

Emasculation and the “Débâcle” of May 1940 in Claude Simon’s *La Route des Flandres*

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Emasculatory imagery is but one of the techniques present in Claude Simon’s *La Route des Flandres* (1960) that render into text one individual’s subjective experience of the German invasion into France during the Second World War, and of the invasion’s post-war repercussions. Emasculatory imagery furthers the novel’s investigative representation of human perception and memory, and it advances the work’s exploration of the national identity crisis in post-war France that stemmed from the country’s humiliatingly rapid and thorough defeat. The novel contains no literal castrations, but male genitalia are occasionally depicted as separate from the male body. This imagery merits our attention despite its limited presence in the novel because it occurs at pivotal moments in the novel and because it sheds light a fundamental concern of the novel, namely the inability of both fictional and historical narrative to accurately represent experience. In both fictional and historical narrative, time operates similarly to the male sexual organ during heterosexual sex acts, actively penetrating the future. However, *La Route des Flandres* shows both types of narrative to be “impotent.” Rather than understanding time as beginning in the past and extending into the future at one of a variety of speeds in the tradition of the *récit balzacien* and historical narrative, Simon’s narration melds past and present. In this way, Simon’s novel reveals the inability of both types of narrative to accurately render individuals’ subjective experience of past events. By

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weakening two tools of social normalization, this revelation may appear to contribute to the progressive agenda of 1960's France. Ultimately, however, *La Route des Flandres* does not challenge the phallogentric worldview on which fictional and historical narration are founded. Rather, while destabilizing the traditional modes of narration, the novel's emasculatory imagery reaffirms traditional gender roles and preserves male authority.²

Because I use the term "emasculaton" in relation to Georges's sexual encounter with Corinne, it should be clear that I use the word emasculation metaphorically, not literally. Accordingly, a brief explanation of my use of the word is in order. To the extent that military prowess constitutes a physical manifestation of national "masculinity," an army's ability to overcome other nations' armies represents that country's "sexual potency." Military failure, then, signals national "impotence," and the destruction of an army parallels the destruction of the nation's organs of sexual potency, which is to say, the male genitals. Military defeat is analogous to "emasculaton." It is difficult to say that Simon's novel "recounts" anything. If it does, it is the "débâcle" of May 1940, during which the woefully outclassed French army failed to check the German invasion, and then disintegrated as it retreated in disarray: the "emasculaton" of France.³

The relationship between Georges and his genitals is complex, to say the least. At times, they are shown as dead and excised from his body, in accordance with the literal meaning of emasculation: castration. No literal castrations take place, but certain metaphors that describe Georges and Corinne's sexual congress suggest a dissociation between Georges and his genitals. One such metaphor occurs in a quotation attributed to Malcolm de Chazal, a Mauritian writer, poet, painter, and visionary, which serves as the epigraph of the novel's third part:

² For discussions of gender roles in *La Route des Flandres* and in Simon's other work, see Baehler, Higgins, Longuet, Mougin, and Woodhall.

³ For a discussion of the importance of the débâcle in *La Route des Flandres*, see Cloonan, Pfeiffer, Pugh, and Solte-Gresser.

La volupté, c'est l'étreinte d'un corps de mort par deux êtres vivants. Le 'cadavre' dans ce cas, c'est le temps assassiné pour un temps et rendu consubstantiel au toucher. (Simon 239)

Sensual pleasure, volupté, is the embrace of a dead body by two living beings. The "corpse" in this case is time murdered for a time and made consubstantial to the sense of touch. (Howard 187)⁴

We can interpret the "dead body" embraced by the two live ones as a metaphoric representation of male genitals disconnected from the body. It is true that "dead" does not necessarily mean "disconnected." However, it is natural for a dead or dying limb or organ to be separated from the body, either through atrophy or by surgical removal. This is certainly true with castration: excised organs are nothing if not "dead." Also, because the "corpse" to which the epigraph refers is situated between the two lovers, the penis is a good candidate, assuming that the couple is heterosexual, as is the case of the main couple in *La Route des Flandres*.

However, the penis sometimes also appears as something much more alive and possessed of a certain disconcerting autonomy. In such cases, the phallus is sometimes equally connected to both participants in sexual intercourse, and sometimes equally disconnected from them. This simultaneous dissociation and integration is evident in an earlier description of Georges's and Corinne's sexual encounter, during which the two lovers form

l'espèce de bête qui possède deux têtes, quatre bras, quatre jambes et deux troncs soudés par le ventre au moyen de cet organe commun (ou si l'on préfère également étranger, car le membre de l'homme ne semble-t-il pas s'enfoncer à l'intérieur de celui-ci comme il s'enfonce dans celui de la femme, s'y prolonger jusqu'au plus profond des

⁴ All translations are those of Richard Howard.

entrailles par un membre égal et symétrique?)
(181)

the species of creature with two heads, four arms, four legs and two bodies welded at the stomach by means of that common organ (or if you prefer equally alien, for doesn't the man's member seem to plunge into his own body as it plunges into the woman's, to extend itself into the deepest cavern of her entrails by an equal and symmetrical member?) (143)

The phallus, then, is the "member" that connects the two torsos of the "beast with two backs." It is therefore an integral part of both the male and the female bodies, which each constitute half of the monster. Yet, paradoxically, that same phallus appears completely independent, seemingly penetrating to an equal depth into both bodies.

Furthermore, although at times Georges's penis appears completely separate from him, at other times it seems to be simultaneously part of his body and separate from it. For example, in the third part of the novel, which finds Georges and a companion falling asleep in a house where they have taken refuge while attempting to flee the Germans in order to rejoin the rest of the French troops. The point of view soon shifts to a scene of Georges and Corinne in bed together, and we begin to see use of figurative language that portrays Georges's own genitals as an active entity separate from himself, yet somehow still connected:

sentant cette tige sortie de moi cet arbre poussant ramifiant ses racines à l'intérieur de mon ventre mes reins m'enserrant lierre griffu se glissant le long de mon dos enveloppant ma nuque comme une main, il me semblait rapetisser à mesure qu'il grandissait se nourrissant de moi devenant moi ou plutôt moi devenant lui et il ne restait plus alors de mon corps qu'un fœtus ratatiné rapetissé couché entre les lèvres du fossé. (243)

feeling that stem growing out of me that tree growing its roots branching inside my belly my loins enveloping me like ivy creeping down my

back wrapping round my neck, I seemed to be shrinking in proportion as it grew feeding on me becoming me or rather me becoming it and then there was nothing left of my body but a shrunken wizened foetus lying between the lips of a ditch. (190)

The fact that this tige—a slang word for penis literally meaning “stem”—both extends out of Georges and has roots growing into him assures the connection between Georges and his sexual organs. However, although *sortie* can refer to an ongoing process of “extending from” or “emerging out of” something, it can also indicate the separation that results from such a process. Thus, while Georges experiences the sensation of his erection as originating from within him—the “roots” of the “stem” are inside of him, after all—for at least a moment it is somewhat unclear whether his penis, once erect, remains an integral part of his body.

The next image suggests that it does not. The “stem” becomes a “tree.” Already, the scale suggests a division between Georges’s genitals and the rest of his body: it is easier to imagine a stem growing out of a human body than an entire tree. The separation between body and organ increases as the tree’s roots enter further into his body. Georges is not the tree, but rather the soil into which its roots grow. For the tree to have originated within Georges’s body, it would have been necessary to introduce a foreign body, the seed. Georges is no longer an active, male-gendered agent, his masculinity, as embodied by his penis, has transferred to the tree, and is now separate from himself. As we have seen, Georges is equally subject to “penetration” by his own penis as Corinne is. Furthermore, due to the dissociation between himself and his genitals, he has been relegated to the traditionally passive and female-gendered role of the earth into which a tree could grow. Given these two transformations, we can safely say that he has been figuratively “emasculated.”

Georges then finds himself consumed by the newly independent active male entity that his penis has become.

At first, he feels the tight embrace of the tree roots. The roots then metamorphose into "clawed ivy" that slides down the length of his back, encircling his neck like a hand. Due to its parasitic relationship with its host, the ivy begins to absorb Georges once it has enveloped him. The assimilation is so intense that Georges's very identity as an independent self becomes uncertain. Eventually, Georges himself is nearly eclipsed, reduced to a shriveled-up fetus as he is subsumed by his own genitals. At first glance, Georges appears to have resumed a more masculine position, i.e. that which is contained rather than that which contains. Just as the male genitals are contained by those of the female during sexual intercourse, so can "woman" be conceived of as the "envelope" or "container" for "man," as Irigaray has demonstrated. Yet, the rapaciousness of the hybrid stem-tree-ivy entity seems much more compatible with an active male principle than with a passive female one. To support this conclusion, I would point to the end of the passage, "couché entre les lèvres du fosse" 'lying between the lips of a ditch', which effects a transition back to the scene of the French retreat by conflating Corinne's labia with the edges of the ditch in which Georges lay during his attempted escape. By likening the role of the male during intercourse with the humiliating situation of a soldier forced to lie in a ditch while beating an undignified retreat, Simon transforms a role traditionally labeled "masculine," into a role traditionally labeled "feminine." Rather than questioning habitual definitions of gender by demonstrating the presence of the feminine in the masculine, or vice versa, Simon merely exchanges one for the other. The ultimate effect of Georges' emasculation, then, is not a challenge to the status quo, but rather a reaffirmation of traditional gender categories.

The disjunction between Georges and his genitalia is also expressed by means of overdetermined description. From Georges's point of view, his penis is something external to himself, which allows him to describe it in a quasi-objective manner. For this reason, when referring

directly to his penis he remains oblique, using the direct object pronoun *le* ("it"):

Quelquefois je m'écartais, le retirais complètement pouvant le voir au-dessous de moi sorti d'elle luisant mince à la base puis renflé comme un fuseau un poisson [...] avec au bout cette espèce de tête, d'ogive ou plutôt comme une sorte de bonnet avec sa fente en haut à la fois bouche muette et œil furieux et mort aux bords rosis comme ceux de ces animaux poissons qui vivent dans les rivières souterraines les cavernes, devenus aveugles à force d'habiter les ténèbres bouche et œil suppliants et furibonds de carpe ou quoi apoplectique hors de l'eau exigeant suppliant de retourner aux humides et secrètes cachettes, la bouche d'ombre. (273-74)

Sometimes I moved back pulled it out altogether able to see it beneath me coming out of her thin at the base then swelling like a bobbin a fish [...] with that kind of head at the end, that finial or cap with its slit at the tip, both mute mouth and furious dead eye like the eyes of the fishy creatures that live in underground streams caves, blind from living in the dark, the suppliant and furious carp's mouth carp's eye apoplectic out of water demanding pleading to return to the moist and secret hiding place, the dark mouth. (214)

Though the image of the blind subterranean fish-creature begging to return to its damp, dark cavernous home does express Georges's sexual arousal, it also distances Georges from the organ by which he can satisfy that arousal. This distance derives in part from the presentation of two grammatically separate actions: "je m'écartais" 'I moved [myself] back' and "[je] le retirais" '[I] pulled it out' (Simon 273; Howard 214, emphasis added). On a grammatical level, Georges, represented by the subject pronoun *je* ("I") and by the reflexive pronoun *me* ("myself"), is distinct from his penis, represented by the direct object pronoun *le* ("it"). On the level of subjectivity, the two are separate as well, as

we can see from Georges's attribution of the desire to return to the "cavern" to the "fish," and not to himself.

Though the examples I have just presented constitute the most extended treatments of Georges's genitalia, there are others, and in them Georges is not always separate from his genitalia. This precludes any single, definitive interpretation. We cannot simply say, for example, that Georges represents France, and that the presence of emasculatory images within the very act of sexual intercourse symbolizes the transformation of the army's defense of France, which should have been a virile act, into an impotent act. Although this view does account for much of the complex relationship between Georges and his genitals, it is not the only possible one. Here I have only attempted to address this one way of explaining that relationship because of light it sheds on the novel's shortcomings when evaluated as a challenge to the traditional institutions of French society in the 1960's, as has been done with other novels associated with the *nouveau roman* movement.

Although Simon never formally joined that movement, like those who did, in *La Route des Flandres* he challenges the traditional form of the novel, notably by disrupting the flow of narrative time. This disruption, which constitutes an "emasculatory" of traditional, "masculine" narrative time, is the product of many elements, including the imagery of emasculation. Jacques Bres has called *La Route des Flandres* "une machine à démonter l'ascendance du temps narratif," referring to the notions of ascendance and descendance, developed by the linguist Gustave Guillaume to describe the system of verbal tenses (13-14). According to Guillaume, subjects perceive time passively, according to descendance: time comes to us from the future and recedes away into the past (Bres 14-15). However, believing that our actions can influence reality leads to a conception of time as extending from the past into the future, which Guillaume calls ascendance (Bres 15). In a typical narrative, consisting mainly of actions, time moves from farther past to nearer past, following the active mode of

ascendance (Bres 15-16). I would add that because action is the defining characteristic of ascendance, we are justified in filing the "ascending" progression of prototypical narrative under the traditional category of "masculine," by analogy with the penis, which "rises" during sex to extend out from the male body. Similarly, "descending" time would be "feminine," the vagina being a cavity. Time in *La Route des Flandres* resembles neither. The lack of typical narrative's masculine, active principle effectively "emasculates" the novel. Emasculatory imagery contributes to this effect by blurring the line between Georges's wartime experiences and his post-war sexual interaction with Corinne, as when the "lips of a ditch" recall both Corinne's labia and the edges of the ditch George lay in while avoiding capture by German troops. While challenging the "masculine" conception of time could be seen as a challenge to a pro-status-quo worldview, Simon's novel stops short of redefining "masculine" and "feminine" conceptions of time, and merely demonstrates how the "masculine" conception, traditionally favored by societal institutions, ceases to function in the aftermath of France's humiliation in the Second World War. Thus, rather than becoming a voice for societal change, Simon's novel advocates returning to an antebellum period when traditional gender categories functioned correctly, thus allowing French society to function smoothly according to its traditional rules.

Just as *La Route des Flandres* challenges any narrative based on traditional conceptions of temporality, it also casts doubt on the validity of historical discourse, which presupposes that individuals possess the ability to control the course of events, and therefore to recall them accurately at a later time in order to assemble them into a History. Instead, in *La Route des Flandres* Simon portrays humans, and particularly Georges, as lacking the traditionally "masculine" attribute of agency. The characters are unable to influence the outcome of the war or even their own destinies. Thus "emasculated," Georges is just as unable to control his fate in the war as he is later to recall

his wartime experiences accurately enough to understand them. The emasculatory images I have presented here constitute one of several key elements in Simon's critique of historical discourse, all of which contribute to an overarching emasculatory effect.⁵ It appears, then, from a traditional standpoint on gender roles, that the worldview presented in Simon's novels "emasculates" all human beings by transforming them from active, "masculine" agents into passive, "feminine" victims. Although this transformation reveals the human inability to master the past through narrative, be it fictional or historical, it does not undermine the power traditionally vested in the male perspective. On the surface, Simon's novel appears to expose a lack of power by showing that what once appeared "masculine" and "powerful" is in fact "feminine" and "weak." When one looks deeper, however, one realizes that what might seem like a revelation is only a mere displacement. It is true, perhaps, that Simon's novel makes it impossible for narration to be an unshakeable foundation for institutional power. However, it is no less true that the novel affirms traditional gender roles' suitability for that purpose.

⁵ Didier Alexandre argues that by challenging historical discourse, Simon is in effect extending the common desire of the theoreticians of the *nouveau roman* to critique the *récit balzacien* (95). He argues, furthermore, that the corpus of Simon's work posits a fundamental separation between the events of History, whether recent or ancient, and the efforts of humans to control or understand them (99-105). Notably, Alexandre concludes that Simon portrays war to be "un phénomène inhumain" because humans are neither its cause, nor its instrument, but merely its tragic victims (121). If so, it becomes clear that Simon's portrayal of the "débâcle" of 1940 in terms of emasculation is merely a specific instance of a larger phenomenon. Furthermore, Simon's use of emasculatory images to blur the boundaries between a national "emasculation" and one drawn from the personal sphere supports the argument that traditional narrative is universally incapable of rendering a faithful account of events, whether they concern a single person, or an entire nation.

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