) to see the funny side of her whole crazy charivari. She might have taken much from Steven Marcus's classic, *The Other Victorians*, and his serenely amused sketch of an 'ideal type' of nineteenth century pornotopia.

For in her final quarter of the book, Roudinesco comes up to date with a bang and her sometimes strange blankness before the facts becomes something much more wobbly and strident, dissolving into eleven successive rhetorical questions (on page 119) and giving credence to a decidedly slanted newspaper report that there are government tests going on in Britain to identify future criminals in the womb.

This is part of Roudinesco's veering and giddy vision of 'the Perverse Society', one in which psychoanalysis itself is indicted for becoming an ideology of control, in which Peter Singer's

animal rights and 'anti-specialist' utilitarianism is rejected for its dissolution of necessary boundaries, and in which the new agents of perversion are the extremists of terror ('the heirs of Fascism') and of child abuse (Socrates and Alcibiades notwithstanding). All these particulate oddities are gathered into the Foucauldian domain of 'the biopower', uninflected, however, by the master's radical historicism.

So she ends at a bit of a loss, not sure whether perversion is best regarded as a treatable deviation or to be defended as an essential aspect of human variousness. Perhaps her candour about her and our confusion is Roudinesco's best face, and as good a way as may be found to end this gamely tackled but rather directionless book.

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